



MEANINGFUL MEMBERSHIP

*The human body has many parts, but the
many parts make up one whole body.
So it is with the body of Christ.
-1 Corinthians 12:12*



Church membership is as old as the church itself, starting with the gatherings recorded in the New Testament some 2,000 years ago. At MCC, we seek to practice “meaningful membership.” This booklet walks through the biblical foundations for church membership, and lays out what our members should expect of themselves and their brothers and sisters in Christ.

WHY CHURCH MEMBERSHIP?

The premise of church membership is that local gatherings of Christians committed to Jesus and to one another are the primary expression of the Kingdom of Heaven here on earth.

The church is not simply another voluntary civic organization, such as the Kiwanis or a country club. Neither is the church a business or a service provider, catering to or serving customers. Clubs exist due to common interest. Businesses or service providers exist due to common needs or desires.

The church comprises all of this, but more: the church has a king who requires the obedience of his people. The church is a family with mutual responsibilities, expectations, commitments, and expressions of love, and unified under a common mission. Christians are not consumers, they are adopted children in the family of God.

The local church is an embassy of Christ’s Kingdom. What is a church member? It’s someone who walks through the embassy doors claiming to belong to this kingdom. “Hello, my name is Christian.” A church member is someone who is formally recognized as a Christian and a part of Christ’s universal body.

Jesus didn’t leave us to govern ourselves and declare ourselves his citizens. He established an institution that both affirms us as believers and then helps form us in that belief. The church is the authority on earth that Jesus has instituted to officially affirm and give shape to the Christian life.

For the Christian, church participation is not optional. Once you choose Christ, you must also and always choose his people, too.

While the “embassy” metaphor lends itself to images of governmental authority, church authority works differently; the church exercises its Christ-given authority very differently than the state does. Christian authority, Jesus says in Matthew 20:26-28, is exercised by giving our lives up for the sake of others, as he did for us.

Christian authority is not about coercion or manipulation, it works by the tender, effective, and heart-changing power of the Word and the Spirit.

The gospel is not just about how God saves us *from* the “dominion of darkness,” it’s also a message about how God saves us *into* the “kingdom of the Son he loves” - a kingdom bustling with other redeemed sinners who, like us, are now citizens of heaven (see Colossians 1:13, Ephesians 2:19). The gospel is about how God reconciles us back to him, and reconciles us to his people.

By joining a church, we commit to other redeemed sinners and show the world that Christ has indeed reconciled us both to God and to each other. It’s not enough to merely have Christian friends with whom we occasionally gather - friends we pick and choose according to our own tastes. What truly displays the gospel is when we commit to love and care for a group of people that includes folks utterly unlike us. We display the gospel when we gather each week to serve people who sometimes share only one thing in common with us: Jesus.

The Apostle Paul in his letters to the brand new church in the years after Jesus’s life and personal ministry, emphasized the familial nature of the community of believers. Though they came from a variety of racial, ethnic, socioeconomic, and cultural backgrounds, Paul said the church is a family because its members share the most important core identifying characteristic: they believed in and followed the crucified and risen Messiah Jesus.

“...so in Christ,” Paul writes in Romans 12:5, “we, though many, form one body, and each member belongs to all the others.

And in Ephesians 2:19, he says, *“...you are members of God’s very own family...and you belong in God’s household with every other Christian.”*

The example set for us by the New Testament Christians is that faith was always practiced in group settings, together in communities centered around the truth and grace of the gospel. The New Testament knows nothing of rogue believers who are saved and committed to Christ but remain uncommitted to the people of Christ. When we commit to the Jesus-filled life, we agree to prioritize this core characteristic over our other identities and personal preferences.

Though we may sometimes be tempted, this means we cannot live out our faith alone. We must do it together, in a church family; rejoicing with those who rejoice and mourning with those who mourn (Romans 12:15), bearing one another’s burdens (Galatians 6:2), encouraging one another (1 Thessalonians 5:11) toward love and good deeds (Hebrews 10:24), devoted to one another (Romans 12:10).

A survey of the New Testament reveals quickly that the Christian life is not merely about affirming the right doctrines or about pursuing individual, isolated virtues. Instead, scripture consistently shows that the Christian life revolves around the local church - a structured community with people of different ages, ethnicities, interests, and economic backgrounds.

To be a Christian is to belong to a church. Church membership is how the world knows who represents Jesus. Church membership does not save, but it does reflect salvation.

So, what is church membership? Here’s one definition:

Church membership is a formal relationship between a church and a Christian characterized by the church’s affirmation and oversight of the Christian’s discipleship and the Christian’s submission to living out his or her discipleship in the care of the church.

There are several elements here:

- Church leadership, representing church membership, formally *affirms* an individual's profession of faith and baptism as credible.
- Church leaders and church members promise to *give oversight* - teach, guide, pray, hold accountable - to that individual's discipleship.
- The individual formally *submits* his or her discipleship to the service and authority of this church body and its leaders.

In essence, the church body says to the individual, "We recognize your profession of faith, baptism, and discipleship to Christ as sincere and true. Therefore, we publicly affirm and acknowledge you as belonging to Christ and welcome you into the care and oversight of our fellowship."

And the individual says to the church, "Insofar as I recognize you as a faithful, gospel-declaring church, I submit my presence and my discipleship to your love and guidance."

Church membership, in other words, is all about the whole church body taking specific responsibility for its individual members, and its individual members taking responsibility for the whole church.

Joining a particular local church is an outward reflection of an inward love - for Christ and for his people. And, as we see so often in this life, the greatest love is characterized by commitment.

IS THERE BIBLICAL SUPPORT FOR CHURCH MEMBERSHIP?

The biblical legitimacy of the formal recognition of local church bodies can be summarized with the following points:

1. *Christians possess a special power and corporate identity when formally assembled.*

Paul writes that when the Corinthian church is “*assembled... the power of our Lord Jesus is present*” (1 Corinthians 5:4). Later in the letter he refers to when they “*come together as a church*” (1 Corinthians 11:18), indicating that they are somehow more “a church” when together than apart. This gathered assembly, it seems, has the power to do things, to make decisions and pronouncements on behalf of Jesus.

2. *Christians are commanded to separate themselves from the world.*

Paul does not forbid relationships with non-Christians, of course, but he does tell Christians not to do anything that might risk compromising their primary identity as believers. When he says in 2nd Corinthians 6:14 “*Do not be yoked together with unbelievers. For what do righteousness and wickedness have in common? Or what fellowship can light have with darkness?*” he is not just talking about marriage, but how all believers should view their formal associations.

Just as God wanted a clear line between Israel and other nations, so God requires a clear, bright line between the church and the world: “*Come out from them and be separate, says the Lord. Touch no unclean thing, and I will receive you.*” (2nd Corinthians 6:17, referencing Isaiah 52:11 and Ezekiel 20:34,41)

3. *The authority and faithfulness of the local church shape and orient the lives of its members.*

Christian life in the 1st century generally consisted of the following steps: individuals were baptized, added to the church, and then gathered to hear the apostles' teaching.

From there, the believers structured their lives around other members of the church: their meals, their praying, their schedules, their financial and property decisions, their provision for widows and orphans, etc.

Their belief was made public, it was officially recognized and they were formally included in the family of God, and then it was developed through teaching, worship, and fellowship.

4. *Christian leaders are responsible for specific Christ-followers.*

Peter tells elders to *“Be shepherds of God's flock that is under your care”* (1 Peter 5:2). And he says something similar to the elders in Ephesus: *“Keep watch over yourselves and all the flock of which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers”* (Acts 20:28).

These metaphors were not chosen haphazardly. A shepherd does not tend (at least as a matter of priority) to stray sheep or sheep from another shepherd's flock; he tends to the sheep in his flock. So it is with pastor-shepherds. Church membership allows elders and ministers to know for whom they are responsible.

5. *Christians are responsible to submit to specific leaders.*

The author of Hebrews writes: *“Obey your leaders and submit to them”* (Hebrews 13:17). Clearly, believers must know who their leaders are. Paul writes to Timothy: *“The elders who direct the affairs of the church well are worthy of double honor”* (1 Timothy 5:17). Christian followers must, then, know whom to honor.

In terms of the example set by the early churches, Acts 2:37-47 indicates that these local groups kept a record of those who professed Christ and been filled with the Holy Spirit, and the churches tracked their growth. There seems to be an awareness in Romans 16:1-16 of who is included as members of that specific church.

Perhaps the most persuasive argument for the biblical understanding of church membership is not *explicit* scriptural passages or examples (there aren't Bible verses that say "Church membership is good! Here's what it is and how to do it..."), but the *implicit* consequences of the teaching of the apostles when it comes to the local church.

Paul tells the church in Corinth to "*expel the wicked person from among you*" (1 Corinthians 5:13). To be expelled implies that the person belonged in the first place. The exact nature of that belonging isn't spelled out, but some type of church membership is a reasonable conclusion here.

In his letter to Titus, Paul says to give a divisive person two warnings, and then "*have nothing to do with them*" (Titus 3:10). John talks about false teachers who "*went out from us*" because "*they did not really belong to us*" (1 John 2:19).

The New Testament writings seem to indicate that local churches knew who belonged to their body, and who did not. Members of a family know who their brothers and sisters are. If the church is like a family, as Paul says it is, it is reasonable to expect membership to be not just encouraged but expected.

WHAT DOES MEMBERSHIP LOOK LIKE AT MCC?

At MCC, we seek to promote and practice membership in a manner that is meaningful for discipleship and evangelism. This is realized in three primary areas:

- Who becomes a member, and how members formally participate in the decision-making process of the church
- Expectations for member participation in the life of the church
- Church discipline

Let's walk through each of these.

Becoming and Being a Member at MCC

The MCC by-laws defines who qualifies as a member, stating:

All who have been immersed upon a confession of faith in Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior at the Minier Christian Church, and those who have been immersed upon a like confession of faith elsewhere and have come into the fellowship of the Minier Christian Church by statement or letter shall be considered members of the Minier Christian Church.

Our profession of faith usually sounds something like this:

“I believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of the living God. I accept him as my Lord and savior, and I commit to follow him with my life.”

Generally, this is done before the church body as part of a Sunday morning worship service so we can all welcome new members into our church family!

In addition to the member expectations outlined below, MCC members participate in the governance and leadership of the church in the following ways:

- Members aged 16 years and older can vote at the annual meeting for elders, the budget, and any proposed by-law amendments
- The pulpit committee to call a new Lead Minister consists of members, as are the committees to recommend other staff hires to the elders
- Leadership and co-leadership of our 10 Ministry Teams consists of members

Per an annual review by church leadership, MCC members may be removed from the roster for the following reasons:

- Sunday morning church service attendance below 50% over the previous calendar year, with the following exceptions:
 - Prolonged or chronic health issues
 - Permanent homebound status or placement in a residential care facility that does not enable physical attendance at MCC
 - Young members away at college whose parents are still MCCers
 - Other situations determined via elder discretion
 - Transfer to and/or regular attendance at another church
 - The execution and exhaustion of the church discipline process, summarized below and outlined in full in the Church Discipline at MCC document
 - Death
-

Expectations for MCC Members

It is the joy and responsibility for MCC members to exercise their membership by participating in church life in the following ways:

1. *Belonging*. Belonging to a church means investing one's life in a gospel-centered community of believers who joyfully serve one another and advance Jesus's mission together.

MCC members will work to elevate the very concept of church; they won't treat the church as unimportant, unnecessary, or an inconvenience. The church is imperfect but indispensable to faithful Christian discipleship.

MCC members will *belong* to and in the church in a very real sense. They will commit to pray for the church, give and receive friendship and counsel, invest in and take responsibility for the success of church events and efforts, and generally orient their lives around the rhythms of church life.

2. *Welcoming*. Division and partiality are realities in our world. The church is meant to be a place of peace, providing a glimpse of the unity and missional commonality to come in the Kingdom of Heaven.

MCC members will welcome all who earnestly pursue Jesus, regardless of race, socioeconomic status, religious background, or otherworldly identifying factors. Being "welcoming" is not the same as being "affirming" of all decisions or identities, but it does mean a posture of love and warmth for those who are different.

MCC members won't be snobs and won't play favorites. They will actively work to welcome outsiders and those who are alone (sit by the single person!). They will reflect on the grace of Christ and seek to extend that grace to others. They will ask God to help make them aware of any pride or prejudice in their own hearts, and stamp it out.

3. *Gathering.* Physically joining together for worship is essential to discipleship, evangelism, growth, education, formation, and community. The various elements of the worship service - scripture reading, communion, corporate singing, prayer, teaching and preaching, giving - all contribute to the development of the mind and the heart.

MCC members will show up to church! Attendance on Sundays will be the norm, absences will be the exception. Habits shape. The habit of church attendance help shape what type of Jesus-followers MCCers become.

4. *Caring.* At least 23 times in the New Testament, God through his biblical authors commands believers to love and care for one another. The primary opportunity for living out this command is through the church.

MCC members will rejoice with those who rejoice and mourn with those who mourn (Romans 12:15), bear one another's burdens (Galatians 6:2), encourage one another (1 Thessalonians 5:11) toward love and good deeds (Hebrews 10:24), and be devoted to one another (Romans 12:10). MCC members will also care for those in the Love20 community who are in need. They will act as the hands and feet of Jesus, who not only came teaching, but who also fed the hungry and cared for the sick.

MCC members will be patient and gentle with each other, and work toward peaceful reconciliation of differences, placing the unity of the whole body ahead of personal preferences.

5. *Serving*. Followers of Christ are not spectators in a church, but servants of Christ's church. By God's great mercy, he has bestowed upon all his children spiritual gifts. In urgent anticipation of Jesus' return, those gifts will be put to work for his glory.

MCC members will contribute to the ministry of the church by serving on the ministry team(s) that most align with their gifting. They will remember that discipleship consists of more than just knowing things about the faith, it means living out an active faith that demonstrates the life and light of Christ through good works.

MCC members will seek out ways to serve the church and the other members; they will volunteer, show up on time, and honor their commitments.

6. *Honoring*. Every member of God's flock needs a humble under-shepherd who serves under the Chief Shepherd (Jesus), and such leaders need to be respected (1st Thessalonians 5:12) and followed (Hebrews 13:7). Then a faithful leader is following Jesus and being submissive to his word, then the people of God are to follow this shepherd joyfully.

MCC members will gently and lovingly hold their leaders accountable for faithfulness and fruitfulness and, having found them to be faithful and producing good fruit, will support them through prayer, attendance at events, attentiveness, kindness, encouragement, responding when called to action, and mature engagement.

When criticism is warranted, it will be communicated privately and with measured wisdom.

7. *Witnessing*. The data is clear: the vast majority of people who come through the doors of a church for the first time do so because a friend invited them. Evangelism isn't reserved for pastors and missionaries - it's the responsibility of all of God's people.

MCC members will engage people in the name of Jesus in the everyday course of life - at work, in the grocery store, across the backyard fence, at the soccer game. They will remember that the most powerful witness isn't perfectly articulated and rehearsed gospel speeches but living faithfully and loving well.

MCC members will engage with unbelievers with the long-term purpose of conversion, will invite them to church events, will serve them as an expression of Christ's love, and will provide them resources - prudently and strategically - that may prompt further opportunities.

8. *Giving*. Ever since the founding of the church in the Book of Acts, its work has been funded by its members. If the ministry of the church is important, then the members of the church must come together to provide financial resources to build and sustain that ministry. A church is only as healthy as its financial stability. Giving tithes and offerings to the church doesn't just fund essential gospel work, it's also spiritually formative for the giver.

MCC members will give a portion of their financial resources back to God, through the church. Through their giving, MCC members will be formed in generosity, will be reminded that our resources are a blessing from God we are to steward, and will be caused to more deeply participate in something bigger than themselves. Kingdom work is only ever possible by the work of the Spirit and the generosity of God's people.

Prospective MCC members will be encouraged to attend the Basics membership class, sign a member covenant consisting of much of the information in the above section, and participate in a brief membership interview (conversation, really) where they will be asked to articulate the gospel message.

Church Discipline at MCC

Church membership exists to serve the purpose of the church, which is discipleship and evangelism.

Church discipline is one aspect of the discipleship process. In fact, “discipleship” and “discipline” share the same root word: “disciple.” Church discipline is the part of discipleship that seeks to correct sin and guide the disciple back on the correct path. To be *discipled* is, among other things, to be *disciplined*.

As elders and ministers, MCC leaders have the responsibility to shepherd the flock, including when one of its sheep wanders away or threatens the others with sin. The underlying purpose in every act of discipline, of course, must be love: love for the individual, love for the church as a whole, love for the watching world, and love for Christ.

The majority of the time, church discipline will look like personal (even one-on-one) conversations, gentle prodding, prayer, and individual counseling and accountability. Informal, relational correction should be the norm amongst members and from leadership for any church claiming to represent Jesus.

For more on our formal church discipline policy, please ask for a copy of our Church Discipline at MCC document.

Much of this material is adopted and/or adapted from the following sources:

Church Membership: How the World Knows Who Represents Jesus - Jonathan Leeman

Why Should I Join a Church? - Mark Dever

Love Your Church: 8 Great Things About Being a Church Member - Tony Merida

I Am A Church Member: Discovering the Attitude that Makes a Difference - Thom Rainer
