

## What follows becoming a member?

Some congregations have structured steps which follow joining, including a visit from the pastor or a lay leader, further classes, or some way of assessing your interests and helping you find ways to be involved that fit your interests and needs. Other congregations do this more informally. Some people may be eager to serve on a board or be involved in a ministry of the church or take part in a study program. Others may wish simply to be a part of the worshiping congregation. As one becomes a member of a congregation it is often helpful to locate at least one smaller group in the church (e.g. choir, a study group, a mission task force, a prayer group) in which to participate in order to get to know some others better. This helps most people to make the move from deciding to join to feeling that they belong.

For more information contact your local United Church of Christ.

## MEMBERSHIP



Practices of Faith  
in the United  
Church of Christ

## Foundation

*For where two or three are gathered in my name, I am there among them.*

—Matthew 18:20 (NRSV)

*Finally, all of you, have unity of spirit, sympathy, love for one another, a tender heart, and a humble mind. Do not repay evil for evil or abuse for abuse; but, on the contrary, repay with a blessing. It is for this that you were called—that you might inherit a blessing.*

—1 Peter 3:8-9 (NRSV)

## I enjoy attending the church. Isn't that enough? Is it necessary to actually become a member?

Joining a congregation is an important step and not one to take lightly. It is significant not only for the individual who becomes a member, but also for the congregation. In becoming a member a person says, "Yes, I am a part of the church. This community is central to my life." A congregation says, "Yes, you are a part of this congregation. We are blessed by the gifts and perspective of persons who are new among us." Moreover, a commitment to membership in a congregation can help sustain people in the inevitable low or dry times in a life of faith. Without this commitment it is easier to drift away during such times, or to be overlooked by the congregation.



## Why become a member of a congregation?

One of the distinctive characteristics of Christian faith is that it is *shared*. It occurs in community, in the company of others. From its Old Testament beginnings (Genesis 12:2, "I will make of you a great people" to the New Testament (Matthew 18:20, "For where two or three are gathered in my name, I am in the midst of them"), this faith has drawn people into community with others who share their vision, story, values, hopes, and dreams. While personal faith and individual commitment are essential, it is God's purpose to create a *people*, who are "salt of the earth and light of the world" (Matthew 5:13-14).

Furthermore, a congregation, said the early Christian teacher Paul, is like a body. He described the church as "the Body of Christ." No one person is the whole body, each is a part. We need each other's gifts to complement our own. Our own faith is strengthened, tested, and deepened as we share in the life of a community of faith.

## What is the process for becoming a member?

Let's divide this into the *informal* and the *formal* process. Informally, we encourage you to attend worship and participate in aspects of a congregation's life over a long enough period of time to get to know that congregation. A decision for or against a congregation should not ordinarily be made on the basis of one worship service or event. You might want to arrange a visit with the pastor or a member of

the congregation to discuss your interest and find out more. Ask about the church's history, vision for the future, expectations of members, important events. Assess whether this is a congregation that is a good match with your background, needs, and interests.

The informal process may overlap with a formal process for joining a congregation. Many congregations have classes for persons interested in membership. Find out if such classes are offered and when. You should be able to take part before making up your mind about whether this is the church for you.

## When and how does someone actually become a member?

Most congregations receive new members during their regular services of worship on a Sunday morning. There are two ways in which new members are received. The first is by baptism, and the second by reaffirmation of baptism.

Baptism is the sacrament of initiation into the church. If you have never been baptized, membership will ordinarily be by baptism, and your preparation should include study of the meaning of the sacrament and preparation with the pastor for being baptized.

Congregations of the United Church of Christ recognize and accept the baptism of other Christian churches. If you have been baptized previously, you will have the opportunity to "reaffirm your baptism" as you join a new congregation. Some persons are coming from another congregation where they have been

active members. This often happens when people move to a new town or city. Then you or your pastor may request a "letter of transfer" from your previous congregation.

## What are the responsibilities of church members?

Different congregations will respond to this question with different specific answers. It is one you should ask of the pastor or lay leaders. But it is generally true in congregations of the United Church of Christ that the following are expected of members of the church: First, that you make a genuine commitment to Christian faith and life, and seek those experiences that will help you grow in your faith and the practice of it. Second, that you participate regularly in worship, the center of a congregation's life. Third, that you make it a point to be an informed member who takes part in congregational meetings and decision making. Fourth, that you support the church financially, by committing a proportion of your income to the work of the church. And, finally, that you seek to build relationships with others in the congregation through conversation, small groups, retreats, or similar opportunities

