

So You're Thinking About Joining the Church

A Guide
to Exploring
Church
Membership
in the
United Church
of Christ

God is still speaking,
UNITED CHURCH
OF CHRIST



**So you've been
attending this
church for a while,
what next?**

You've felt the mysterious presence of God during worship, the Spirit has touched you through the ministry of the congregation, and you feel yourself trying harder to follow Jesus.

What next?

In the United Church of Christ, after you have been worshipping at a church for a while, we ask you to consider joining the church.



“But what does ‘joining the church’ mean?”

In our tradition, joining the church matters. We have people stand up in front of the church during Sunday worship and make promises about their commitment to God and to this faith community. To prepare for that event, there might be a newcomer’s orientation or a class. Perhaps you would meet with a pastor or a church leader. And then you would become a member one Sunday during worship. Why the big deal?

In the UCC, there is no hierarchy that tells the churches what to do and how to behave. We talk about having a “priesthood of all believers,” which means that all of us do ministry. The congregation is the heart of all that.

When you join a church, you become a voting member of the church. Members vote on the church’s budget each year, they vote on which of the members should serve as key leaders, and they even vote on whether or not to call a new pastor. There are important practical issues associated with being a member.

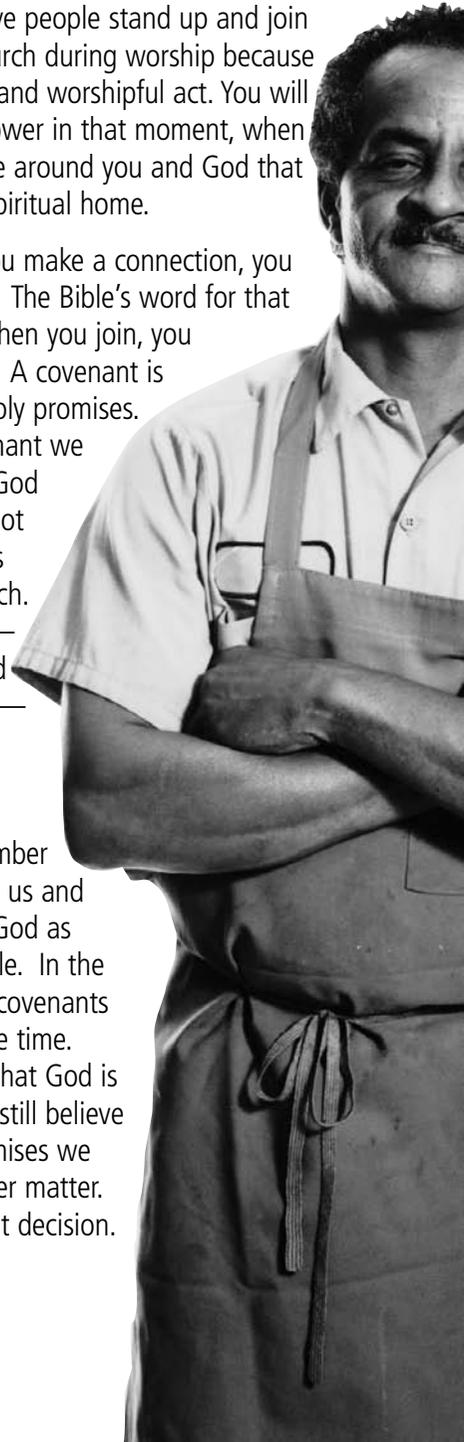
ABOUT VOTING ON THOSE PASTORS...

In some traditions, pastors get assigned to a church, but not here. In the UCC, a search committee made up of church members seeks through prayer and discernment to find the right minister. After they do, that minister comes to worship with the congregation and then all the members get to vote to call that person. Being a church member is an important and meaningful responsibility.

“So it’s just a matter of determining who gets to vote on stuff?”

No, it’s about much more than that. We have people stand up and join the church during worship because this is a prayerful and worshipful act. You will experience real power in that moment, when you tell the people around you and God that this is now your spiritual home.

When you join, you make a connection, you join a community. The Bible’s word for that is “covenant.” When you join, you make a covenant. A covenant is an exchange of holy promises. In making a covenant we promise to serve God together. So it’s not just new members who join the church. Rather, everyone—new members and existing members—joins one another. As we make our promises to one another we remember God’s promises to us and promise to serve God as best as we are able. In the Bible God makes covenants with people all the time. Since we believe that God is still speaking, we still believe that the holy promises we make to each other matter. This is a significant decision.



“What about my old church, or the church I grew up in? Am I replacing them when I join a new church? In joining a church, am I saying something about my past?”



When new members join the church, we often give thanks for every place that has ever been your spiritual home. When you join a church, you do so at one moment in time, and that does not take the place of any other church. When you join a church, you are not saying that this church trumps all others. But you are saying that while you are here, you will be an active part of this congregation.

“By your baptism, you were made one with us in the body of Christ, the church. Today, we rejoice in the pilgrimage of faith which has brought you to this time and place. We give thanks for every community of faith that has been your spiritual home, and we celebrate your presence in this household of faith.”

-from Book of Worship, United Church of Christ

“I don’t get why I would need to join the church. Isn’t it fine to simply come to worship?”

Of course you can come to worship. Worship is open to everybody, at any time, and you can worship in all sorts of places, not just this church. Joining the church is different from worshipping God.



You can praise God on a mountaintop or while the plane lands after a bumpy flight. You can gather a group of people in church or on a lakeshore to worship. But when you join a local church, you are saying that you have chosen this particular community of faith to be your spiritual home at this time.

When you join, you tell the community, “I’m in,” and they in turn make promises to support you on your faith journey together.

One of the things they will promise is to join you in the amazing adventure of prayer. You will now be part of something larger than yourself and your own private journey.

**“Oh please don’t
make me stand up
there in front of
everybody...”**

Sometimes people ask why they can’t just “sign up” to join the church as you would for a health club or some other organization. Instead we ask people to join as a part of worship. Why do we do that?

Well, it’s not to torture shy people.

Here’s the reason: the worshipping community matters. It’s not just about you making promises; the church members make promises to you as well. It wouldn’t make any sense to make joining a community a private matter, would it? You really won’t be on your own.

And speaking of private, this isn’t just a private event for human beings only.

We believe without a doubt that God is present, and particularly so during our most important community event, Sunday morning worship. We have members join the church publicly, and during worship, because this is a prayerful and meaningful act, not just for you but for all of us.

We may invoke that mighty cloud of witnesses – all those generations that have gone before us, and join us in eternal community that stretches beyond time and space. You are joining with a community that may have begun long before you were born and will continue long after, if not in this world, then certainly in God’s heart.

**“So, it’s not
like joining a gym...”**

When you want to get in shape, you don’t have to stand up and make promises in front of everyone at the gym. (And thank goodness for that.) At the gym you’re signing up to receive certain services, to use the equipment and to receive advice from experts, all as part of a financial transaction. We call that a **culture of membership**.

But when you join a church, you’re not just on the receiving end, but on the giving end as well. You are promising to do more than show up and use the facilities. Will you hold other people in prayer and in love? Will you make a contribution to the community by volunteering as you are able and financially? And let’s be clear, you are considering doing all of this because somewhere in your journey, you sensed that there was more to this life than what you see in front of you. You sense that God is still speaking.

You will make a difference and the church will be different because you have joined it. As we grow and change together, in a community centered not on ourselves but on God, we call this a **culture of discipleship**.



**“AND
WHAT
ABOUT
THOSE
FEES?”**

No one will send you a bill in the mail. You will want to make a regular financial contribution to God’s work in your church. People often ask how much to give. We don’t answer that question for you. But we do encourage you to make it a portion, a percentage, of your income, rather than just a number. When you take the brave step of choosing to give a percentage away, rather than just a number, when your income goes up or down, your gift does too, but your commitment remains steady. That’s a great feeling.

**“OK,
WHAT
PERCENTAGE,
THEN?”**

The Bible encourages us to give 10% of what we have away. Some give it all to the church, others divide that money among different causes that are all doing God’s healing work. Many people set the goal of 10%, as something to work toward.

Allow your giving to develop as your spiritual life develops. Pray, increase a percentage point every year or start out at a high percentage in the hope that you’ll never miss what you give away regularly.

We do believe that everyone can give, though. Even the smallest amount of money given away reminds us that we have all received.

We also believe that in giving, we find greater joy than we can ever find in receiving. Happiness does not come from the stuff we accumulate. Joy and fulfillment come in serving and giving to others. The early church learned that from Jesus and from the Jewish tradition, and we trust in that same generosity today.

**“WHAT ELSE
AM I
AGREEING
TO WHEN
I JOIN A
CHURCH?”**

You will be asked to participate fully in the life of the church through worship and serving others.

Worship is the heart of what we do as a faith community.

It is what sends us out to do other things, and restores us when the world has diminished our spirits. Always keep worship at the top of your commitments. And should some situation make it impossible to be with your church physically, stay connected by prayer, and in service.



Serving others is a part of the deal, as you are able.

Local churches have all sorts of traditions around volunteering. You may be needed to serve in the congregation, or they may need you to serve God in the world. We can be the hands and feet of Christ wherever we are, but in joining, you commit to add your gifts and talents to the unique pool of gifts that keeps this community of faith going. That could lead you to hand out worship bulletins on a Sunday morning, cook for the sick and the hungry, lead a youth group or serve on a board for the United Church of Christ.

Life is fragile. One year you may be making meals for someone recovering from surgery, the next year you may be in need of those meals yourself. But over a lifetime, we can all minister to one another in beautiful ways when we are part of a faith community.

THE AFFIRMATION OF FAITH

PASTOR: Let us unite with the church in all times and places in confessing our faith in the triune God.

PASTOR: Do you believe in God?

MEMBERS: I believe in God.

PASTOR: Do you believe in Jesus Christ?

MEMBERS: I believe in Jesus Christ.

PASTOR: Do you believe in the Holy Spirit?

MEMBERS: I believe in the Holy Spirit.

--from *Book of Worship*, United Church of Christ

“What exactly will I be asked to say when I join?”

If you are asking this question, it's a good time to ask someone at your church to show you the words that are said when someone joins. Perhaps you have seen people join already. Do you remember what they said? Here's a sample from the UCC *Book of Worship*, which your church may use, but sometimes, congregations have their own unique and special customs around membership. Find out about yours.

You will notice that these are a series of questions and answers that are very basic to the Christian faith.

The Questions of the Candidates

- Do you desire to affirm your baptism into the faith and family of Jesus Christ?
- Do you renounce the powers of evil and desire the freedom of new life in Christ?
- Do you profess Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior?
- Do you promise, by the grace of God, to be Christ's disciple, to follow in the way of our Savior, to resist oppression and evil, to show love and justice, and to witness to the work and word of Jesus Christ as best you are able?
- Do you promise, according to the grace given you, to grow in the Christian faith, and to be a faithful member of the church of Jesus Christ, celebrating Christ's presence and furthering Christ's mission in all the world?

- from *Book of Worship*, United Church of Christ



“I’m not sure I am ready to make all those promises. I am not sure I know what I think about all those topics. I’m not sure I ever will.”

If you are not ready, take the time to wait and get to know the church better. Ask other members how they understand those questions. You



may find that you hear a lot of your own questions in what they share with you. By making those promises, we do not claim to have all the eternal mysteries solved once and for all.

When you join a church you join a group of people on a journey. We have all come from different places but we are now moving in the same direction. What direction is that? It can shift and change because we’re not marching in lockstep. We’re following Jesus wherever he leads.

WELCOME TO THE UNITED CHURCH OF CHRIST

If you do become a member of this congregation, you will be joining a church that is part of a denomination called the United Church of Christ, founded in 1957 but made up of churches that have been around a lot longer than that, going back to the first Pilgrims in America in 1620.

The UCC is known for its welcoming stance toward all people. You can see that goes back a long way when you read the list of the things we did first. Ours was the first historically white denomination to ordain an African-American (in the 18th century), the first in the modern era to ordain a woman (in the 19th century), and the first to ordain an openly gay man (in the 20th century).

We were in the forefront of the anti-slavery movement. We founded the first institutions of higher learning in America (Harvard, Yale) and were among the first to establish schools and colleges for newly freed slaves (Fisk, Dillard). We were early leaders in the Social Gospel movement, taking seriously Jesus’ commandment to “love your neighbor as yourself.” We brought to North America the concept of freedom of the press; today, the Pilgrim Press is the oldest publishing house in the U.S. We published the first book in what would become the United States (The Bay Psalm Book) and the first (and only!) Christian hymnal that honors in equal measure both male and female images of God: *The New Century Hymnal*.

What We Believe

UNITED CHURCH OF CHRIST STATEMENT OF FAITH

We believe in you, O God, Eternal Spirit, God of our Savior Jesus Christ and our God, and to your deeds we testify:

- You call the worlds into being, create persons in your own image, and set before each one the ways of life and death.
- You seek in holy love to save all people from aimlessness and sin.
- You judge people and nations by your righteous will declared through prophets and apostles.
- In Jesus Christ, the man of Nazareth, our crucified and risen Savior, you have come to us and shared our common lot, conquering sin and death and reconciling the world to yourself.
- You bestow upon us your Holy Spirit, creating and renewing the church of Jesus Christ, binding in covenant faithful people of all ages, tongues, and races.
- You call us into your church to accept the cost and joy of discipleship, to be your servants in the service of others, to proclaim the gospel to all the world and resist the powers of evil, to share in Christ's baptism and eat at his table, to join him in his passion and victory.
- You promise to all who trust you forgiveness of sins and fullness of grace, courage in the struggle for justice and peace, your presence in trial and rejoicing, and eternal life in your realm which has no end. Blessings and honor, glory and power unto you.

Amen.



Is This A Church You Could Be Part Of?

Then perhaps you are ready to join this congregation.

Perhaps you have been led here to this church to worship. Perhaps you have been led here to take the step to join.

If you have, this may be the prayer that the whole congregation says together on that special day. Pray it now to yourself and ask yourself if you are ready for others to pray it for you.

WELCOME AND RECEPTION

PASTOR: Let us, the members of the church, express our welcome and affirm our mutual ministry in Christ.

MEMBERS: We welcome you with joy into the common life of this church. We promise you our friendship and prayers as we share the hopes and labors of the church of Jesus Christ. By the power of the Holy Spirit may we continue to grow together in God's knowledge and love and be witness to our risen Savior.

AMEN.

A red background with two hands reaching towards each other. The hands are dark, almost black, and are positioned on the left and right sides of the frame, with fingers slightly curled as if about to clasp or support each other. The lighting is soft, highlighting the contours of the hands.

And to guide you in the days ahead, why not sign up for the United Church of Christ's daily devotionals? They come to your email box each day with short messages of the inspiration, challenge and encouragement you find in the UCC.

Sign up at www.ucc.org.

This is our gift to you.

**NO MATTER WHO
YOU ARE, OR WHERE
YOU ARE ON LIFE'S
JOURNEY, YOU ARE
WELCOME IN OUR
CHURCH.**

May God bless you on your journey, and may God bless the faith communities that have brought you this far.