



# Membership Covenant Package

*Open Your Heart to the Adventure...*

## **What is Membership? What is a Member?**

Quite simply, a member is someone who belongs to a group or an organization. Membership, in our context, is the set of characteristics that defines who belongs to our group of churches.

## **History of Membership in the Early Church**

In a narrow sense, the word “member” is only used handful of times in the Bible as a metaphor to describe followers of Jesus as members of Christ’s body (Rom. 12:4-5, 1 Cor. 12:24-25).

In the broader sense, membership in the church represents those who have accepted Jesus’ message as truth (Rom. 10:9-10), have been baptized in water (Acts 2:41), indwelt by the Spirit (1 Cor. 2:12) and meet regularly to celebrate Jesus’ death and resurrection (1 Cor. 6:17-26; Heb. 10:25).

- In the New Testament, the only ritual necessary to become a “member” was baptism

There are many other expectations of church members that flow out of Jesus’ affirmation of the OT commands to love God and love people.

- Willful, repeated rejection of these expectations (sinful behavior) required that church members were to be removed from the community (Matt. 18:15-17, 1 Cor. 5:1-5)
- The purpose of such harsh action was always restorative (2 Cor. 2:1-5)

## **Membership Today**

In the contemporary evangelical church setting, membership has a number of additional dimensions:

- Legal
  - With the litigious nature of North American societies, some churches see membership as a type of “informed consent” which reduces the chance that people undergoing church discipline could successfully sue the church for libel.
- Organizational
  - Membership is a way of defining those who merely attend meetings and “true” members, who have signed some sort of covenantal document.
  - Membership represents a way of defining belonging and allegiance to a specific denomination. As well, within the denominational setting, it serves as a convenient mechanism for numerical analysis: establishing budgets, record keeping and performing other statistical analysis.
  - Membership defines those who are able to select leadership and it also limits those who can serve in critical leadership/teaching roles.

## How Does the CMA Practice Membership?

In the Alliance Local Church Constitution ([http://cmalliance.ca/files/Manual2006\\_26.pdf](http://cmalliance.ca/files/Manual2006_26.pdf), p. 28), membership is attained through the following:

- Presenting a credible testimony of faith in the Lord Jesus Christ before members of the Board
- Believer's baptism (\* See statement below for those who have been baptized as infants).
- Commitment to the C&MA

Also as noted in the Local Church Constitution, members are given two specific privileges:

- Eligibility to vote for Advisory Council Members
- Eligibility to serve as an Advisory Council Member

## Membership at The River Church

After reading all of this, you can see that there is a significant challenge in keeping membership “simple.” Yet, we believe that it is possible to keep membership from being overly complicated. So what qualifies someone as a member of The River Church?

- You meet regularly with your church to celebrate Jesus’ death and resurrection
- You have shared your story of faith in Jesus with your church (small group and/or house church).
- You’re willing to commit to a life of community with The River Church Family.
- You have been baptized\*

Because we have a responsibility to hold elections, we will need to compile a list of members on an annual basis, prior to the Annual General Meeting (AGM). To facilitate this, it will be the local church elders’ (Advisory Council) responsibility to identify the members within their church. After verifying that an individual wishes to be a member and meets all the qualifications, all local church elders will need to submit a list of members to the Network Council no later than two weeks prior to the AGM.

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\* The River Church follows the doctrine of believer’s baptism where baptism is a type of pronouncement that follows a public declaration of a person’s faith in Christ (Acts 16:25-34). We choose this understanding of baptism because we believe it to be the best interpretation of the Scriptural teaching on baptism. Recognizing however, that there are godly men and women who hold to different teachings on baptism (for example, a view of baptism as the new covenantal symbol), we seek to have a generous orthodoxy. Our practice will be to encourage those who have been baptized as infants to prayerfully consider adult baptism, because ultimately we want to listen to God’s Spirit in all things. Yes we do think that all believers should be baptized after confessing their faith, not before, we want to practice a generous orthodoxy concerning these matters. So for those believers who have been baptized as infants, had a meaningful confirmation, and are willing to provide a written summary (or better yet dialogue with the Pastor) regarding the Scriptural support for their view of baptism to the Network Council, the Council will consider them for membership on a case-by-case basis.

## **Elections**

Elections are held once every 2 years at the AGM for all positions on the Council. Existing council members must indicate their willingness to serve another year at least 3 months prior to the AGM. If there will be vacancies, a nominating committee, consisting of at least 2 members and 2 council members, will be responsible for submitting a name for each vacancy. The candidate list should be made public at the City Wide Gathering prior to the AGM.

Council members must be a member of a local House Church/Simple Church. All church members are eligible to vote.

## **Introduction on Covenant**

The River Church is **a network of Simple Churches, immersed in the grace of God, listening to the Spirit, freed to live out Jesus' love.**

Covenant is a biblical concept. In the Ancient Near East, covenant was a binding agreement in which covenant members had certain obligations to keep and expected certain benefits in return. What makes a covenant different from a simple business agreement is that a covenant is based on a meaningful relationship between the two parties. Examples of covenant include the covenants God made with all creation in the time of Noah, with Abram and his descendants, and eventually with the people of Israel at Mt. Sinai. To the prophets of the Bible, this covenant was a marriage between Yahweh and His people. Another example of covenant is the commitment between Jesus and people everywhere who follow Him. We believe that to commit our lives to God, one another and the world in meaningful relationship is what it means to be the Church.

We invite you to Covenant with the River community by exploring all 7 of the Directions/Values (please see Membership Brochure) and joining us as we seek to be a community who lives by faith, who are known by love and who are a voice of hope in our world.

We affirm the central truths of historic orthodox Christian faith, seeing ourselves in a long line of generations taking part in the endless conversation between God and people. We believe the Bible to be the voices of many who have come before us, inspired by God to pass along their poems, stories, accounts, and letters of response and relationship with each other and the living God. To know where we're going, we have to know where we've been.

## **What is the difference between Membership and Covenant?**

Both models are biblical. Paul develops the term 'member' in his letters. Those in the Christian community are all considered 'members' of the body of Christ. 'Membership', however, has lost some of its usefulness in our culture. One can be a member of the YMCA, the golf & country club and a fan club, etc. For many, their experience of church membership comes to suggest that a small number of people think about the business of the church while many other "regular folk" are not included. This isn't what we desire Membership to look like at The River Church. To put it simply, Membership is taking a step of faith and joining us in the purposes of God in and through the River Church. Membership is an important commitment in our culture, as it is essentially a commitment to create and contribute to community rather than consume it.

## **How can I become a Covenant Member?**

**Any follower of Christ is invited into covenant at The River through the following process:**

1. Prayerfully consider what you are signing, interact with others who are already in covenant at The River and personally commit to embodying the shared values in the Covenant.
2. Sign the Covenant and submit it to the church office or give it to your House Church.
3. Annually renew the Covenant commitment in writing every two years . Every two years we ask ourselves and each other to consider whether this is the kind of community we want to covenant with.
4. You may become a covenant member at the age of thirteen (13), however, you must be eighteen (18) years of age to vote at business meetings.

## **What's the role of people in Covenant? How can I live that out?**

A covenant member has committed to live in a particular kind of way according to our shared values / directions. Covenant members strive to embrace the full story of God, understanding its roots and their meaning for us today. Covenant members have also committed to an ongoing spiritual journey, the pursuit of wholeness, being in community with others, serving one another and the world, and celebrating regularly. Whether it is joining together at our regular Celebration Worship Gatherings, attending a Simple Church gathering in a home or elsewhere, starting a house church, joining the regular Deep Stream teaching events, or volunteering in any capacity, there are many ways to live out the covenant values/directions together at The River Church. If you would like further information on how to get involved, email [info@intheriver.ca](mailto:info@intheriver.ca).

## **Why should someone Covenant with The River Church?**

For us the real question is, "Why should we be part of a church family?" Committing your life to Christ, to others in community, and to bringing the healing of Jesus to the world is what it means to be church. Formally signing a Covenant is simply a way of declaring that this commitment to Christ and his church is, in fact, a serious reality in your life. It is also a commitment to contribute to the River community rather than merely consume.

## **How do we decide where we should get involved?**

As a church we are committed to taking care of each other. We are also passionate about serving the most forsaken people, places and issues of our time. We have been involved in a number of issues both locally and globally and have begun to focus our human, spiritual, technical and financial resources into focused, achievable goals (the Big 3 we are committed to presently are : a local Young Life Youth Ministry, a C&MA Missions Team or Family and an AIDS orphanage/shelter in Cambodia called Place of Rescue). We also desire to see many River folk engage in their own community through things like the Helping Hands Homeless Shelter, the Youth Drop-In and others like them. Contrary to popular opinion we as a church don't have to recreate the wheel. By engaging in service and working toward these goals, we hope to become more like Jesus through caring about the things that he cares about.

### **How Are Persons in Covenant Held Accountable?**

How are persons in Covenant held accountable? The River Church is part of the Christian & Missionary Alliance (C&MA) but most importantly we are self-regulating. We keep each other accountable in loving relationships of mutual submission. Served by leadership, house churches, serving groups, and other small communities (i.e. Life Transformation Groups), we take care of one another. We desperately need each other to live the way of Jesus.

### **How are Leadership and Staff held accountable?**

Leadership is ultimately held accountable by the church as a whole through the Elders it selects and to whom it submits. The Elder Team holds the leadership accountable through its oversight of the Lead Pastor. The Lead Pastor, in turn, is responsible to give leadership to the various house church leaders, teaching teams and ministry teams and to hold them accountable through other spiritual mothers and fathers within the River Church Community. Being connected to the Christian and Missionary Alliance (C&MA) provides the leadership team with a healthy base of accountability as well.

### **How are persons in Covenant empowered?**

Empowerment comes from being in community with others who share a commitment to responsible, informed action. There are organized opportunities for engagement that range from serving our own community at Community Celebration Gatherings, House Churches, Deep Stream teaching events as well as serving the oppressed within our own city or globally.

### **Who is the Covenant between, me and God or me and The River?**

Both. As one people, we covenant with God. As a local expression of God's Church, we covenant together with each other. This means we covenant with each other and with God.