

SOUTHRIDGE COMMUNITY CHURCH

CHURCH MEMBERSHIP: BIBLICAL REVIEW

As we launch into another season of local church membership affirmation and reaffirmation, we've made a slight (but hopefully significant) modification to Southridge's membership criteria. To help us process this from a biblically-based perspective, our Board of Elders has summarized our thought process through the following outline.

1. **The Bible describes church membership exclusively in spiritual terms**

In the New Testament, when people became followers of Jesus they did two things right away: they were baptized, and they became a part of the Church. This is why historically churches like ours have viewed those two steps of faith as virtually synonymous for people who've become followers of Jesus.

Even though believers were regularly "added to their number" (i.e.: to the Church) though, when the Bible refers to the term "member", it is referring to the spiritual dynamic of a believers' identity with God at a spiritual level.

a. **Believers are members of God's family**

Consider Ephesians 2:19-20 which says, "***Consequently, you are no longer foreigners and strangers, but fellow citizens with God's people and also members of his household, built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, with Christ Jesus himself as the chief cornerstone.***" Here the term "member" implies the belonging of believers to the Family of God thanks to the saving work of Jesus.

b. **Believers are members of Christ's Body**

Another way the New Testament uses the term "member" is in an example like Romans 12:4-5: "***Just as each of us has one body with many members, and these members do not all have the same function, so in Christ we, though many, form one body, and each member belongs to all the others.***" In addition to simply belonging to God and each other, membership is also viewed as a contribution that each believer makes to advance the purposes of God through the spiritual gifting of Jesus.

2. Local church membership is merely an application of the biblical values of spiritual membership

Since scripture does not provide specifics as to how local churches are to define or facilitate the dynamics of membership, the best a church can do—if it chooses to have a definition and process for local church membership at all—is to seek to apply those two biblical values of spiritual membership.

Over the years, the Elders of Southridge have debated whether to have a local church membership definition and process at all, considering the risks that “extra yokes” can burden believers with. Anything outside of pure and simple devotion to Christ runs the risk of fostering legalism, which is something we want to avoid at all costs.

However, we’ve consistently landed on the side of having a definition and process for church membership specific to Southridge, because the core purpose of the church is to incarnate the Person of Jesus—i.e.: to make spiritual realities real in the world. And since our purpose is to make practical what is spiritual, we’ve chosen to take this tack when it comes to membership.

So church membership at Southridge seeks to practically apply the biblical values of spiritual membership.

a. Southridge membership applies family membership (belonging)

On the one hand, we want our membership affirmation process to apply the reality of belonging to our community. First, this involves affirming your belonging to Christ as a follower of Jesus, but beyond that it also involves affirming that you’re applying that belonging in Christian community here at Southridge.

To belong at Southridge is to more than merely attend or spectate; it’s to connect in some more meaningful way—most likely through a Life Group and/or Ministry Team in our context. This differentiates a member from an attender.

b. Southridge membership applies Body part membership (contribution)

In addition to affirming belonging, we also want our membership affirmation process to apply the reality of contribution to our community. Again, this means two things. First, it means you track with and support the general direction our church is headed. Even across the Niagara Region, there are many unique churches with very different senses of calling and contribution to the world, and without presuming Southridge is ‘better’ than any others, like all the others we too are very unique. So affirming support of who

we as a church uniquely sense God is leading us to become (in things like our vision, mission, model and values) ensures we're embracing Southridge for who we're becoming instead of wishing Southridge was something else.

In addition to that philosophical alignment, there's also a more active aspect to functioning in Christ's Body. Practically applying the biblical values of spiritual membership in this way affirms that your time, talents, and financial treasures are being committed to Southridge in a pot-luck way that can be experienced by the rest of us as we pool our resources together to extend Christ's love to the world. We often say that we need everyone's help to help everyone, and members are those who've said, "I'm in!" when it comes to stewarding what God's entrusted to us, together to make a difference for Jesus.

It's in these two ways that we seek to apply the biblical values of spiritual membership—and in each case, two aspects of those two ways—that forms the basis for what we invite people to affirm in our local church membership and to annual reflect on and reaffirm through our annual membership renewal process. Without seeking to be legalistic, we invite people to affirm these four statements:

1. **"I have committed my life to following Jesus and expressed that through a public declaration of my faith"**
(in baptism, confirmation, profession, etc.)
2. **"I have relationally connected with others through a Life Group and/or Ministry Team"**
3. **I have embraced the vision, purpose, direction and practices unique to Southridge community church"**
4. **I will commit my resources—my time, talents and treasures—to this community to reach and serve our world as a community"**

3. While baptism is the outward expression of faith, it's not essential for salvation

We believe baptism is an important step in the life of a believer. Jesus Himself was baptized and encouraged other followers of His to do the same. He also encouraged the Church to baptize those they reached with His message who'd responded in faith.

While we hold the baptism of believers in high regard though, we also appreciate that it's not absolutely essential to experience a life with God. The thief on the cross hanging beside Jesus, for example, was promised to see Jesus in paradise in response to His repentance and faith, without ever being baptized.

In addition, many faith traditions differ on how they understand baptism. Most Christian traditions appreciate baptism is the New Testament (i.e.: new covenant) replacement of circumcision—it becomes the new 'rite of passage' into God's family. Because circumcision was performed just after physical birth in the Old Testament though, many faith traditions apply this ceremony of baptism at that stage, baptizing babies on their parents' choice. Later on, it is often encouraged for people who have consciously made their own decision to follow Jesus to affirm that intent of their parents through some sort of public testifying, often through ceremonies like confirmation or a public profession of faith.

From our perspective—and the perspective of our particular faith tradition—we understand baptism similarly to be a new covenant replacement of circumcision. But since the new covenant is described as "by the Spirit", we understand it to begin not at physical birth but at 'spiritual birth' when a person entrusts their life in faith to Jesus. So we encourage parents to make commitments at the birth of their children (called a "Parent Dedication") but then utilize baptism as the way for believers themselves to publicly identify and testify to their personal choice of faith in and followership of Jesus Christ.

4. Scripture encourages us to be aligned on essentials and unified within diversity on non-essentials

These different perspectives on baptism have caused churches to draw hard lines on inclusion (and as a result exclusion), especially when it comes to their local church membership.

Here at Southridge, we've been growing in appreciating the primacy of Jesus' Law of Love (through teachings like His Greatest Commandment to love God and others) and the biblical mandate to foster unity—and not allow division—over other theological interpretations and distinctives that are not core to salvation. We've called this prioritizing of Love and cultivating of unity-within-diversity on non-essentials 'Love Beyond Belief'.

When we consider the Bible's teaching both on membership and baptism—and also consider how Christ-centred traditions differ in their understanding and practice of baptism—this is why we have made a modification to our church membership criteria. As an Eldership, we feel it is more faithful to Jesus' Law of Love and more consistent to the scriptures' teaching on unity-within-diversity to

not allow strict, singular distinction—and the resultant exclusion—around peoples’ understanding, convictions and experience of baptism.

While we will continue to hold the conviction that baptism is an expression of faith for believers—and will continue to practice believers’ baptism—we want to be more respectful of family and faith traditions that have understood and upheld the value and role of baptism differently, and to no longer restrict those who desire to apply the biblical value of spiritual membership here at Southridge from doing so.

In a step of ‘Love Beyond Belief’, we’re hoping to foster a greater degree of inclusion and unity-within-diversity when it comes to the affirmation of church membership here at Southridge.

5. Southridge’s application the biblical values of spiritual membership remains in unity and dialogue with our denomination—The Ontario (and Canadian) Conference of Mennonite Brethren Churches

While seeking to stimulate a greater degree of unity-within-diversity here at Southridge, we also bear the responsibility and obligation of alignment with our larger faith community, particularly our denomination of the Ontario and Canadian Conference of Mennonite Brethren churches.

Interestingly, as we’ve opened this dialogue up with provincial denominational leadership, we’ve learned that they, too, are reviewing their policies. In fact, in 2019 the National Faith-Life Team of the Canadian MB Conference will be conducting a formal review of its article on Baptism & Church Membership in its Confession of Faith.

We look forward to actively participating in this process and sharing our perspectives with our larger family of churches, eager to foster a greater degree of ‘Love Beyond Belief’ and unity-within-diversity with them as well.

If you have any questions or comments about how we’re approaching issues like baptism and church membership, please reach out to any member of our Board of Elders or specifically to our Board Chair Joan Hyatt.

We would love to dialogue with you about how we’re sensing God is leading us in this way and are grateful for your interest in church membership at Southridge!