

INTRODUCTION

There are several key topics to discuss when thinking about membership:

1. What's the point...why membership at all?
2. Membership that means little means little...how do we make membership meaningful?
3. The front door...how do people become members?
4. Honoring commitment...how do we recognize new members?
5. Distinctions...what can members do that non-members cannot do?
6. Remembering and reaffirming...how do we regularly reaffirm our covenant commitment?
7. The back door...how do people cease being members?
8. Two-timing...can someone be a member of two local churches at the same time?

1. WHAT'S THE POINT...WHY MEMBERSHIP AT ALL?

The practice of church membership is derived from Scripture, and particularly from those biblical themes pertaining to the commitments and responsibilities of believers within the larger body of Christ. The Bible speaks of membership in the body in two different ways. First, there is membership in the one holy, catholic and apostolic Church. This membership is an instantaneous reality at conversion, as Paul teaches that those who are in Christ are, in fact, members of one another (Romans 12.5). Second, the Scriptures also envision the more immediate context of the local church. This closer horizon provides a context in which, under the oversight of duly appointed leadership, Christians live out the “one anothers” of Scripture. There are many such “one another” passages, particularly in the New Testament (e.g. Romans 12:16: Live in harmony with one another; 1 Thessalonians 5:11: Therefore encourage one another and build each other up, just as in fact you are doing; Galatians 6:2: Bear one another's burdens, and so fulfill the law of Christ; etc.), and the majority of them require a local church context for their fulfillment.

Sometimes it is argued that believers can be part of the universal church of Christ without being united to a local, organized, visible church. Yet this is entirely inconsistent with the practice and experience of the first followers of Jesus. In the earliest days of the church, every baptized follower of Jesus was grafted into a local body of believers. Historical evidence, as well as the uniform testimony of Scripture, show that “these churches were thoroughly organized and visible,” such that participants were manifestly aware of who the members of their particular body were, who held particular responsibilities, and so on.

Cyprian, one of the earliest bishops and martyrs in the African church, wrote around 250 AD, “No one can have God as father who does not have the church as mother.” This is merely a statement of the obvious: thoroughgoing discipleship in Christ cannot occur outside of the context of a local body of believers to whom one is committed and responsible.

Our system of membership is intended to affirm and emphasize this important, biblical teaching in our highly individualistic culture where it gets naturally downplayed or overlooked. In the contemporary context, we live in a fragmented world that tends to isolate us from one another. Thus membership in a local church is counter-cultural. Instead of isolation, local church members should experience interconnectedness, mutual dependence

and communal life in the new society of the body of Christ. In fact, an emphasis on church membership speaks prophetically to the practices of church shopping and church hopping that are so prevalent today. Calling people to meaningful membership fights against the anonymity that ultimately inhibits growth as a disciple of Jesus.

In light of these things, it may be helpful to think of membership in the local church as a means to the end of mature Christian discipleship. At the Church of the Advent, our membership system is a means for commitment to growth in Christ with a particular group of Christians. It provides an environment for living out the “one anothers” and other responsibilities given to believers as family. Unlike many modern conceptions of membership with which we are familiar, membership is just as much about what we give as it is about what we receive. There are benefits and privileges to being in the body of Christ just as there are responsibilities and commitments. We hope and pray that our methods with regard to church membership foster deeper discipleship, develop stronger community, and thereby strengthen the witness of the church in the world.

Membership in the Church of the Advent is not meant in any way to undermine the broader unity of the one holy, catholic and apostolic church nor is it meant to exclude, from our worship or life together, any brothers and sisters in Christ among us who are simply passing through DC or those who are investigating the church. We will remain an open and welcoming community, and, while we are committed to one another in a special way as a local body, we also remain committed and responsible to all other believers in our city, region, and world.

2. MEMBERSHIP THAT MEANS LITTLE MEANS LITTLE...HOW DO WE MAKE MEMBERSHIP MEANINGFUL?

Church membership often ends up meaning very little. This is illustrated by churches where, for example, membership rolls number 300 but average weekly attendance is around 70. In such cases, membership has obviously lost any meaning. For membership to be meaningful requires substantial effort on the part of leaders and members in a congregation. It is much easier to implement a membership system that is minimalist but the values for discipleship of such a system will be limited as well and, in the end, this kind of system may prove spiritually harmful.

Our membership covenant is the charter for this community and becomes the focal point for our communal life together. We ask that all members to commit themselves as members by signing this covenant on a yearly basis. We plan to develop methods for ensuring that this covenant is being upheld, reaffirmed, and promoted among the members of our church.

3. THE FRONT DOOR...HOW DO PEOPLE BECOME MEMBERS?

We all know that what is easily acquired is often considered less valuable. While being careful not to make unnecessary burdens for people, the entrance process into church membership should adequately represent the importance of the discipleship realities that church membership emphasizes. Furthermore, the entrance process provides us with a valuable opportunity for discipleship, teaching, relationship building, etc.

STEP 1: ATTEND A NEWCOMERS' DINNER

Several times throughout the year, we hold a Newcomers' Dinner for anyone interested in learning more about the Church of the Advent. We share a meal, get to know one another, and talk about the mission and vision of our church. This dinner is open to all who would like to learn more about the church, whether or not you intend to pursue membership at Advent. To attend, email the parish administrator when the dinner is announced.

STEP 2: COMPLETE ADVENT ESSENTIALS

Through the membership process people should learn much about our common faith, our common life and its governing principles, our responsibilities to one another, and our responsibilities to the world. Advent Essentials meets like a fellowship group for a period of four to six weeks at least twice a year. We discuss the core theological conviction and membership expectations at Advent, grouped under the general headings Gospel Defined, Gospel-based worship, Gospel-based Community, Gospel-based Discipleship and Gospel-based Mission. To attend, email the parish administrator to sign up when the class is announced.

STEP 3: MEET WITH A PASTOR

After you have completed the Advent Essentials course, if you would still like to become a member, you will need to schedule a 1:1 meeting with one of the pastors. This is simply a time for us to get to know you and hear more about your experience of coming to know and follow the Lord.

STEP 4: SIGN THE MEMBERSHIP COVENANT

The final step in becoming a member of Advent is signing the membership covenant. Though we do not require it, participation on a fellowship group is assumed of all members. We encourage you to sign the covenant in your fellowship group, and to spend some time praying with them about the commitment you are making to the church. You may obtain a copy from the Parish Administrator.

The front door at Advent will always remain open, but we want to take seriously the responsibility we have, before God and all other believers (not simply those in our flock), to train, equip, and get to know those who want to walk this road of discipleship with us.

4. HONORING COMMITMENT...HOW DO WE RECOGNIZE NEW MEMBERS?

We recognize new members publicly in the worship service at Advent. This both enables existing members to recognize their new family members and reminds all members and non-members present of the biblical truth that discipleship must be pursued in the context of a local, organized body of believers under the oversight of acknowledged leadership. These membership services are a time of celebration, and will happen two or three times throughout the year.

5. DISTINCTIONS...WHAT CAN MEMBERS DO THAT NON-MEMBERS CANNOT DO?

Most obviously, members have a vote at our members meetings. However, because membership entails a certain level of commitment to the local body, positions of leadership in this body should be reserved for members. Non-members can participate in fellowship groups and serve on committees and teams; however, non-members generally will not be leading ministries of the church.

As a general rule, the baptism of adults is reserved for those who are becoming members of Advent. Baptism is an outward and visible sign of spiritual new birth, and “they that receive Baptism are rightly grafted into the Church.” As we have seen, being grafted “into the Church” universal entails being connected to a local, visible, organized church. Therefore we normally require all adults that we baptize to be candidates for membership at Advent. The baptism of infants and children in our church is limited to the children of members only, because of the promises that are being made on behalf of the child by both the parents and the other members of the congregation.

Should non-members receive godly admonition? Clearly membership entails inviting the community and its leaders into one’s life, but what about non-members who regularly worship with us and share in our community?

While these brother and sisters in Christ are not “officially” part of our particular, local family, they are indeed part of God’s family, of which our local family is one part, and should therefore not be excluded from the grace of godly admonition. The confusion in our culture over the issues of church membership further necessitates this open and inclusive stance. We all have to operate with the same love, care, and responsibility to all those who come to and participate in the life of this church, member or non-member. This includes the exercise of godly admonition.

6. REMEMBERING AND REAFFIRMING...HOW DO WE REGULARLY REAFFIRM OUR COVENANT COMMITMENT?

During the services in which we welcome new members, we will give all members the opportunity to reaffirm their covenant with one another. This regular reminder of the commitments we have made to one another will help us from drifting into meaningless membership. It will also serve as a witness to the non-members and non-believers that we take the biblical realities of community seriously and that we see them as essential in the life of a person who follows Jesus.

7. THE BACK DOOR...HOW DO PEOPLE CEASE BEING MEMBERS?

People regularly move away, people change churches, and some people simply quit coming to church for whatever reason. It’s important that we have a way to remove these people from our membership so that our membership rolls reflect the reality of our situation. This helps our continued witness in the city as we are able to continue to be involved in the lives of our members, preventing us from claiming those with whom we no longer relate or, perhaps more importantly, preventing them from claiming us and so, possibly, maligning our witness and providing them false spiritual security. One mechanism we will use for a back door is to require that each member annually sign their membership covenant.⁷ This will generally eliminate from membership all those who no longer remain part of the common life of our congregation. In addition, we desire to formally send off those called away from DC, and to transfer their membership to the next church they join.

The back door discussion also relates to the subject of godly admonition. Pursuant to Section 1.14 of our by-laws, those who have been called to repentance formerly by the Presbyters on at least two occasions, at least one of which would be before the church, and who fail to address the matter shall cease to be members of the church. Paul is clear in 1 Cor 5 that the man who bears the name of brother and is found in persistent, unrepentant sin is not to be associated with (1 Cor 5.11). Further, in Matthew 18, the unrepentant brother is to be considered as a Gentile and a tax collector. That is, he is not to be considered a part of the church. In short, unrepentant sin can lead one to lose his or her membership in the local church.

8. TWO-TIMING...CAN SOMEONE BE A MEMBER OF TWO LOCAL CHURCHES AT THE SAME TIME?

Generally, the answer to this question is no. However, in situations where people have jobs that keep them regularly in two locations, dual membership could be an understandable reality. So long as dual membership does not enable a person to avoid the biblical responsibilities of the “one anothers” and “togethers” of Scripture, then dual membership, in certain cases, could be acceptable.

CONCLUSION

Being connected to a local, visible, organized body of believers in a meaningful way is essential for following Jesus. We emphasize membership not for its own sake but so that the teaching of Scripture with regard to discipleship and the local church may be expressed faithfully in the lives of believers.