

CHURCH
MEMBERSHIP:
AN INTRODUCTION
TO THE JOURNEY

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and
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Congratulations

Congratulations on the commitment you have made to become a member of a Christian church. Christian congregations are diverse, but through baptism we all share in the common fellowship of the church universal, the body of all Christian believers that is not bound by time, national borders, or denominational identity. You are uniting with both a specific local congregation and the broader national or international structure to which it belongs, and also with the universal church of Jesus Christ. This booklet is offered in the hope that it may lead to a richer experience of church membership and a transforming Christian faith.

Each individual who unites with a local church brings his or her own unique gifts and experiences to enrich the community. Perhaps you were an active member elsewhere, perhaps not. It has become increasingly common for adults in America to discover they are bringing very little past experience to their church membership. They feel as if they are starting from "square one." Wherever you are on the journey of faith, the act of joining a local church is a momentous occasion. In joining, you publicly profess your faith in Jesus Christ and commit yourself to participation in a community of believers. It is an exciting moment filled with unlimited potential.

The church is not a typical, modern "organization." It is not a club or group. "Family" might be a better word, but there are limits to the idea of kinship as well. By becoming part of a church community you have become part of a people that includes Christians past and future, in places near and far, in heaven and on earth. Christians believe that we experience the fullness of the church when we are bound deeply to the people worshipping by our side. By becoming part of a church, we have not become part of an organization that exists simply to meet our

needs or interests. We are part of a great adventure - sometimes a dangerous one - that will sweep us up in its flow, carrying us to new and unexpected places.

By joining the church you have set out on a new journey of faith. This is a journey that you cannot entirely manage, compartmentalize, or control. You should expect to be changed in the ways that you live, work, shop, and relate to other persons.

Becoming part of a church is a wonderful and frightening idea. If you look around you on any given Sunday, you are not likely to see prominent and influential people. Gathering for worship is not like going to the Oscars, or even the local businesspersons' luncheon. You might look around and wonder why some have dared to cross the threshold of the church. These are not all good people and certainly not all beautiful and brilliant people. Moreover, we Christians are not all likely to share the same interests in sports, politics, or fashion. This lack of prestige and common "lifestyle" is precisely the point of gathering in God's name. We have been called by God to a shared life, in God's name and not our own.

When we gather in God's name, we are not perfect people. Aware of our imperfections, we are called to be open to God. We are called to live faithfully to the way of God in Jesus Christ. We are called to depend upon one another. We are called to a way of *peace* where we reject vengeance, not returning violence for violence. We are called to a way of reconciliation, taking the first step to peace with our enemies. We are called to *love* - not just a sentimental "feeling good," but a love that can heal broken relationships and resist injustice. This is the kind of love that stands with victims of abuse, the kind of love that fills us with passion for the good things in life. This is the love that moves us to extend hospitality to our neighbor. We have been called by God to a common life, in God's name and not our own. This is a daunting, breathtaking, and wonderful call.

Wonderful as it is, it can also be frightening. Statistics demonstrate that nearly half the persons who join a local church will drift away from active participation within two years. Surely their intentions were good when they joined, and they truly wished to deepen their relationship with the God made known to us in Jesus Christ. What happened? What went wrong? In most cases, they never succeeded in moving into the

deeper experience of church membership. They never came to feel they were truly a part of the church community. Uniting with the church requires a conscious decision on your part. Likewise, experiencing church membership in a way that will center and transform your life requires a series of conscious decisions.

At least five specific disciplines are essential to living well as the church. These disciplines will be outlined below. The word "discipline," as it is used here, refers to a way of life. "Discipline" comes from the same root word as "disciple," a pupil or follower. With its connection to learning, "discipline" is also used to refer to fields of study like chemistry and accounting. Learning a discipline means being formed into a way of looking at things, thinking and acting on them. By entering into the disciplines of the church, we are opening ourselves to learn and to be formed as disciples of Jesus: that is, to be friends of God. By entering into the way and habits of faith, we hope to learn to see ourselves and the world through God's eyes.

The Discipline of Corporate Worship

Coming together to lift up our praise to God in common worship is the central act of the church. As a church member, it is of critical importance that you share in worship on, at least, a weekly basis. It is in worship that we most fully experience our true nature as God's beloved creatures and our distinct identity as a called people of God. Over time, the experience of corporate worship has the greatest power to form your identity as a Christian and nurture a deep faith within you.

Many in our time suppose that private, individual prayer is far more important than worshipping with others. "After all," some will say, "it is my own personal relationship with God that is most important. If the church helps me with that, fine. If not, why go?" This statement misunderstands the very nature of faith and friendship with God. We are brothers and sisters called to a common work: to give glory to God. As human beings, we have been created by God for community with others, and the church is called to be a sign of God's kingdom. We are called to live

together in justice and peace, and to offer God's hospitality to the world.

Love of God and love of neighbor are deeply connected: knowing God and truly knowing our fellow human beings cannot be separated. Being a friend of God means becoming a friend of God's friends. Being a friend of God means being a friend to our neighbor, our enemy, the sick, and the imprisoned. Personal faith and private prayer are certainly vital, but these individual matters are meaningless if they are disconnected from sharing our joys, sorrows, and struggles with others in Christian community. Our faith brings us near to our neighbors. In short, God's gracious love is a reality that must be shared. The biblical image of God's grace is a wedding banquet.

Maybe you bring a rich experience of regular worship with you as you join the church. For many people, however, this will not be the case. Their memories of worship will be of squirming in boredom as children whose parents "dragged" them to worship, or of scattered Easter and Christmas Eve services. Perhaps worship initially strikes you as a random process of standing up and sitting down: sing and pray, sing and pray. No matter what your prior experience, entering into worship life with a new congregation is likely to be a new beginning. Even if you have long been a member of the same denomination and the style of worship is familiar to you, you have not worshiped with this specific community of Christians: worshipping God together is the "glue" that binds us into real community.

Worship is not entertainment, although it may bring moments of great joy, solemn beauty, or profound emotion. The ministers, priests, or choirs are not "performers" and we are not the "audience." Rather, the clergy and musicians could be properly termed "prompters" helping *us* to "perform" for our true audience: Almighty God. We do not enter into worship to "get our batteries recharged" or to "learn more about the Bible." Rather, we share in this experience in order to render our worship to the One who alone is worthy of our praise and worship.

Worship brings transformation. As we learn how to worship God with all that we have and all that we are, we also learn how to safeguard ourselves from the very real temptation to worship ourselves, our families, our careers, our social

privileges, nations and governments, or material goods. The church's worship places the rest of our lives in proper perspective. Worship ought to be the central experience out of which our lives as Christian people flow. In worship, we begin to gain wisdom and courage to live in a new way as God changes us.

Worship brings transformation for the long haul. We worship week to week, year to year, as ordinary people. If worship is the center of our lives, it will not be an extraordinary event. On a given Sunday, it is not likely that worshippers will be rapt in ecstasy or have stunning moments of enlightenment. In fact, if worship is a deep part of our lives, it will become "routine" and "normal."

Compare the effect of physical exercise on the body. The "weekend athlete" will find a day of vigorous play extraordinary in two senses. First, his exercise offers an unusual bit of fun. Second, it is an unusual strain on his muscles and joints. Because this exercise is infrequent, his body will not weather the strain better the next time. The body is not strengthened because the "weekend" experience is quite distinct and separate from day-to-day life.

In contrast, the athlete who trains regularly will not experience exercise as extraordinary for the body or spirit. Exercise will be routine; however, the trained athlete will have a deeper joy and a greater (and constant) desire for the sport. She will happily endure the tedium of practice and day-to-day struggles, and she will have very profound moments of insight and joy. For the "weekend athlete," a day or hour of exercise is extraordinary, but for the routine athlete, one's whole life is elevated to a higher level.

This elevation of our whole lives is the effect of worship. When new to the experience, the rhythms and patterns of worship will not fully disclose themselves immediately. They must be experienced over time before they reveal their riches. Worship unfolds in accordance with the Christian Calendar, or the *liturgical year*. This calendar does not begin with January 1, nor does it coincide with the beginning of school in the fall. Rather, it begins with the season of Advent, a period of four weeks during which we anticipate and prepare ourselves for God's entrance into human history on Christmas day. From

Advent we move through the other sacred seasons, each rich with meaning, each intent on shaping our spiritual journey.

As we move through these seasons over the years, we experience them in ever-deeper ways. We begin to understand that the secular calendar, punctuated with its "Hallmark Card holidays," is not the only way to measure time or to frame the unfolding of our lives. The secular calendar has come to have an economic function. Halloween, Christmas, New Year's Eve, Valentine's Day, Mother's day, and so on, mark the passage of the year and provide a rationale for buying and consuming more goods.

Think about how different our lives would be if we "lived into" the sorrow of Christ's death on Good Friday and the absolute joy of Easter. Jesus' resurrection means, among other things, that the reign of the world's violence and hatred does not overcome the power of God. What if we "lived by" this pace and rationale of the year? What if we learned to experience the full power of the Easter proclamation, "He is risen!?" Wouldn't we be able to live without anxiety (about what we have or don't have)? Wouldn't we be able to take the risk of love for our neighbor and enemy? Wouldn't we learn a profound hope for the world? God is with us.

The liturgical calendar conveys a unique understanding of the passage of time and how we come to "see" our lives in the world. Likewise, the liturgy of the worship service has its own rhythm and pattern that only reveals itself fully as we experience it many times. The liturgy will be different in various Christian traditions, with certain portions of the service receiving greater or lesser emphasis, but always worship is a *drama* that flows in accordance with its own logic. The community gathers, sings praises, prays for one another and the world, hears God's Word in Holy Scripture, shares in the sacraments, offers its gifts to God in gratitude, and seeks to carry God's blessings and guidance out into the world. There is a specific purpose behind each component in the liturgy. There is a reason for its placement within the worship service. While these purposes and reasons can be explained, the liturgy must be experienced, again and again, so that the deep truths of our worship may grow in our hearts.

Christian worship is not an individual act; it is not something we can do alone. When we gather for worship, we each bring with us the Christ who dwells in our heart, uniquely expressed in us. We will not be magically transformed through occasional worship "experiences" or through an isolated hour each week. Worship is our common calling to give glory to God. When worship becomes regular and routine, we will come to know other members of the community in a way quite different from our more shallow social interactions. We go deeper because we have laughed and cried together, prayed and sung together, blessed one another's children and shared the bread and cup together. Worship is what makes us Christians. Worship is what makes us the church.

The Discipline of Friendship

Every committed church member should cultivate friendships of common faith. Indeed, friendships based in the love of God are the highest form of friendship. Friends spend time with each other, share good times and bad, and enjoy each other's company. Good friends want good things for one another. We work and worry on behalf of our friends. We are happy when they are successful and sad when they fail. We take joy in the good things, and, if the friendship is true, we are able to tell each other when we have done wrong. We can forgive and ask for forgiveness.

Friendships in the church share even more. We open ourselves to each other through prayer and faithful living. We share in prayer and conversation. We share with one another the joys, concerns, and challenges of our lives. Such friendship is essential to our spiritual formation. It is remarkable how friendships can hold people together and make for some "odd couples." We never know through which member the Holy Spirit may speak the truth we most need to hear. Friendships are not always easy. But in the Spirit of Christ, we can have faith that the struggles will bring discovery.

Praying and reading the Bible together, in friendship, provide key opportunities for God's word to come alive in us. As we come to know other group members, and they come to know us, we become more willing to take risks. We are able to share the real struggles of our lives and to ask fellow Christians

to pray for us and with us. Together, we are able to seek God's guidance and direction. If corporate worship helps us to unite with the *entire* church community, sharing among a circle of friends aids us in forming *specific* relationships that serve the entire community. These relationships have the potential to become some of the most important in our lives.

Friendships are sustained well when set within the life of the church as a whole. Most Christian churches today offer a wide range of opportunities to share in the life of a small group centered in study, prayer, or service to others. Over time each group forms its own unique identity as participants give to and receive from one another. Within these groups, deep friendships may emerge, including friendships between persons who, on the surface, seem to have little in common. Church staff or fellow members can help you select the group most appropriate for you. Many church members report that it is their experience within a small group that had the single greatest impact in leading them to feel that they were truly a part of the church.

The Discipline of Service to the Community

Community only works when each member gives of himself or herself for the common good. In modern politics and economics, self-interest and the common good are set in opposition. In other words, the good of society is considered a way to limit natural self-interest. Corporations, like Microsoft or Wal-Mart, might like to monopolize a market (such would be very good for them), but they are restricted by law for the sake of the common good. The logic of Christian community is quite different.

As Christians, we assume a unity between what is good for individuals and good for all. There does not have to be a contradiction between self-concern and concern for others. When we serve others, gladly and freely, we discover the remarkable "economy of God." When we give up our envy, competition, egocentric ambitions, and shallow attachments, we gain far more. We begin a journey, marked by both suffering and joy, but directed to the fullness of life. As Jesus taught, those who seek to keep their lives will lose them, while those who give of themselves freely will have life in abundance.

Churches today offer a wide array of opportunities for participating in the community's ministry. Ideally, a church staff

member or fellow Christian will help you identify your specific gifts so that you can put these gifts into practice. In most congregations, you will not be a member for long before someone asks you to help. Are your gifts in teaching? Perhaps you are called to teach in the church school. Are you musically gifted? Join the choir. Do you have the natural ability to put other persons at ease? Congregations require many ministries of hospitality, from serving coffee after the worship service to greeting first-time visitors. A fundamental work of the church is giving aid to the sick, hungry, and poor. We are called to give hope to those who despair, and to see the dignity of those whom many call worthless.

Your congregation doubtless has many outreach ministries in and beyond the local region. Such service ministries are far more than "free labor" for the church. They are a basic expression of what it means to be the church, a community engaged in mutual ministry. They are also important vehicles through which we come to know our fellow members, and to become a vital member of the congregation. Christians believe that we come to see Christ in the people we serve. By visiting the sick or teaching the young about faith, we carry out Christ's works of mercy, *and* we are served by the presence of Christ in our neighbor - by the bedridden person or the crying child.

The most active in the church (the ones who "give" the most) will tell you that they receive far more than they give. That is not to say that "receiving" is their motive (that is, they do not help *in order to* get something in return), but receiving is an inevitable effect. By working for the sake of the good in others, we are working "the good" upon ourselves. On this point, it is important to note that the concept of "sin" carries the same insight. By doing others wrong, we are working wrong upon ourselves. In this sense, we are not called to be self-less, but self-giving.

As a community, we are called to have our lives shaped by God's way in the world. We are called to offer God's good news, to show the way of peace in a violent world, to love the "unloved," and to speak the truth about what is right and good. These are not tasks that can be managed by individuals; they are a way of life for a community of disciples.

The Discipline of Housekeeping

It is often said, "the church is not the building, but the people who gather there." True enough. But having a place to gather is a necessary aspect of being a people. Anyone who has suffered through a divorce knows how difficult it is being a family without sharing the same household. Moreover, many American homes have simply become airport terminals where family members are always either coming or going. There are households, in contrast, that seem to be "people magnets," places where family and friends alike enjoy gathering on a regular basis. These homes might be a bit messy because they are in constant use. At the same time, cleaning and maintaining order are of utmost importance precisely because they are constantly in use. Any good housekeeper knows that hospitality is a full-time job. Although housekeeping has come to have less and less value in our culture, it is a full-time job of the church.

When we commit to membership in a congregation, we also commit ourselves to our portion of housekeeping responsibilities. Housekeeping includes taking responsibility for the church's financial well being, for upkeep of the physical structure, and for sustaining the practices of hospitality. Hospitality might include keeping the "meeting place" in good working order (such as sweeping, painting, and plumbing). It might include inviting in the stranger, hosting parties for special events, entertaining guests, and feeding those who have traveled to attend funerals and weddings. The hospitality and the care giving of the church are always directed outward as well. For this reason, local churches are deeply connected to service in their communities and to the global mission of the church. Look in any town or any part of the globe: the church is there to show God's love and mercy.

One of the more "touchy" subjects of good housekeeping is money and budgets. Clergy dislike talking about it, and laity do not like to hear it. But we must give prayerful consideration to our financial stewardship. In spiritual terms, our financial giving to the church becomes authentic and meaningful when it is given in proportion to our income. Few of us invest in our retirement or pay our mortgages haphazardly. Why should we show more conscious concern when saving for our vacations than in

supporting the ongoing life of the church? Shouldn't we give according to the bounty of life that we enjoy?

One Biblical standard for financial stewardship is the *tithe*: Christians are called to give at least ten percent of their total income to God's service. Most Christians support other charitable organizations in addition to their church; some use as a rule of thumb "five percent for my church, five percent for other worthy causes." Many devout Christians consider the tithe a beginning point, and seek to increase their proportionate giving as they grow in Christ.

If you are giving serious consideration to Christian financial stewardship for the first time, a tithe, or even a half-tithe, may be too ambitious a place to begin. It sometimes takes several years of responsible budgeting before such a goal can be reached. But even if you are just beginning as a Christian steward, it is important that your giving represent a real commitment, and a meaningful sacrifice: Christ's cross serves as a constant reminder that the nature of genuine love is to give itself away, and carries real personal cost. Such a commitment is essential to our spiritual well being, a constant reminder that we have pledged ourselves not to the pursuit of material wealth, but to a vibrant, lifelong relationship to our God.

The Discipline of Christian Ministry in the World

Even as we are each called to commit to a specific ministry within the church, every Christian must understand himself or herself as called by God to Christian ministry in the world: we go forth from the church to be Christ's hands and heart in the world.

Even non-Christians generally praise the church for "all the good it does," and certainly the church as an institution does engage in many wonderful forms of ministry and service. But the good works done by the church corporately are but a small part of its total ministry in the world, which is largely expressed through the ministries of its individual members. We do not cease to be the church when we leave the church building: whether together or apart, we belong to God and to one another.

Individually, we each have a mission field, a field that includes our own home, our neighborhood, and our place of employment: all the places we go and the people we know. As

church members, we are called to "live in Christ" in these settings. Our life in the church - our worship, fellowship, small group life, and our various avenues of community service - is the "whole" from which we carry out our "individual" ministries in the world.

The Church is a Way of Life

The Church of Jesus Christ is a *community* of disciples made up of diverse persons (diverse in race, nationality and income), who share a common calling and a common desire to know, worship, and serve the God made known to us in Jesus Christ. Christian community is not founded on our individual successes (like a gathering for the Emmy Awards), but on God's grace and our calling to be a people of forgiveness and reconciliation. Discipleship is our way and journey.

The church is a *family*. It is different in significant ways from "blood families," for the bonds between us are formed not by blood, but by the Holy Spirit through baptism. As in our families of origin, in the church family we discover that we belong to one another in profound, life-giving ways. We will experience conflicts and misunderstandings in our church family, just as we do in our families of origin, but we attempt to resolve these differences in a manner that reflects our special calling as Christ's people. As friends we bear each other's burdens and joys. We have been adopted into a long history, into the struggles and hopes of a pilgrim people.

The church is an *institution*, and like all institutions it has by-laws, governance structures, and a variety of formal and informal rules that guide its life. The institutional element of the church ought not to be minimized. If we are called to live faithfully *in the world*, then structures of authority, decision-making, mutual support, service, and the day-to-day maintenance of life will be a necessary part of our presence as a people of God.

The church is a *servant*, *witness*, and *sign*, committed to "being Christ" to a world that suffers the pain of pride, violence, ill will, and ignorance. As servant, the church is called to stand with those who suffer injustice and to sit at the bedside of the dying and sick. As witness, the church is called to speak the truth and to be faithful to the good news of Jesus Christ. As

sign, the church is called to be a "light" to the earth, to be a community that lives out God's gracious presence in the world. Let God's love be known through the way we live.

It may take years before you fully understand and appreciate all the different things that form and shape the life of the Church. Joining a local church is not the end of a journey, but rather a beginning. We are a pilgrim people. Congratulations on becoming a member. "Go in peace, and serve the Lord."

Possibilities for further investigation:

1. Ask your pastor to explain the logic and rhythm of worship and the liturgical year.
2. Locate the monthly calendar of the church. On it, you will find various groups and activities. The weekly bulletin often includes requests for help and upcoming events.
3. Ask a leader in the church about the budget. It is interesting to discover where our tithes and offerings go, and how this speaks of the church's mission. You may need to inquire further to a district or diocesan office. Local churches participate in programs and institutions that are supported by the wider church. You will be amazed.
4. Ask about upcoming adult education offerings. If there is an area of Christian faith where you are called to become more knowledgeable (the Bible, Christian theology, prayer, etc.), enroll in a class that will help with that goal.
5. If you are a parent, learn about programs the church offers for children, youth, and families. In particular, seek ways to form relationships with fellow parents in order to support one another in maintaining a Christ-centered household in a consumerist society.
6. Seek to learn more about the history and practices of the Christian tradition to which your congregation belongs, and how these compare with other churches.

7. Learn about your church's governance structure. How are decisions made and how is ministry carried out? Does your church have formal boards and committees, or informal "ministry teams"? Is there an area of church leadership to which you might be called?
8. Find out whether your denomination publishes a daily devotional guide you can use to center each day in your Christian faith. Inquire about weekday or daily worship and prayer at the church.
9. Make it a habit to introduce yourself to one person you do not know each Sunday morning.
10. Regularly review your participation in the life of the church, taking on new challenges and opportunities for growth if your involvement begins to feel a bit "stale."