

## **Membership FAQs**

### **The United Church of Granville**

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*UCG is a unique congregation in many ways, and over the years that I've been here as pastor, I've heard some of the same questions over and over again. So, I thought I'd collect some of these questions and provide responses for your reading pleasure!*  
- Pastor Dwight Davidson

#### **In the bulletin, it says that UCG is a “free church.” What does that mean?**

Yes, UCG is an independent congregation in the free church tradition. This means that we, as a local congregation, are free to organize ourselves in any way that we see fit. We are under no compulsion to take direction from any external church hierarchy or organization. We operate by what's called a “congregational polity” (or system of governance).

In effect, what this mean is that, though we have voluntarily chosen to affiliate with The United Church of Christ (UCC) and The American Baptist Churches, USA (ABC/USA), and a few other organizations, these organizations neither support us financially nor do they oblige us to act or believe in any particular way.

#### **What are the requirements for membership?**

Well, let me answer that in two ways—first by simply quoting from the Church Constitution (which acts as our “covenant with ourselves” about how we're going to operate), and then by giving a bit of commentary. In the section on Membership, we read:

All who are members of Christ's Body are welcome to our fellowship irrespective of opinion on matters wherein we are all learners. We seek the unity of faith in Christ, relying upon the love of God to keep us in a spirit of Christian community.

Persons may be received into membership by baptism, by letter of transfer from another church or by statement of Christian experience. Persons who want to maintain membership in a “home church” and wish to affiliate with this church may be accepted as associate members by the same process.

Members are expected to be faithful to the essentials of Christian life and to the life of the church community, e.g., to attend regularly the church's services and events, to give regularly for its support and benevolences, and to share in its organized work.

### **So pragmatically speaking, what does this “churchy” language mean?**

The traditional wording of this paragraph invites a bit of confusion. For example, what is meant by “all who are members of Christ’s Body” or “the unity of faith in Christ,” or “the essentials of Christian life?”

To answer that, let me offer some commentary, taking those phrases one by one, and thinking about them through a progressive lens: First, the phrase, “All who are members of Christ’s Body are welcome...” The image of “the body of Christ” is one of the earliest ways people in the Christian tradition pointed to the principle of *universality*. The metaphor intended to convey that normal, everyday people—regardless of their gender, status, ethnicity, or religious background—could participate in the continuation & development of the ministry of the historical Jesus. This concept was *trans-religious* very early on—beginning, apparently with St. Paul, continuing through the vine & branch imagery of St. John, and then, in the 100s CE, with Justin Martyr proposing the doctrine of “hidden Christianity” when he famously wrote, “there are many who are of Christ who *know not the name of Christ*.”

So that image of all people of goodwill who *live their lives in love* being “members of Christ’s Body” whether they’re “Christian,” or “Jewish,” or “Muslim,” or “non-religious,” etc. is a symbol which the mystical and universalistic elements within the church have used for millennia. We continue to use this metaphor, with caution, because it connects us to a history of universalistic, trans-religious thinking within the Christian tradition (which has been often ignored/jettisoned/buried by all sorts of “official church” teachings which have been based on more insider-outsider thinking [like the medieval, *extra ecclesiam non salus*="outside the church there is no salvation"]).

Still, we use this traditional metaphor with caution, because we at UCG also try to be careful to let people name themselves how they want to be named. I’m not sure I want someone telling me I’m a “hidden Zoroastrian,” after all, if that’s not the way I define *myself*.

### **So what do you mean by “the unity of faith in Christ” or, the “essentials of Christian life?”**

Members of UCG share a common understanding about the essentials of Christian faith, (and I bet most of us would consider these to be essentials of *any* type of healthy religious faith)—and these are *our core values of living lives of compassion, rooted in the pursuit of justice and aiming towards peace (shalom!) for ourselves and all creation*. We feel that this was the center of Jesus’ message.

That being said, we are a diverse congregation, and our members come to UCG from all sorts of different religious (and non-religious!) traditions. So, as to the accidentals of Christian doctrine or practice (beliefs or practices which have historically divided traditional churches—for example, a preference for infant vs. “believer’s” baptism, or various understandings of the meanings of “communion,” or “salvation” or “God”) we wouldn’t expect our membership to maintain a uniformity of opinion.

This is why we sometimes also speak of ourselves as a “non-creedal church”—not because we see no *value* in creeds or other statements of faith but rather because we do not believe that it’s particularly helpful to use an affirmation of this or that historic creed as a litmus test for church membership. In the Baptist language which has been used historically in this church, we’d call this “soul freedom”—we’d say, we are “*free* people in a *free* church,” responsible to live care-fully in community.

What this allows for is *transformation*. New congregants may change their minds about some things as a result of being part of the UCG church family. In the same way, long-timers may change *their* minds about some things as a result of newer people coming in and bringing “new light.” That kind of growth in faith is *anticipated and welcomed* at our church. So when we talk about “Christian faith” at this church, we’re not referring to a predetermined set of dogmas to which all must give assent. We’re using the definition of “faith” as *trust* (from the Latin, *credo* rather than L., *assensus*)—expressing “Christian faith” is taking the risk to embark together upon a shared journey, around a simple set of common values (we would say, *Jesus’* core values).

**So just checking-- I see that there are “Statements of Faith” on the UCC and the ABC/USA websites. Do I have to agree with everything in those denominational statements of faith in order to join UCG?**

No. Both the UCC and the ABC/USA acknowledge that they are communities of *free* churches comprised of *free* people, each able to make up his or her own mind. In the language of the UCC, the national setting of the church produces “confessions of faith” as a way of speaking *to*, not *for* the churches. These confessions are understood as invitations to dialogue. “The Spirit is still speaking,” and we’re all listening together.

**So if I were to join The United Church of Granville, does that mean I have to register either as a member of The United Church of Christ or as a member of the American Baptist Churches, USA?**

No. Though at some united or federated churches (churches which are multiply-aligned) individuals who join the church are asked to register as a member of one of the national denominations, this is not the case at UCG. You do not have to declare that you “are UCC” or that you “are Baptist.” By joining, you’re simply becoming a member of UCG, and are free to define yourself the way you’d like.

**“Okay, so what would happen if I were to decide to become a member?”**

**First, we’d determine how you were joining**, and there are four ways to join, implied by the wording of our constitution:

1. As a *regular* member, joining “by statement of Christian experience.”

The vast majority of people join “by statement of Christian experience.” If you are not currently a member of another church, or if you are a member of another church which you think would be unlikely to send us a Letter of Transfer (many churches don’t do this anymore!), *and* if you are happy simply conveying that you agree with the core values of UCG, you will likely join this way. Again,

we're encountering traditional language... Joining "by statement of Christian experience" doesn't mean that you need to stand up and explain to people what you believe about this or that, or how you've been involved in church historically. "By statement of Christian experience" is simply traditional, Baptist wording used to express your assent to the congregation's core values. (If you *really* want to know how we ended up with this particular phrase in our church constitution, talk to the pastor for a semi-interesting review of frontier revivalism in American Baptist churches.)

2. As a *regular* member, joining "by Letter of Transfer."

If you're already a member of a mainline, Protestant church, your home church may be willing to send us a Letter of Transfer" so that you can join our congregation "by transfer." (This is an older way of moving membership from one church to another, and it helps keep the rolls tidy at both churches. N.B. Unfortunately, many theologically more conservative churches will *not* grant a Letter of Transfer to UCG. Talk to the Pastor if you have questions about this.)

3. As a *regular* member, joining "by baptism."

If you have not been baptized before, and feel moved to be baptized here at UCG, a service of baptism can be held in conjunction with your reception into membership. Talk with the Pastor to find out more. Though you *do not* have to be water baptized to become a member of UCG, water baptism is a beautiful, symbolic ritual which, because of our Baptist roots, is highly valued at this church as a public expression of faith.

4. As an *associate* member, joining "by statement of Christian experience."

If you are currently a member of another church and wish to remain on the rolls at your previous church, but would like to be actively involved at UCG, join this way. You will have full voting rights at UCG. College students often join as associate members.

If none of those seem to fit your particular situation, talk to the Pastor!

**Second, you'd be paired with a person in the congregation who would be your "sponsor"** (couples/partners/families usually have a single sponsor for the whole family unit). That person would get to know a little bit more about you than the average person at UCG. He or she would be your go to person for questions about the congregation as you become more acquainted with UCG; your sponsor will make a point to try to introduce you to others, and to help you get the lay of the land here at church!

**Then, typically, at an agreed upon date, during a Sunday morning worship service, you'd be introduced to the congregation by your sponsor and would be formally received as a new member.** In the service, there will be a time for "Reception of New Members," and at that time, each person or family

joining would be introduced, given some words of encouragement, and then new members and the congregation would join together in a litany of welcome.

Usually there a *number* of people joining the church at the same time, so you'll probably not be standing up front by yourself! After the litany of reception, the congregation welcomes new members with a big round of applause, and then new members simply return to their seats. After the service, the church clerk will help you record your name in the "big black book"—the official membership registry of the congregation. That's it—when your name's in the book, you're a voting member of The United Church of Granville.

I include the word, "typically," because some people feel quite uncomfortable going up in front of a large group of people and being in the spotlight, so to speak. In that case, we figure out a different way to welcome folks into the congregation.

### **Do I need to contribute a certain amount of money every year to retain my membership at UCG?**

UCG doesn't "bill" members—we operate on a pledge system. Every fall, members are asked to pledge an amount that they can contribute to help fund the church in the coming year. We suggest to congregants that a typical pledge to a church like ours is around 2-5% of a person's net income, though many members are generous enough to contribute a traditional "tithe" (10%). We depend on this tax-deductible giving to support the work of the congregation, but we understand that different people are in different situations financially, and we do not require a minimum amount of giving—the amount you give is purely "a decision between you and God."

### **What if I have been baptized in a church of another denomination?**

As mentioned earlier, The United Church of Granville is a member congregation both of The United Church of Christ and of the American Baptist Churches, USA. After the World Council of Church's publication of the *Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry* document in 1982, both of these denominations agreed to urge their congregations to accept the baptism of all other Christian congregations as *valid* baptism, regardless of the age or church at which the baptism was performed. Our church has, in fact, chosen to adopt that practice, so whether (for example) you were baptized as an infant in the Roman Catholic Church or as an adult in a Pentecostal church, both of those would be considered valid baptism at UCG.

That being said, strictly speaking, *water* baptism is not essential for membership at UCG. We respect and honor the views of groups like The Religious Society of Friends (Quakers), which stress "the baptism of the Spirit." The point is that, for us, baptism is a multi-vocal symbol which marks one of the turning points on the spiritual journey; the mode of baptism is not as significant as the *turning and faith* it signifies.

### **Does UCG perform infant or adult baptisms?**

At UCG, we perform *both* infant and adult baptisms. Infant baptisms are performed by sprinkling or pouring. Adult baptisms are generally performed by immersion, but in certain special cases, could be performed by sprinkling or pouring.

Children whose parents understand baptism to be a sign of God's grace available to us before we are ever aware of it (the predominant theological understanding of baptism in the UCC), will often be baptized as infants and then given the opportunity to join the church as they become middle school students and go through classes leading up to a service at which they'll be given the opportunity to "affirm their faith" (in other churches, this is called "Confirmation").

Children whose parents understand baptism as a public profession of an individual's faith in Jesus' Way (the predominant theological understanding of baptism in the ABC/USA) may choose to have their children "dedicated" as infants. Those children are then simply offered the choice to be baptized (typically by immersion) after those middle school classes.

### **Why become an official member?**

Granted, church membership is an invention of the institutional church. You won't, for example, read anything about church "membership" in the Bible or the earliest traditions. For this reason, we at UCG try not to over-concern ourselves about whether or not people decide to officially become members of our congregation. At the same time, there are a number of good reasons to consider membership.

First, as a non-profit institution recognized as such by the State of Ohio, we have to operate by a clear set of procedures (our Church Constitution) which sets limits as to who may have a voice in the decisions of the church. In short, *members* are those who can vote at congregational meetings to affect the official direction of the church. As I mentioned earlier, our church has a congregational polity, which means that *we the people*—not some hierarchy "out there"—make decisions *for ourselves* about our beliefs, our mission and our future; about who we'll call as our pastor(s), about our missional objectives, and about what we want to accomplish. Of course, we want as many participants as possible to be able to have a voice in those decisions! Officially speaking, membership provides that voice.

Second, this is an historic congregation, and becoming a member leaves a trace in history that you were a part of it. In 1834, this church was instrumental in the founding of Denison University, in addition to being a founding congregation of the Baptist Peace Fellowship of North America in the 1980s, and a founding congregation of the Association of Welcoming and Affirming Baptists in the 1990s. It was the first church (and for many years the *only* church) willing to participate in the Columbus Gay Pride Parade. The congregation has been the spiritual home of people like famous church historian, Dr. Kenneth Scott Latourette, ordained here in 1918, Dr. Kirtley Mather, Denison professor and church deacon, who in the 1920s led in the struggle to legitimate

the teaching of evolution in America, and Rev. Evelyn Huber, ordained here, who, in 1978, was the first woman to serve as an area minister in the American Baptist Churches, USA. This congregation has ordained more women to ministry than any other Baptist church in Ohio. When I was able to write *my* own name in the official church register of members, and knowing the significant impact this particular congregation has had on American liberal and progressive Christianity, I was personally overwhelmed with a sense of humility and gratitude, as well as a sense of connection to something much bigger than myself. Perhaps that makes sense to other people, too.

Last, and perhaps more importantly, becoming an official member is a very clear way of showing others in the congregation that you are supportive of our common mission. It's always a great encouragement when new friends say, "I want to be a part of this!" by joining the church.

Well... I hope that helps. But if you have other questions or concerns about membership, feel free to contact myself or the Church Moderator at any time.

And thanks for considering membership at The United Church of Granville!

-Pastor Dwight