

expectations they should anticipate, pastors should insure that they and the other leaders of the church are faithful models in these areas themselves. This would also be an appropriate time to discuss the church covenant which new members will be expected to take when they join the fellowship of the church.

The Church Covenant

Candidates for church membership present themselves to the local church and accept the following covenant by answering, "I will."

"Will you sincerely promise in the presence of God and these witnesses that you will accept the Bible as the Word of God, believe and practice its teachings rightly divided - the New Testament as your rule of faith and practice, government and discipline, and walk in the light to the best of your knowledge and ability."

The Most Critical Element

As important as all the above elements are, they fall short of what Jesus commissioned us to do. He did not tell us to go into the world and make church members, believers, or even Christians. Instead, He said in Matthew 28:19, "Go therefore and make disciples of all the nations. . . ." (NKJV).

We do a great disservice to sincere believers who come to our churches if all we offer them is church membership apart from genuine discipleship. Too often churches are filled with believers and members who are not disciples. Therefore it is critical when designing a training course for new members to include a strong component of discipleship which will begin in the membership course itself and then continue for life.

A disciple may be defined as "a follower," "a student," or, perhaps most appropriately, "an apprentice." An apprentice is one who joins himself or herself in a long-term relationship to a master in order to learn a trade or craft. In the spiritual sense, the master craftsman of the spiritual life is Jesus Christ, and those who would be His disciples must join themselves intimately to Him and follow Him daily in order to become like Him. The initial experience of coming to Christ as Savior is actually the beginning step in a lifelong process of becoming like Christ. We must never leave the impression that once a person becomes a church member, they have achieved the ultimate goal of the spiritual life. In reality, joining the church simply provides one with a context for growing into Christlikeness, just as a natural family provides the environment for an infant to mature into adulthood. If a family chooses to leave a baby to itself once it is born, with no further nurture or encouragement, it will never become a healthy adult. If the church is satisfied with believers becoming church members, but never provides for their further spiritual growth, they will never become mature disciples of Christ. They may be good members, from our point of view, but they will never become Christlike.

Instead of relying on codes of belief and rules of behavior to

produce spiritual maturity, it is incumbent on the local church to create an environment that allows believers to constantly experience intimate loving relationships with God and His children. It is in such an environment that members become mature, believers become disciples, and Christians grow into Christlikeness.

The principles of discipleship should be introduced as part of the church membership class, but they must also be included in the on-going life of the local church so that all may come to "the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ," (Ephesians 4:13).

One great resource for bringing discipleship into the local church is *Relational Discipleship: Transformed by God's Love*, published by White Wing Press.

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Why Church Membership Matters



The Church of God of Prophecy has always regarded church membership as vitally important, so it seems essential to

offer an intentional method of informing and preparing individuals who are considering membership. Over the past several years some have seemed to diminish the importance of church membership. Perhaps this a reaction to some of the excesses of our earlier ecclesiology, or perhaps it is simply a sign of the times; we live in an age in which loyalty to any institution is hard to come by. While the rest of the world is seeking to avoid commitment and loyalty, we must continue to emphasize, from a biblical perspective, the need for belonging to, and actively participating in, God's ordained institution on earth, His church. This brochure offers basic information for pastors to use with individuals who express interest in joining the church.

Why Should Someone Join the Church?

It is still important to covenant ourselves in fellowship with other believers. That conviction rests on what the New Testament has to say about the church. There are at least nine reasons why we should belong to the church.

1. **The church belongs to Jesus.** In Matthew 16:18, He calls it "my church." Acts 20:28 states that He purchased it "with his own blood." If the church belongs to Jesus, it is important for us to belong to the church.
2. **Jesus loves the church.** According to Ephesians 5:25, He "loved the church, and gave himself for it." If He loved it, so should we.
3. **Jesus is the head of the church.** Paul wrote in Ephesians 1:22 that God "put all things under his feet, and gave him to be the head over all things to the church." He further states in Colossians 1:18 that Jesus "is the head of the body, the church." If the church is important enough for Jesus to be its head, we need to be a part of it.

4. **The church was divinely instituted.** Jesus stated in Matthew 16:18, "I will build my church." Paul reminds us in Ephesians 2:20 that Jesus is the "chief cornerstone" on which the church is built. When offered the opportunity to participate in something divine, we should take the offer gladly.

5. **Jesus Himself established the church.** In Mark 3:13-15, Jesus "called unto him whom he would" to form the nucleus of the church. If He started the church, we need to be part of it.

6. **The Holy Spirit empowered the church.** Jesus promised in Acts 1:8 that the church would "receive power after that the Holy Ghost is come upon you. . . ." and that promise was fulfilled on the day of Pentecost when His church was "all filled with the Holy Ghost." If the Holy Spirit is the power of the church, it is important for us to be attached to that source of power.

7. **Once it was established, members were added to the church by God Himself.** Acts 2:47 records that "The Lord added to the church daily. . . ." and Acts 5:14 says that multitudes of both men and women were being "added to the Lord." If the church is important enough for God to be involved, it is important enough for us to be involved.

8. **The church properly exercises government and discipline.** In Matthew 16:19 the church was given the "keys of the kingdom of heaven" by Jesus Himself. In Hebrews 13:17, ordained church leaders were given spiritual authority over the members for the sake of their souls. If we remain outside the fellowship of the church, it is highly likely that we will remain outside God's provision for spiritual government and discipline, which are given for our protection and growth.

9. **In addition to the points mentioned above,** the church provides for us a number of necessary things to which we could not have full access outside the relationship of the church. These include:

- Discipleship
- Fellowship
- Protection and safety
- Teaching
- Accountability
- An outlet for gifting and service
- An arena for corporate worship
- A channel for stewardship
- A place to mature spiritually
- A biblical world view

Church Membership Training

When individuals approach the pastor to inquire about becoming a member of the church, it is important that they be offered an opportunity to receive information and training before becoming a member. This training should be offered in a series of classes over a period of several weeks, culminating in

the individuals who complete the course being received into the fellowship of the local church by covenant. This training is important for several reasons. First, it helps insure that people understand the spiritual nature of church membership, and realize that belonging to the church is different than belonging to a social organization. Furthermore, it allows people the opportunity to become better acquainted with the workings of the local body of believers they plan to call home. Finally it helps people reflect on the serious nature of the commitment they plan to undertake.

Elements of the Church Membership Course

While every local church is unique, and will therefore need to design a membership course which fits that uniqueness, there are a number of elements that will be common to all churches, and which should be included in any church membership course.

In the first session of the course emphasis should be given to the spiritual and covenantal nature of the church, using scripture to show that the church is not merely a man-made institution, even though it comprises humans. This leads to a second critical emphasis on the fact that the church is essentially relational in nature. It is important to note that virtually every metaphor used to describe the church in the New Testament is relational, such as the body of Christ, the bride of Christ, the household of faith, the family of God, and the habitation of God. It is vital to stress that the viability of the church depends on maintaining right relationships with God and with one another. This allows prospective members to understand in advance that their participation in the church must go beyond correct belief and acceptable behavior to include intimate loving relationships with both the Head of the church and with those He loves.

Though there is much more to said about both the spiritual and relational nature of the church, these introductory emphases should suffice for the membership course, since it is assumed that the on-going preaching and teaching ministry of the local body will offer more in-depth instruction in these areas. One excellent resource for further teaching is Relational Foundations: Experiencing Relevance in Life and Ministry available from the White Wing Press.

Several practical areas need to be examined in relation to the broader context of the Church of God of Prophecy. These would include such things as the Church's history, polity, and doctrine. This information can be found in resources such as An Introduction to the Church of God of Prophecy and Fitly Joined Together: Concise History, Polity and Doctrine of the Church of God of Prophecy, both published by the White Wing Press. At the discretion of the pastor, this material could be presented in a single class session, or in more depth over multiple sessions.

Much of the material to be covered with prospective members

will deal with the specific local church they will be joining. It would be good to collect and print this material in an attractive notebook to be given to each student. Each church will need to develop this information locally, following these general guidelines:

- **Local Church Mission.** At the outset, it would be important to acquaint prospective members with the mission statement of the local church. This gives them insight into the church's reason for being and reassures them they are becoming involved in something of eternal value.
- **Local Church History.** This could include important dates, church locations, past leadership, and numerical growth as well as any other historical information that might be of interest to new members.
- **Current Church Leadership.** This could include the introduction of the pastor and his/her family, other ministry staff members, deacons, and key lay leaders. A list of pertinent contact information could be distributed at this time, and the session could conclude with a fellowship meal which would allow prospective members to get acquainted with church leaders on a personal level.
- **Local Church Ministries.** This session should introduce new members to all the ministries operated by the local church, with emphasis on the opportunity and responsibility they will have to be involved with one or more ministries. This is also the time to emphasize the importance of each member becoming involved in a small group for spiritual nurture. Ministries to such groups as children, youth, singles, families, and seniors should be highlighted, along with special programs targeting such needs as the poor, homeless, unwed mothers, or the abused. This will also acquaint prospective members with the ministries that are available for their children, extended family, and circle of friends. Furthermore, this can strengthen their understanding of the church's role in bringing the Gospel to the local community as well as the wider world.
- **Local Church Polity.** Because new members may not understand the inner workings of the local church it is important to acquaint them with the structures and functions that guide our business and financial practices. This would include such things as the local church conference, appointment and function of committees, financial and accounting procedures, and designation of offerings.
- **Local Church Expectations.** It is vitally important to avoid future misunderstandings by being clear at the beginning about membership expectations such as stewardship and ministry involvement. However, such things should never be presented in a legalistic or manipulative way. People should never feel under bondage in their service for the church, but should be helped to realize the privilege and joy of giving and serving. When presenting prospective members with the