

## Membership in Hope Fellowship

This paper is an attempt to explore and add some clarity to the concept of “membership” in Hope Fellowship. It will look at “membership” first in our societal and historical context, then in a Biblical context, and last in a Hope Fellowship context.

### **Societal and historical context**

We use the word ‘member’ in many ways. Membership is an essential concept for most organizations. Some of us are members of the YMCA. Various ones of us are staff members of World Hunger Relief, Habitat for Humanity, and other organizations. Political parties, book and music clubs, PTA’s, and many other organizations have members. Organizational membership is usually thought of as voluntary or contractual. In other words an individual chooses to be a part of the organization. Membership in organizations is usually defined by rights (having a vote or receiving certain privileges) and responsibilities (things such as dues, attendance at meetings, or committee memberships).

‘Member’ is also used to describe parts of larger wholes, when the part really doesn’t have any choice about whether to be a part of the whole or not – it just simply *is* a part of the whole. Members of physical bodies such as fingers, hands, and feet fall into this category. Families have members and even though some may become prodigals, they are still daughters, sons, fathers, mothers, etc. Also our houses have structural members such as walls and floor systems, and these systems themselves have members such as 2x4’s. In these cases membership is certainly not voluntary. And in terms of the way we normally talk, members don’t have “rights” or “responsibilities.” You could try to argue that the elbow has a “right” to be supported by the upper arm while it also has a “responsibility” to keep the lower arm attached to the body, but that kind of talk is basically silly.

Historically churches have used both of these approaches, voluntary or structural-organic, to membership.

Catholic and Orthodox churches have traditionally had a parish concept of membership. A person is a member of a parish simply because they live in a certain geographical area and therefore come under the authority of the church. Membership in the body of Christ is established at one’s baptism which is not a voluntary event, but comes soon after birth, hopefully for all members of the parish. In this understanding neither membership in the parish nor in the body is voluntary.

Protestant churches started out with a similar understanding of parish membership. However, over the centuries Anabaptists, who saw churches as voluntary groups of believers, marked by their baptism, have had tremendous influence. Today most Protestant churches would see themselves as voluntary associations. Actually the growth of the idea of democracy can be partly attributed to the early Anabaptists.

In the voluntary association model, most churches have come to adopt the same understanding of membership as secular organizations. Membership has come to be defined by a constitution which spells out rights (such as voting at business meetings, free use of the “Family Life Center” or swimming pool, services of the pastor and use of the facilities for marriages and funerals) and of responsibilities such as being at the business meeting and supporting the church financially. Actually responsibilities are usually not enforced and only weakly emphasized. For many evangelical and mainstream churches membership is granted immediately when one shows up at the sanctuary on Sunday morning and asks for membership by transfer of letter or profession of faith.

### **Biblical context**

One very important model for us is in the community of disciples that gathered around Jesus. “Membership” is never used to describe an individual’s status in this group, but there is definitely a sense of people joining the itinerant group and therefore in some generic sense being a “member” of it. Individuals were given a “call” or an invitation to join the group. Clearly some people declined, so in that sense “membership” was voluntary. For most of the individuals in the New Testament we can see that to become a member of the group meant literally to lay down one’s life (livelihood) and to walk along with Jesus. In the cases of Mary, Martha, and Lazarus who still kept residence in their home (John 11.1-3) and Zacchaeus (Luke 19.1-10) who apparently “followed” Jesus without going along with the band, we see that there were exceptions. For all, though, we see that becoming part of Jesus’ community required radical action, a departure from life as usual or normal, and the full dedication of all that one had to the kingdom of God. *“So therefore, none of you can become my disciple if you do not give up all your possessions.” Luke 14.33*

A second model is seen in the record of the early church gathered in Jerusalem, also reported by Luke in the first four chapters of Acts. What did it mean to give up all of your possessions and follow Jesus when Jesus was no longer wandering around the Judean countryside with a group of ragtag disciples? In Jerusalem it meant gathering together to hear the teaching of the apostles, eating with one another, and again dedicating all that one had (time, financial resources, and talents) to the enterprise of the kingdom which was represented in the life of the community.

Eventually New Testament churches became dispersed and therefore the kingdom of God movement was embodied in a number of small communities. Membership in a “church” is never mentioned in the Bible. The closest thing is Paul’s three passages about the body of Christ (Romans 12, 1 Corinthians 12, and Ephesians 4). In these passages Paul uses an analogy of members of a human body to try to help explain the relationship of believers to each other. Probably when his readers heard the words that he wrote, they understood their “membership” was in the body of Christ locally – in their own community – as well as the body of Christ of all of the believers.

Obviously membership in the body is very organic. At one point (Ephesians 4.16) Paul, in trying to show how we are jointed to Christ and to each other, describes the unity of the members of the body of Christ in very physical terms: the “whole body is jointed and knit together by every ligament with which it is equipped.” And to underscore the whole point, Paul closes with what is a startling statement to me, “we are members of one another” (Ephesians 4.25). In these passages Paul’s primary concerns are: a) consideration and care for each other; b) universal ministry – everyone has a role; and c) unity and love among the believers.

There are some glimpses of the modern-day democratic ideal in the New Testament churches. They were voluntary gatherings of very diverse groups of people. Their meetings had a sense of freedom where all were actually encouraged, to contribute in the Spirit. However, there is no hint of some of the staples of democracy that we see embedded in the notion of membership today – no decisions made by majority votes, no constitutions, and no talk of rights and responsibilities.

If we feel we must choose between a voluntary association of membership on the one hand, or a structural-organic understanding on the other, we will receive little help from the New Testament.

### **What HF has said officially about membership**

The following is from our Vision Statement:

**Membership is open** to baptized believers in Jesus Christ, who confess him as Lord, and are willing to share life with the community.

**We ask those interested in membership to:**

- worship with us
- attend a set of classes
- participate in discipleship
- live life with us for a while

Members are officially welcomed at a point when they and the church recognize together that God has joined us in Christ's body. This process may take up to a year or even more.

**Members are called to:**

**Worship actively** and regularly with the body and to grow individually in prayer and devotion

**Confess sin and grow in discipleship** with brothers and sisters

**Serve willingly and joyfully** as able with the church in ministries and other tasks

**Tithe to the corporate treasury** of the church and **share financially** with each other as needed and led

**Love, support, forgive, and respect** each other

We have one additional statement. In March 1998 we laid out the following process for becoming a member in Hope Fellowship.

Membership Process

1. Complete classes
2. Participate in a discipleship group or relationship
3. Share testimony with the church
4. Be recommended to the church by Discipleship Group and Pastoral Team

After completing 4 of the classes above, people would be invited into a discipleship group or relationship and would also be welcomed to attend membership meetings.

### **Some lessons to draw or discussions to have**

1. “Calling” is good language to use.

Our vision statement says that “members are *called to...*” rather than “*required to.*” “Calling” seems much more Biblical, keeping the sense that the walk in discipleship is an invitation issued by the Lord to all of us rather than a requirement imposed on us by each other or by a constitution. Jesus’ words quoted above in Luke 14 are probably best understood as a descriptive statement by Jesus rather than a prescriptive statement. In other words, Jesus probably did not sit down and decide that he wanted to require all of his disciples to give up their possessions. Rather, it was in the very nature of the kingdom of God that the disciples would have to give up their possessions. We understand that the bullet points above that describe the “call” of a Hope Fellowship member are in the very nature of being a community of Jesus’ disciples. In becoming a member of Hope Fellowship we have accepted this calling. If we fail, which we all will, one of these callings, does that mean we are still a member? Probably the answer is yes unless the case can be made that we have abandoned our calling rather than just falling short of our calling.

To start using the language of “requirement” will take our focus off of the Lord and lead us in a path of legalism.

2. The concept of membership will always be a little vague.

We are a voluntary association as the group gathered around Jesus was voluntary and as the early Anabaptists were voluntary. However, we want to experience and model an understanding of membership that is much more organic, body-like, and family-like, than organizational in the sense of

being defined by a constitution, rights, and responsibilities. We will always need to be attune to the spirit and the culture of the kingdom that had Martha, Mary, and Lazarus “staying at home” while the rich ruler (Luke 18.18-25) was told that he had to “follow.”

### 3. Despite a lack of “requirements” and a degree of “vagueness,” church membership will involve discipline.

Because we take the organic nature of membership seriously we will be concerned when a brother wanders off or a sister appears to be heading in some direction other than fulfilling her calling. Our approach to each other in this way should not be a concern regarding requirements or for the purity of the membership, but instead should be motivated by a sincere love for each other and a desire to see the brother or sister restored in the fellowship. The instruction of Jesus in Matthew 18.15-17 is not a codified procedure, but instead is a picture of healthy conflict resolution – seeking first to speak directly to each other and then enlarging the circle to others and ultimately to the whole church. Just as it was possible to leave the community surrounding Jesus or to leave one of the early New Testament fellowships, it is possible for brothers and sisters to separate themselves from the fellowship.

The process of discipline should be marked by patience rather than urgency, gentleness rather than upbraiding, and a great deal of listening before conclusions are drawn.

### 4. Decision-making is actually a process of discernment of the Spirit.

Because Christ and the Holy Spirit are present among us, the church is given the authority to make decisions (to bind and to loose) on earth. Truly making decisions should be a matter of discerning what the Holy Spirit wants. It is reasonable to believe that the Holy Spirit will speak to us in small matters as well as large.

How do we know what the Holy Spirit wants? Through the study and understanding of scripture and through listening in prayer and listening to our brothers and sisters both in our fellowship and in the larger body of Christ. Ultimately, though, the process seems circular because, according to Matthew 18, the discernment is finally the decision of the local body.

Decisions are made by Hope Fellowship in a number of ways. Some decisions are made by the whole body meeting together. Some decisions have been made by smaller groups, such as the pastoral team, the missions team, the mutual aid stewards, etc. It is very functional for the body for those with more experience or more investment in certain areas of the church’s life to have more responsibility in making particular decisions, but the ultimate authority for all decisions rests in the body as a whole. Delegated authority can be withdrawn. For decisions as a whole body we have generally used a modified form of consensus, meaning that in some cases one or two may not be in whole agreement, but are able to defer to the rest of the body. It is conceivable that we could decide to make some decisions with a majority vote, but that itself should be a leading of the Holy Spirit.

Members clearly should be invested in the larger decision-making process for the church. We have often involved those who are a regular part of the larger Hope Fellowship community in decisions and discernment. This seems generally appropriate, but it does seem that the authority should rest ultimately with those who have made the decision to publicly formalize their membership.

### 5. A lengthy membership process seems functional.

The membership process for Hope Fellowship may take a year or more to complete. Given that the commitment of membership, basically one’s life, is substantial, even though it may not appear that way at first, this lengthy period seems appropriate. To learn the organic life and culture of Hope Fellowship requires experience which takes time. As we have said repeatedly, it is our belief that when we formalize membership, it should be apparent that God has already done the work of joining a brother or sister to us.

Meanwhile the fact that our life is substantially open to those who have not made a membership commitment seems also appropriate. The larger community that gathered around Jesus must have been fairly open and accessible to people. Surely there were some that went along for a while on the journey as they decided whether or not it would be a longer-term commitment for them.

While we have not defined different classes of membership, it is clear that those who are regularly involved in Hope Fellowship are in some sense a member of the Hope Fellowship community. These individuals are usually involved in taking on a number of responsibilities, and the church feels in many ways just as responsible for them as for those who have made the formal commitment.

6. Recognizing membership for teens who have made a commitment to follow Jesus also seems functional.

It has worked well to accept teenagers who have committed themselves to follow Jesus and been baptized as members. Clearly their responsibilities are different than adult members, but there is also a great deal of variation among responsibilities of adult members too.

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