

## WHY MEMBERSHIP?

Josh Harris wrote a book several years ago called *Stop Dating the Church*. In it, he compares the way some people treat the local church to the way they treat their relationships. They just like dating around without ever making a commitment. He says, "The strongest argument I know for why you and I should love and care about the Church is that Jesus does. The greatest motivation we could ever find for being passionately committed to the Church is that Jesus is passionately committed to the Church." We live in a culture that spurns commitment of any kind, let alone commitment to the local church. But commitment to the local church is simply commitment to a community, a family. It is this lack of connection to community that has brought a sense of isolation, loneliness, and confusion to our generation. "We are physically detached from each other. We change places of residence frequently. One survey revealed seven in ten do not know their neighbors. As many as one-third of Americans admit to frequent periods of loneliness, which is a key factor in the high rate of suicide among the elderly." If there is a place we should feel a sense of connection, a sense of meaningful community, it should be in the local church.

In this short booklet I want to address three questions. What is the church? What does covenant membership mean? And why should I become a covenant member of Seed Community Church?

### WHAT IS THE CHURCH?

The word "church" is thrown around a lot these days, so let's get some clarity on what the church actually means.

#### **Universal Church**

First, there is the universal church. Every person from the beginning of time who has faith in God through Jesus Christ is a member of the universal church. This collective are the ones whom Christ chose before the foundation of the world and for whom he died (Eph. 1:1-5; Matt. 16:18; 1 Pet. 2:9). The church is called "one body" of Christ and its members are all "saints" (Eph. 4:4; Col. 1:18). Also, this collective will live in heaven as a massive family for all eternity at the resurrection (Rev. 21:1-5). The universal church is sometimes called the invisible church because only God knows who are truly his children, and most of our church family we will never meet each other until we get to heaven. It is like knowing you have an extended family of cousins, aunts, and great-grandparents but never having the opportunity to meet them until a huge family reunion in the future. In fact there is no such thing as a Christian being saved and not being a member of Christ's spiritual body the church. What we can take away from recognizing the fact that there is a universal church is that we are part of an extended family whom God has rescued and we are unified around a single way to God through Christ.

#### **Local Church**

Second, there is something called the local church. After Christ resurrected he told his apostles that soon he would send the Holy Spirit to gather his church. This event happened at the day of Pentecost and after a sermon by Peter, 3,000 people at one time became believers. From that large group, smaller communities began to form and organize.

*Acts 2:42-47 And they devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and the fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers. And awe came upon every soul, and many wonders and signs were being done through the apostles. And all who believed were together and had all things in common. And they were selling their possessions and belongings and distributing the proceeds to all, as any had need. And day by day, attending the temple together and breaking bread in their homes, they received their food with glad and generous hearts, praising God and having favor with all the people. And the Lord added to their number day by day those who were being saved.*

Here is the first example of the formation of what we now call the "local church". What began as simply a disorganized gathering of believers around relationships, the Lord's Supper and social justice projects, soon developed into an organized gathering. The Greek word for church in the New Testament is ekklesia, and means assembly. It is used thirty-three times to refer to separate local churches started all over the world during the time of the apostles (Acts 5:11; Acts 11:26; I Cor. 1:2; Phil. 1:1; Rev. 1:4, 11).

The local church is the visible gathering of people who are professed followers of Jesus. However, the local church includes both true believers and non-believers. This is why the apostles organized the local church around ways to identify true believers, equip those believers for ministry, and scatter them out for mission. Just because someone visits a local church service doesn't mean they are truly believers.

**The local church is a community of believers unified around a common belief, a common mission, a common participation and a common identity.**

*First, the local church community has a common belief.* In the Old Testament the people of God were to follow the Law of Moses. Today the local church follows the Law of Christ and the teachings of his disciples (Gal. 6:2; Matt. 22:37-42). The scripture given from Moses to Jesus is still our authority, but we are able to obey it in a new way, and with a new understanding (Rom. 7:6; 8:2). It may seem obvious, but it must be pointed out that the local church must have as its foundation a Christian belief - a proper view of God, of the Scripture and of the gospel. It is one of the roles of the gathering of the local church to teach and reaffirm correct theology, and although there can be some diversity in different people's perspectives, there are some core beliefs essential to defining a local church as a Christian church.

*Second, the local church community has a common mission.* The apostles were sent out to plant churches that continued to multiple disciples (Matt. 28:19). First and most importantly, God is on mission. We cannot talk about mission without starting with God. He is on mission to graciously restore the world unto himself for his glory. We cannot fully comprehend how he reconciles the world or see all he does to accomplish that. He has, however, revealed in Scripture pieces of his mission, the most obvious being the incarnation, in which He is both the sender and the missionary. God sent himself in the form of Jesus to show us what a life completely submitted to his will would look like, and to redeem his creation through Christ's death. Any purposes or actions by God's people must be founded on God's mission. Second, God has ordained the church to accomplish his mission. God has chosen to restore the world to himself through a community of believers united and gifted for His purpose. Since it is impossible for us to meet with those in the church who have already died, or meet with every member of the church on the planet, the church is made up of many local expressions who tangibly work out their part in God's mission. The work of the local church is to make disciples through the teaching and living of the gospel. Third, God has ordained individuals to accomplish his mission through their local church. As members of the church we are saved for his purposes. Saved to be sent out on his mission. But mission is not primarily intended to be accomplished through individuals apart from the local church. It is in and through the local church as it works together that mission can be best accomplished.

*Third, the local church community has a common participation.* Christians were told to meet regularly for prayer, relationship building (Matt. 18:20; Acts 1:14; 2:42, Heb. 10:25), the Lord's Supper (Luke 22:20; I Cor. 11:20), worship (Eph. 5:19) and the teaching and preaching of the gospel (Acts 9:20; 15:35; 20:7). All Christians are to volunteer their talents, spiritual gifts and finances to that local assembly (Eph. 5:15-18; Rom. 12:1-2; Eph. 4:1-16; Gal. 5:22-26; Prov. 3:9-10). It is only as everyone contributes and works together that the local church can function and accomplish its mission. The local church exists by the voluntary service of its members and voluntary donation of funds. It should not be expected that non-Christians and visitors participate at the same level as the identified members. The members have a personal and spiritual stake in how the church operates and the health of its programs.

*Fourth, the local church community has a common leadership.* All Christians are to submit to the local church leadership and teaching (Heb. 13:17). The leaders of the local church are called elders and deacons. It is the responsibility of the elders to lead the church's direction while submitting to Christ (I Tim. 5:17), manage church affairs (I Tim. 3:4-5), teach the Bible (Eph. 4:11; I Tim. 3:2), protect the church from false teachers (Titus 1:9), promote unity while squelching divisiveness (Rom. 15:5; 16:17; I Cor. 1:10; 12:25; Eph. 4:3), discipline unrepentant Christians for their own good and the purity of the church (Matt. 18:15-17), and promote accountability within the assembly (2 Tim 4:2; Titus 2:15). The responsibility of deacons is to act as the front-runners in fulfilling the

mission of the church under the guidance of the elders. The deacons are the missional torchbearers of the local church and do the actual work involved in ministering to its members and serving the community. Leaders of the local church are only able to lead those willing to support that leadership.

*Fifth, the local church community has a common identity.* Remember the local church is not the same as the universal church. The universal church is the true spiritual family of believers, but the local church is a mix of Christians and non-Christians (Matt. 13:24-30). The local church is designed this way because how else would non-believers be able to convert to Jesus if they were not allowed to see Christ at work in his local assembly? Since the local church is a mixture of observers and participators, Christians and non-Christians, sinners and saints, there has to be a way to identify the professing Christians in the mix. Baptism is the initial identification of a believer, and entrance into the local church (Acts 2:41). In the early church, once a candidate was baptized, they were added to the numerical record. The early Church had basic records of church membership that included a numerical record (Acts 2:37-47), records of widows (I Tim. 5:3-16), elections (Acts 6:1-6), removal of members for discipline (Matt. 18:15-20; I Cor. 5; Gal. 6:1), accountability (Heb 13:17) and an awareness of who was a member (Rom. 16:1-16). Practically, for the church to function and for church leaders to serve the local family, there needs to be a way to identify who that family actually is.

#### WHAT DOES COVENANT MEMBERSHIP MEAN?

**Covenant membership means to be identified as a Christian and choose to unite with a local community of Christians around a common belief, a common mission, a common participation, a common leadership, and a common identity.**

As stated in this document the role of the local church is unity around several ideas. But it is the voluntary commitment of the individual Christian to these ideas that brings any sense of tangibility to this unity. Christians can't be unified unless they know what they are unified around. A Christian can't be treated as a family member until they actually join the family and want to be identified with them.

At Seed we do not view a person as part of the spiritual family who is not a covenant member. The covenant members are called the Core. There is no specific scriptural method by which local church membership is to happen, but the principles in scripture remain the same. Seed Community Church believes covenant membership is the best way to unite our people around the things necessary to be a strong and unified church. First, covenant membership involves attending Seed for at least six months to allow for time to build relationships and ask questions to see if one feels they are a good fit for this particular local assembly. Second, covenant membership involves taking an all-day class about Seed's core beliefs, leadership philosophy, mission and vision in

order to understand what one is committing to and unifying around. Finally, core membership is ratified by signing a covenant which confesses belief in Jesus and believer's baptism, commits to unity around Seed beliefs and philosophy, and commits to actively participate in Seed life. The covenant is to the church leadership and they in turn make their own covenant commitment to serve the community, to protect the church from false teaching, and to shepherd and pray for the members.

## WHY SHOULD I BECOME A COVENANT MEMBER OF SEED CHURCH?

Not everyone should be a covenant member of Seed Community Church. Covenant membership is not about having perks or a special parking spot at the front of the church, but for Christians who have chosen to make Seed their local family, there are some benefits to being a covenant member.

1) First, as a covenant member you can have the satisfaction of knowing that you are obeying Jesus as one of his disciples. Jesus did not create us to have an island relationship with him. We were created to live in community with other believers. Becoming a part of the core is fulfilling Jesus' expectations for you to live in community.

2) Second, as a covenant member you get prayer and leadership support. The elders at Seed only commit to regularly pray for, counsel and connect with covenant members. The elders can't manage everyone who walks in the door, nor do they desire to split their time between the masses and the family. As a member you get direct access to the elders for the spiritual support you may need during times of celebration or struggle.

3) Third, as a covenant member you get healthy accountability. Our culture struggles with authority and hates putting themselves under leadership. However, we all need accountability and protection from ourselves. By covenanting to submit to Seed Community Church leadership you are linking yourself into a community that loves you and cares for you and wants the best for your spiritual walk. We find that often it is when it is too late that Christians regret living so long in isolation instead of having a support group and wise leadership to help them.

4) Fourth, as a covenant member you are able to be developed in the gifts and skills God gave you. Only covenant members are able to lead missional communities or ministries at Seed and therefore receive the monthly training and support to develop in their leadership.

## FAQ's

**I already volunteer at Seed and even donate money. Why do I need to become a member?**

We appreciate your involvement and your financial sacrifice, but there is a difference between dating and marriage. There is something to be said for making a personal commitment personally to the Core. If there is regular work schedule conflict involved in taking the Saturday Church & Mission class, please let us know and we can work something out.

**I was baptized as a baby. Can I still become a member?**

We recognize that there are disagreements among good Christians concerning types and modes of baptism. Seed Community Church is Historic Protestant but we are credo-Baptists. This means we do not recognize any baptism which happens apart from one's choice and prior to one's personal commitment to Jesus Christ. We do not believe someone is necessarily sinning because of their paedo-baptism if they believe it in good conscience. However, allowing for multiple perspectives in this case causes disunity and confusion, so we only allow credo-baptism for membership. We have a booklet written about [baptism](#) and welcome the dialogue from those considering becoming members. The worse case scenario is that an adult is baptized a second time into a new local body, which for many can be a very beneficial act.

**I'm married. If I take the class and sign the covenant, does that speak for both of us, or does my spouse have to go through the process as well?**

Your spouse must fulfill the same requirements to be a part of the Core. If childcare is an issue, and one of you must stay home with the children, the other can take the class at a later date.

**How long does my membership last?**

There is no specific end to ones' membership, but there is an annual renewal in which there is a re-affirming of the covenant and it is then that one can make the choice to renew their membership or choose to no longer be part of the Seed family.

**What kind of things am I being asked to commit to as a member?**

The covenant that is signed does not ask members to commit to extra-biblical rules or Seed specific standards. The members commit only to those things Jesus demands of all his followers. Also, the elders are required to submit to the same standard of covenant living as the members they lead so nothing is asked of a member that an elder does not do.