

MERCY HILL

Covenant Membership Handbook

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Welcome!

You have before you now the Covenant Membership Handbook of Mercy Hill Church! We are so glad that you are even considering becoming a member here. We hope that this Handbook will serve you well as you pray and think through such a commitment.

What Is Covenant Membership?

Covenant membership at Mercy Hill is a way of going all in with us as we commit to “*be the body*” here and now together (1 Cor 12:27). It’s a way of formalizing your commitment to this church—its members, leaders, mission, and ministries. It’s a promise we make to one another—that we will participate meaningfully in this local assembly as we pursue God’s presence, grow together as His people, and live for His purpose in the world.

How Do I Become a Covenant Member?

There are three basic steps to becoming a Covenant Member at Mercy Hill Church:

1. **Explore**
2. **Apply**
3. **Commit**

These three basic steps are broken down further in the Checklist that follows.

The Covenant Membership Expansion Packet

We should mention here that efforts have been made to keep the contents of this Handbook as simple and streamlined as possible. For those interested in diving deeper, we’ve created the Covenant Membership Expansion Packet. This Expansion Packet, while meant to elaborate and expand upon the material in the Handbook, remains supplemental and is in no way required reading. Refer to it as little or as much as you’d like.

As you progress through this Handbook, you will be alerted to the existence of expansion material in a manner similar to the example below:

✦ *For more on church membership and the way it will play out here at Mercy Hill, see **Expansion 1: The Five Aspects of Church Membership**.*

If you think the expansion material will be helpful, interesting, edifying for you, check it out!

You can download the Expansion Packet in PDF form from our website or request a hardcopy by contacting our church office. We hope you find it a blessing!

The Following is a breakdown of the three basic steps that you will need to take to become a Covenant Member at Mercy Hill Church.¹

1. Explore

- Submit the Covenant Membership Class Registration Form** (online).
 - The Covenant Membership Class consists of only one session two hours long. It takes place live on the church grounds following the Sunday Service. Lunch is provided during the class, with an optional Q&A coffee hour afterwards.
 - The class is offered on an as-requested basis (though no more than once per quarter). Once we receive even one Class Registration Form, we will open the opportunity up to the church at large. When all forms have been received, we will select a Sunday and launch!
- Attend the Class and finish reading through the Covenant Membership Handbook.**
 - The Covenant Membership Class will cover Sections I and II of the Covenant Membership Handbook. During the class you will learn what church membership is, why it's important, and what it looks like at Mercy Hill.
 - After the class, Sections III through V of the Handbook are for you to read on your own time and at your own pace.²
- Fill out and submit the Covenant Membership Reflections Survey** (online).
 - After attending the class and reading through the rest of the Handbook, please let us know how you feel about membership at Mercy Hill. Your thoughts, suggestions, lingering questions really matter to us!

2. Apply

- Fill out and submit the Covenant Membership Application Form** (online).
 - If after taking the class and reading through the rest of the Handbook you are excited and desire to be a Covenant Member of Mercy Hill Church, this form is for you!
- Meet with an Elder for the Covenant Membership Conversation** (see Appendix 7).
 - After we have received your application, we will reach out to you to schedule the Covenant Membership Conversation. This meeting will take place between you and an Elder or two. It gives us a chance to hear more of your spiritual story, answer any of your questions, and help you along your way in becoming a Covenant Member at Mercy Hill.

¹ If you are married, you and your spouse are encouraged to go through the Handbook together, but we do ask that each spouse submit the appropriate forms and surveys individually.

² As you progress through the Handbook, please consider marking up the content—underlining key thoughts, making notes, writing down questions you hope to have answered, etc. The more you engage with the material, the more you will get out of it, and the more our church leaders will be able to help.

Sign the Church Covenant (see Appendix 8).

- This will take place in person at the end of the Covenant Membership Conversation meeting.
- The Council of Elders will then prayerfully recommend you for Covenant Membership to the current Covenant Members of Mercy Hill Church.³

3. Commit

Receive our welcome into Covenant Membership at Mercy Hill Church!

- As you commit to “be the body” here and now with us, please know that we also commit ourselves to the same with you. As a celebration of this, you will be welcomed into Covenant Membership during a Sunday Service. At that time, you will be introduced and prayed for by the church.

Upon completion of these steps, you would then be formally considered a Covenant Member of Mercy Hill Church! We would be so thrilled to join ourselves together with you in pursuit of Christ and His mission in this city and the world!

³ Your name will be included in a Special Announcement emailed out to all (and only) current Covenant Members and they will have two weeks to respond privately to the Council of Elders if they have any questions or concerns.

Just as the body is one and has many members, and all the members of the body, though many, are one body, so it is with Christ. For in one Spirit we were all baptized into one body—Jews or Greeks, slaves or free—and all were made to drink of one Spirit. For the body does not consist of one member but of many. . . . Now you are the body of Christ and individually members of it.

1 Corinthians 12:12–14, 27

Introduction

Kicking Against the Current

In this Handbook we are going to deal with the subject of church membership in general and church membership at Mercy Hill in particular. As we begin, it is perhaps worthwhile to note that such a subject immediately has us kicking against the current of our culture and the natural drift of our flesh.

- Our culture prizes *individualism*—“Get out of my business. Sure I’m a Christian, but it’s just me and Jesus. I don’t need the church getting in the way!” But church membership presses in and says: “No! We’re in this thing together—I need you in my life; and you need me in yours!”
- Our culture has so fostered *consumerism*—“I’m here only so long as you meet my needs; when you stop satisfying me, I stop coming!” But church membership presses in and says: “No! Though I’m a mess, and you’re a mess; though I’m going to hurt you, and you’re going to hurt me; I’m committing to follow Christ along with you through the ups and the downs.”
- Our culture preaches *tolerance* as the highest of virtues—“What’s true for you is true for you, but don’t you try to tell me what’s true for me!” But church membership presses in and draws hard lines of truth in love and says with great joy that some seem to be in Christ, and with great sorrow that others seem, according to biblical standards, to be out of bounds.

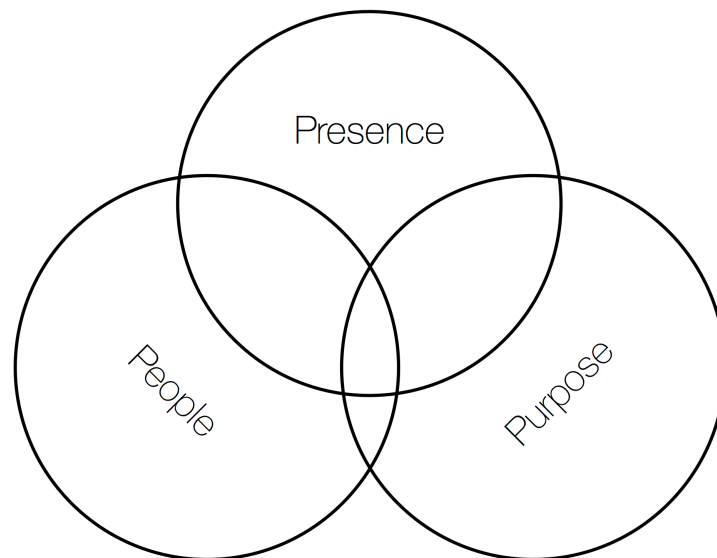
So we mustn’t assume that all the contents of this Handbook will go down smoothly. We might struggle and question at certain points. But we are still right to assume, and even expect, that there is much glory waiting for us in all of this. For, while church membership may seem foreign and even offensive to some of us, it is a subject that matters greatly to God. We trust you will come to see this as you proceed.

What Is the Church?

One Blessed Assembly with Three Distinct Aspects

Before we can effectively introduce church membership, we should back up and ask: What is *the church* in the first place? It’s a question we all imagine we could answer quite simply, but when we start to make an attempt, we come to face the complexities of it. What is the church? What exactly are we doing here?

Here's our humble attempt at a definition: **The church is that blessed assembly that exists in the *presence* of God, as the *people* of God, for the *purpose* of God.** One blessed assembly, with three distinct aspects.



The church is that blessed assembly that exists in the presence of God, as the people of God, for the purpose of God.

The Church in Redemptive History

We've defined the church using these broad terms here to help us see that the church is not merely a New Testament reality but something that God has been after with us from the very beginning. What Christ redeems us to be is organically connected to what God originally created us to be in Adam.

1. Adam and Eve

Consider Adam and Eve¹:

- In an overflow of joy and love, God creates them and sets them in the garden sanctuary of Eden, where He would walk with them (Gen 3:8). They were created to exist in His holy *presence*.
- But, even more, they were created to be His *people*. It was not good for man to be alone so "God created man in his own image . . . *male and female* he created them" (Gen 1:27). One human being was not enough to truly image God (who Himself exists as one in *three*!). Human beings were created to be His *people*, in special (even covenant) relationship with Him *and* with one another.
- And He gave to these people in His presence a unique *purpose*. The first man and woman were to rule with Him over His creation. They were to subdue and have dominion over it. They were to bear fruit,

¹ You might want to read Genesis 1-3 as a refresher on this. As you do, make special note of God's dealing with the first man and woman.

multiply, and fill the earth with more human beings made in God's image and reflecting His glory (Gen 1:28). By this, it seems, they were to expand the boundaries of Eden so that, one day, God's glory might fill the earth like the waters cover the sea—with all humanity existing in His presence, as His people, living for His purpose in the world.

In this sense, then, humanity was created, from the start, to be the church.

But we would not have it! In our arrogance, we abandoned His presence, broke our fellowship with one another, and started living, not for the purpose of God, but for ourselves.

And so the world went dark.

2. Jesus Christ

But God was not willing to let the story end here. He begins a countermovement with Israel that, through many ups and downs, ultimately culminates in the arrival of the Christ, Jesus—the light of the world (John 1:9), Immanuel, God with us (Matt 1:23). Though we fell from His presence, in grace, God brings His presence down to us.

And—through Jesus' perfect life, sin-bearing death, triumphant resurrection, and renewing Spirit—broken humanity can finally be put back together, restored to God's original design. All that was lost in Adam is regained in Christ (1 Cor 15:20-23, 45-49)! Redemption is restoration of creation.

Listen to how Peter describes the church as it has been restored in Jesus: "You are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people for his own possession, that you may proclaim the excellencies of him who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light. Once you were not a people, but now you are God's people; once you had not received mercy, but now you have received mercy" (1 Pet 2:9–10).

Did you hear it?

- In Christ, we've been restored to the *presence* of God—"called . . . out of darkness into His marvelous light" (v. 9b).
- In Christ, we've been restored as the *people* of God—"once [we] were not a people but now [we] are God's people" (v. 10a).
- In Christ, we've been restored to live for the *purpose* of God—that we might "proclaim the excellencies of Him" to others. And through this gospel proclamation we will begin again to fill the earth with people now renewed in God's image, reflecting His glory (v. 9b).

And this work begun in Christ will someday soon be fully realized. The apostle John writes of the end of things in this way:

Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth, for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and the sea was no more. And I saw the holy city, new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband. And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, "Behold, the dwelling place of God is with man. He will dwell with them, and they will be his people, and God himself will be with them as their God." (Rev 21:1–3)

Christ has done it! God's original plan for humanity as the church—in His *presence*, as His *people*, for His *purpose*—will be fully realized in the end through Jesus and His work on the cross!

3. The Space Between

But we're not in Revelation 21 yet, are we? No! We're back in 1 Peter 2. We're shining lights in a world that's still dark. We're calling sinners back to God through the Savior, warning them before it's too late. We have God's presence, we are God's people, we live for God's purpose, but we're not yet home. We're still somewhere in the middle of the story. And as such, we are both an echo of Eden and a foretaste of heaven.

We are the church.

*We are both an echo of Eden and a foretaste of heaven.
We are the church.*

What Is Church Membership?

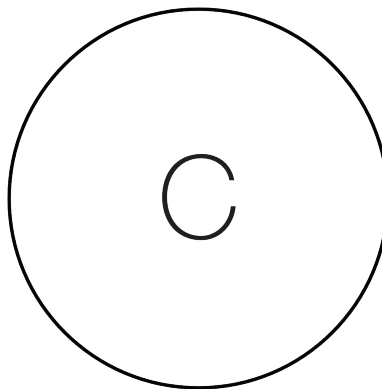
From Universal to Local

So, with this definition in view, what then is church *membership*? How do I become a part of that blessed assembly?

1. The Universal Church

Church membership broadly conceived, takes place simply by coming to Jesus in repentance and faith (Acts 2:37-39; 16:30-31). When the gospel is proclaimed and we repent and believe, we are united to Christ by His Spirit, and we become members of His body, the church.

We are referring here to what has been called the *universal church* (church with a capital C). The universal church is that which includes all people, through all time, across all space. It is the sum total of all who have been united to the Son through the ages.



It's the universal church that the author of Hebrews has in mind when he writes: "You have come to Mount Zion and to the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem, and to innumerable angels in festal gathering, and to the assembly ['church'] of the firstborn who are enrolled in heaven, and to God, the judge of all, and to the spirits of the righteous made perfect, and to Jesus, the mediator of a new covenant" (Heb 12:22-24a; cf. Rev 7:9-12).

If you have bowed your knee to Christ, then your name is written in the roll-sheet of heaven—the Lamb’s book of life—and you are a member in His universal church and granted the privilege of participating in this kind of cosmic worship service!

2. The Local Church

But it is not so much membership in this broad sense that we are concerned with in this Handbook is it? It is doubtful that any would question the validity of church membership along these lines. But O how things get a bit confusing, even controversial, when we start to consider church membership in a narrower sense—when we start considering membership in the *local church* (church with a lower-case c).

If the universal church is that which includes all people, through all time, across all space, then the local church is that which is confined to a particular group of people, at a particular time, in a particular space—like Mercy Hill Church.

So what should church membership look like at this local level? Is such a thing even important or biblical?

Distinguished But Not Divided

The New Testament would certainly lead us to think so. While it distinguishes between the universal and local church, it sees no division between them. To be part of the universal church necessarily meant that you would be part of a local church (and vice versa).

Indeed, one’s membership in the universal church is always concretely expressed through vital membership in a local church. There are no drifting Christians; they are all anchored concretely in local assemblies. As Douglas Millar writes: “In the New Testament there is no such person as a Christian who is not a church member. Conversion was described as ‘the Lord adding to the church’ (Acts 2:47). There was no spiritual drifting.”²

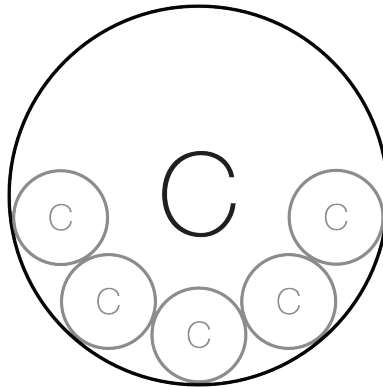
If you were coming to Christ, you were coming into the local church. Period.

In the New Testament there is no such person as a Christian who is not a church member. Conversion was described as “the Lord adding to the church” (Acts 2:47). There was no spiritual drifting.

And, to put it conversely, by coming into the local church you were coming into the church universal. Which is why Paul would open his letter in 1 Corinthians 1:2: “To the church of God that is in Corinth [local], to those sanctified in Christ Jesus, called to be saints together with all those who in every place call upon the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, both their Lord and ours [universal].”

The local assembly is the gateway into the universal assembly. Amazingly, the only way to really enter into Hebrews 12 kind of cosmic worship, is through the little assemblies of local churches! We hope you never look at our fluorescent lights, stained carpets, and wrinkled curtains in the same way again. When you come through the doors of this elementary school, you are ascending mount Zion. We’re touching heaven in this place!

² As quoted in the *Introduction to Redeemer Seminar Handbook* of Redeemer Presbyterian Church.



Now there are droves of professing Christians in our day that reject almost everything we've just said: "Give me the universal church but don't make me commit to the local church. It just slows me down and gets in the way of my walk with Christ. It's just an outdated institution. It brings more shame to Christ's name than honor."

We don't want you to feel that way about this or any local church. Christ shed His blood for *this* local church (Acts 20:28)!

Four Strands of Biblical Evidence for Local Church Membership

Let's quickly consider four strands of biblical evidence that seem to indicate the importance the early church placed on local church membership. While we cannot say that a formal process of church membership is clearly articulated for us here, we can say that something of the like is clearly implied.

1. It Is Implied in the Records Kept by Local Churches

Consider the New Testament church's origin there in Jerusalem. On the day of Pentecost, after the outpouring of the Spirit, and the preaching of Peter, we read that "those who received his word were baptized, and there were added that day about three thousand souls" (Acts 2:41). And they immediately come into the local covenant community of believers: "They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and the fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers" (v. 42).

Similar statements are made in 2:47; 4:4; 5:14; and 11:24. We get this sense that as people were added to the church, numbers were kept—not because they were concerned with numbers in themselves, but because they were concerned pastorally for each and every soul that the numbers represented.

It seems they had some way of keeping track of who was coming in.

2. It Is Implied in the Leader-Member Dynamics of Local Churches

The clearest text for this is Hebrews 13:17: "Obey your leaders and submit to them, for they are keeping watch over your souls, as those who will have to give an account. Let them do this with joy and not with groaning, for that would be of no advantage to you."

Matt Chandler, the lead pastor of a church in Dallas, and the President of the Acts 29 Network of which we are a part, writes of his wrestling through the issue of local church membership. And he points to this verse as the lynchpin. Reflecting on it, he writes:

Two questions occurred to me. First, if there is no biblical requirement to belong to a local church, then which leaders should an individual Christian obey and submit to? Second, and more personally, who will I as a pastor give an account for?

... Regarding the first question, the Scriptures clearly command Christians to submit to and honor an elder body (Heb 13:17, 1 Tim 5:17). If there is no understanding of local church membership, then who are we to submit to and obey? Is it anyone with the title elder from any church? Should you as a Christian obey and submit to those loons at Westboro Baptist? In order to obey Scripture, must you picket soldiers' funerals, as the pastor of Westboro seems to imply?

Regarding the second question, the Scriptures clearly command an elder body to care for specific people (1 Pet 5:1-5; also, Acts 20:29-30). Will I as a pastor be held accountable for all the Christians in the Dallas Metroplex? There are many churches in Dallas that I have strong theological and philosophical differences with. Will I give account for what they teach in their small group, how they spend their money, and what they do concerning international missions?³

For Hebrews 13:17 to make any sense, it seems that the early church members must have had a clear idea of who these leaders were that they were to submit to. And, likewise, it seems that the early church leaders must have also had a clear idea of who these members were for whom they would give an account to God—those whom God had put “in [their] charge [‘lot’; ‘share’]” (1 Pet 5:3).

It seems they had some way of drawing these lines.

3. It Is Implied in the Practice of Church Discipline and Excommunication by Local Churches

Mathew 18:15-17 and 1 Corinthians 5 in particular talk about putting a person out of the church due to clear, consistent, calloused, unrepentant sin. But how can you formally put someone out if they were never formally brought in?

4. It Is Implied in the Metaphors Used to Describe Local Churches

Local churches are described as:

- *Flocks*—composed of sheep (Acts 20:28; 1 Pet 5:2-3).
- *Temples*—composed of living stones (Eph 2:19-22; 1 Pet 2:5).
- *Households*—composed of family members (1 Tim 3:15).
- *Bodies*—composed of body parts, or members (1 Cor 12).

Each of these metaphors push us to see the local church as composed of distinct yet vitally connected members.

Whether there was a formal membership process or not, it is clear that these individual believers had joined together in some radically significant way.

- When one sheep goes missing, the good shepherd recognizes it right away and leaves the 99 to go after him.
- When a stone is pulled from the wall of a temple, who wouldn't notice the gaping hole left in its place?
- When a family member has gone AWOL, family meals around the table just aren't the same.
- When a hand is removed from the body, every body part suffers the loss.

³ <https://9marks.org/article/journalchurch-membership-biblical/>.

Formally Encouraging What the Scriptures Already Require

It might be that all this evidence finally implies is that the early local churches of the New Testament had some sort of informal understanding of church membership. Certainly we are not to suppose that they had some database on their computers where they saved applications, interview notes, signed covenants, and directory info. Whatever they did, they did it differently than we are going to do it here.

But it does seem clear that they did something, that they approached the issue in some way. And we should do the same.

With covenant membership, we are not trying to go beyond what the Scriptures teach. We are simply attempting to formally encourage in our church what the Scriptures already require of us.

- We're supposed to know who's being added to our assembly by the Lord.
- Members are supposed to submit to, obey, and honor their leaders.
- Leaders are supposed to oversee, shepherd, and care for the members under their charge.
- When members or leaders are hardened in unrepentant sin, we're supposed to have clear ways of removing them from the communion of this church so as to warn the sinner, protect the church's purity, and preserve the honor of Christ.
- Every believer is supposed to be in intimate, committed, accountable relationships with other Christians.

A formal process of church membership encourages all of these things and helps to provide a framework for developing them in our church.

With covenant membership, we are not trying to go beyond what the Scriptures teach. We are simply attempting to formally encourage in our church what the Scriptures already require of us.

So What Is It?

With all of this now in view, how would we define church membership here at Mercy Hill?

Church membership is a way of formalizing your commitment to this church—its leaders, members, mission, and ministries. It's a way of going all in with us as we commit to "be the body" here and now together in the beautiful and broken city of San Jose. It's a promise we make to one another—that we will participate meaningfully in this local assembly as we pursue God's presence, grow together as His people, and live for His purpose in the world.

Do Not Cut Yourself Off from this Blessing!

As we bring this first section to a close, consider the pleadings of seasoned pastor, John Piper:

I [urge] you to pray and to think this through for your own life. The New Testament knows of no Christians who are not accountable members of local churches. . . . "Lone-Ranger Christians" are a

contradiction because becoming a Christian means being united to Christ, and union with Christ expresses itself in union with a local body of believers.

. . . Are you an accountable member of a local church? Not just: Is your name somewhere? But, are you committed to discipline and being disciplined according to biblical standards? Have you publicly declared your willingness to be shepherded and to be led by the leaders of a local church? Do you see yourself and your gifts as part of an organic ministering body? Do you show by your firm attachment to Christ's body that you are attached to Christ?

Church membership is a blood-bought gift of God's grace. More than most of us realize, it is a life-sustaining, faith-strengthening, joy-preserving means of God's mercy to us. I urge you not to cut yourself off from this blessing.⁴

- + For more on church membership and the way it will play out here at Mercy Hill, see *Expansion 1: The Five Aspects of Church Membership*.
- + If you are wondering why we are calling this "Covenant" Membership, see *Expansion 2: Why "Covenant" Membership?*
- + For further reading on the subject, the Elders at Mercy Hill recommend Jonathan Leeman's little book: *Church Membership*.

⁴ <http://www.desiringgod.org/messages/how-important-is-church-membership>.

I decided to know nothing among you except Jesus Christ and him crucified.

1 Corinthians 2:2

Section I of this Handbook provided an introduction to church membership in general. Now we start to deal with what it means to be a member at Mercy Hill Church in particular. In this section, we are going to look at three headings: (1) Our Mission; (2) Our Values; and (3) Our Ministry Strategy.

Our Mission

Laboring in Line with God

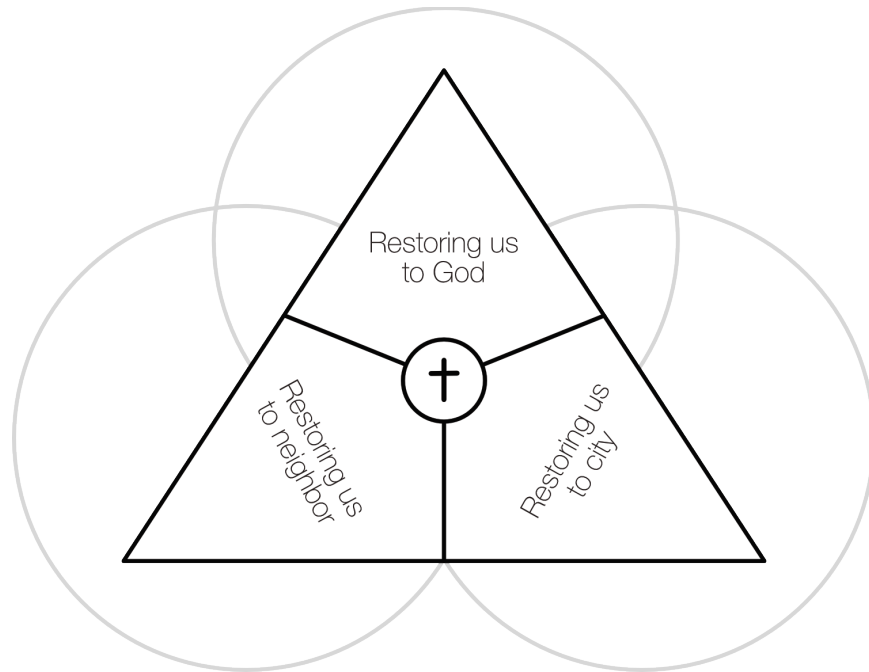
There's really nothing more fundamental to a church than its mission statement. It answers questions like: "Why do we exist?"; "What are we doing here?"; and "Where are we going?" Nick preached a full message¹ on Mercy Hill's mission statement back in June of 2018. In this Handbook our aim is simply to give a brief summary.

As we transition now to look at our mission statement, we need to recall how we defined the church back at the beginning of Section I: "The church is that blessed assembly that exists in the *presence* of God, as the *people* of God, for the *purpose* of God." This is who we were at first created to be in Adam, and it is who we are now redeemed to be in Christ. One blessed assembly, with three distinct aspects.

Understanding that this is what God has created and redeemed us to be as *the church*, we want to make sure that this is what we are laboring with all our might to be in *this church*. Therefore, our mission statement takes these same three basic aspects, puts them into common vernacular, makes them a bit more concrete, and in so doing, attempts to send out clear lines in which our church can march. Hence, *presence*, *people*, and *purpose* become *God*, *neighbor*, and *city*.

Our mission statement reads as follows: ***Mercy Hill Church exists to help restore us to God, neighbor, and city through the good news of Jesus Christ.*** Let's break this down bit by bit.

¹ <http://mercyhillchurch.org/resources/sermons/our-new-mission-statement/>.



To Help Restore Us

The idea of restoration here implies the repairing of something broken, the return to something that once was. It presupposes the fact that the way things are is not the way things are supposed to be—not the way things were designed to function. It touches on the idea that this world, and even we ourselves, are fallen, distorted, broken. And we need help, we need rescue, we need restoration. And that is just what Jesus has come to provide!

Therefore, this is what we as a church have to offer you in Him. The church is God's restoration project. And we get the joy of partnering with Him in this great work!

Through the Good News of Jesus Christ

But how exactly is Jesus going to do this? Well, skip to the end of our statement and you see it. Restoration comes "through (or by way of) the good news of Jesus Christ." The "good news of Jesus Christ" is just another way of talking about the gospel—all that Jesus accomplished for us at the cross.

We have found it helpful to emphasize that this gospel is in fact good *news* because it keeps ever before us something we are often prone to forget. Consider the words of Tim Keller here as he channels the ideas of the late Welsh minister Martyn Lloyd-Jones:

Some years ago, I heard a tape series . . . by David Martyn Lloyd-Jones, an evening sermon series on 1 Corinthians 15. And he made a distinction that was extremely clarifying . . . how the gospel is based on historical events in a way that other religions just aren't. He said there is a big difference between good *advice* and good *news*. The gospel, he would say, is good news, not good advice. Here's what he said about that: "Advice is counsel about something to do and it hasn't happened yet, but you can do it. . . . News is a report about something that has happened—you can't do anything about it—it's been done for you and all you can do is respond to it."

So he says, "Now think this out. Here is a king and he goes into a battle against an invading army to defend his land. If the king defeats the invading army, he sends back to the capital city messengers . . . He sends back *'good news-ers'*. And what they come back with is a report. They come back and they say, 'It

has been defeated! It's all been done! Therefore, respond with joy and now go about your lives. Conduct your lives in this peace which has been achieved for you.' But if he doesn't defeat the invading army, if the invading army breaks through, the king sends back *military advisers* and says, 'Swordsmen over here, and marksmen over here, and the horsemen over here. We're going to have to fight for our lives.'"

Dr. Lloyd-Jones says, "Every other religion sends military advisers to people. Every other religion says, 'You know, if you want your salvation, you're going to have to fight for your life.' Every other religion is sending advice, and saying, 'Here are the rights, here are the rituals, . . . and here are the laws and the regulations. Earthen works over here, marksmen over here, horsemen over here. Fight for your life.' But we send heralds; we send messengers not military advisers."²

Every other religion offers advice on how to fix the brokenness we all experience, but this only burdens and breaks us down further. Only Christianity is brave enough to hold out the twofold reality that: (1) We can't fix this ourselves; but (2) God can and has already done the decisive work in Jesus. On the cross, Christ took our sin and brokenness upon Himself. He experienced the full weight of them in His death. But, on the third, at break of dawn, He rose again, victorious . . . with good *news* to proclaim!

The battle has been won for you in Jesus. We can be restored *upward* to God, *inward* to neighbor, and *outward* to city because Jesus has come *down* to us. He meets us in the mess and changes everything!

Therefore, we as a church are jealous to make sure we are always holding out not mere "good" advice, but the good news of Jesus Christ. There is no hope for our restoration outside of His finished work.

To God

Most everybody in our day would admit that there is something wrong with the world and, even, with themselves. But, if we were to go out and talk to people on the streets around our city, it is likely that few would say they think all of this is resulting from some fundamental fracture in their relationship with God. They're not thinking about God. They don't care about God. And that's the problem.

The good news of Jesus Christ, before it does anything else, restores us to God. Jesus leads a people dying of thirst back to the Fountain of living water (Jer 2:13; John 4:10).

Restoring us to God through the good news of Jesus Christ directs our energies as a church upward. If we are not restored to God through Christ, we cannot even begin to be restored in these other directions (Lam 5:21).

To Neighbor

When we've been restored to God in Christ, we can finally start to enter into relationships with other people. Until then, sure, we have relationships, but it's all ultimately still about us. We need something from them.

We hang out with those richer, smarter, "cooler" than us because it helps *our* image. We hang out with those more needy than us because it makes *us* feel better about ourselves. We hang out with those who are like us because they enjoy the same sorts of things as *we* do. Every relationship is run through the grid of self-concern—"What am *I* going to get out of it?" Because we're still thirsty at a fundamental, soul level.

But then we meet Jesus, and He plugs us into God, into living water. We come to find that, even though we're sinners, we are loved and secure and forgiven in Him. And do you know what happens? In our relationships with other people, no longer do we have something to prove, something to get. Now we actually have something to *give*!

² <http://resources.thegospelcoalition.org/library/what-is-gospel-centered-ministry-en>.

Restoring us to neighbor through the good news of Jesus Christ directs our energies as a church inward—because we believe that the only way we are truly going to be restored to neighbor, to other people, is if we are brought into the family of God and establish relationships around the gospel.

To City

A city is the place we inhabit—the place we work, rest, play, and live. The idea of being restored to city, then, is this idea of being restored to a sense of purpose and joy in the place we occupy. It's gaining a clearer sense of why we're here, what we're doing, and who we're doing it all for.

When we are brought back to God and into His family, the church, we enter a story so much bigger than ourselves. We start to see so much more worth living for. Even common, everyday activities begin to shimmer with eternal significance. Whether we eat, drink, or whatever we're doing, we want to do it all in love for Him and for others (1 Cor 10:31).

Restoring us to city through the good news of Jesus Christ directs our energies as a church outward. We're not just about connecting us to God and one another and then hunkering down until Jesus returns. No! We go back into the city with a renewed sense of purpose and joy. We want others to know what we've found in Christ!

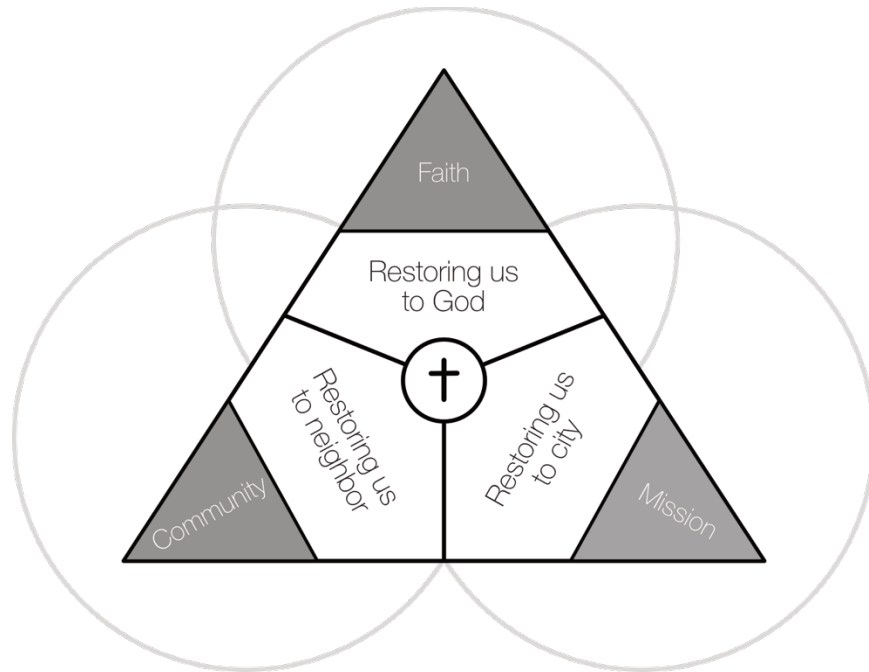
Our Values

A Finer Point

Through the years, we've identified three core values that have really marked all that we are and want to be about as a church: *Faith*, *Community*, and *Mission*.

These three core values really serve to put a finer point on the three directions identified in our mission statement. In every case, they answer the question: *How?*

- How is a person restored upward to God through the good news of Jesus Christ? Answer: By *Faith* that is fixed upon that good news.
- How is a person restored inward to neighbor through the good news of Jesus Christ? Answer: By *Community* that is centered around that good news.
- How is a person restored outward to city through the good news of Jesus Christ? Answer: By *Mission* that is mobilized by that good news.



Each of these values will be unfolded further in Sections III through V. For now, let's just quickly define them and relate them to one another.

Defining Each Value

Faith: Knowing and Loving *the Lord*

We, the church, exist in the *Presence* of God. We are the *Bride* of Christ, created and redeemed to enjoy intimate relationship with Him. This value presses our church *upwards* in love for God.

Consider 1 Corinthians 8:6—"For us there is one God, the Father, from whom are all things and for whom we exist, and one Lord, Jesus Christ, through whom are all things and through whom we exist."

We were created for Him—to know Him, love Him, trust Him, obey Him, worship Him. We once had been exiled from Him in our sin, but through Christ, by way of faith in His finished work, we have been brought back.

We value Faith in this church.

Community: Knowing and Loving *the Church*

We, the church, exist as the *People* of God. We are the *Family* of Christ, adopted in the Beloved and brought into covenantal relationship with His people. This value presses our church *inwards* in love for one another.

Consider Ephesians 2:19—"So then you are no longer strangers and sojourners, but you are fellow citizens with the saints and members of the household of God."

We were created for community. To know and love others and to let ourselves be known and loved by others. We once were at enmity with one another—bitter enemies like Jew and Gentile. But in Christ, we have been reconciled, brought into the same family room under care of the same Father.

We value Community in this church.

Mission: Knowing and Loving *the World*

We, the church, exist for the *Purpose* of God. We are the *Embassy* of Christ, commissioned by the Savior to be His ambassadors—salt and light in a world decaying and going dark. This value presses our church *outwards* in love for the unbelieving.

Consider 2 Corinthians 5:20—“We are ambassadors for Christ, God making his appeal through us. We implore you on behalf of Christ, be reconciled to God.”

We were created for something so much bigger than ourselves. We were created to take part in the rush of working alongside our Creator—in pushing back darkness and calling rebels to lay down their arms and live. We once had abandoned such a high calling, building towers of Babel instead of temples of God. But now, in Christ, we’ve been called off the bench and put back in the game! Our lives have regained their grand meaning.

We value Mission in this church.

The Larger Ecosystem

Our values, while they can be distinguished, cannot be divided. They are distinct, yet inseparable. You might think of them along the lines of an ecosystem. There’s an interdependence among them such that, if ever we abstract one from its larger ecosystem, the whole system collapses. A church is either pursuing all of these at once or it is truly pursuing none of them at all.

- Some churches make it all about Faith. They want to teach the Bible, spend hours in prayer, encounter Jesus in musical worship, etc. But they don’t go anywhere with it. It’s just a doctrine, or it’s just a warm fuzzy feeling, but it doesn’t propel them into community or out on mission.
- Other churches make it all about Community. They’ve got the warm fellowship, the support groups, the coffee hour. But, at the end of the day, they’re more like a social club than a church. The gospel is rarely mentioned and their mission to the lost seems irrelevant.
- Still other churches make it all about Mission. They’re tired of the institutional church. It just gets in the way. They want to finally get out from within the four walls and do something! So they’re active in the city, they’re serving at the soup kitchens, they know the poor by name. But somewhere along the way they stopped reading their Bibles and doing life with God’s people. Their Christianity got reduced to a movement for social reform or philanthropy.

Faith is meant to flow into Community. Community is meant to flow out on Mission. When even one of these three values is distorted or disregarded, you no longer have the church as God designed it. The whole ecosystem unravels.

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Our Ministry Strategy

Let me now address our ministry strategy at this church. How are we going to partner with God in this restoration project? How are we going to develop Faith, Community, and Mission? How are we going to grow the church—both qualitatively and quantitatively?

At Mercy Hill, we have a three-part interlocking ministry strategy that we should unfold for you at this point. We have a (1) Strategic Focus, (2) Strategic Rhythm, and (3) Strategic Activity.

1. Strategic Focus: We Are a One-Issue Church

One Issue

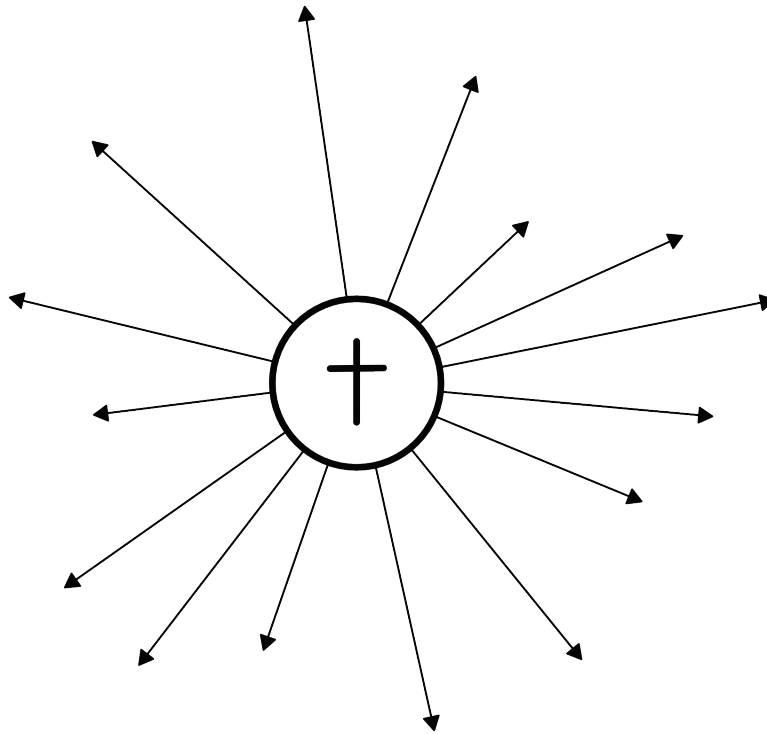
Churches can be known for all sorts of things—“That’s the church where the band is radio-quality”; “That’s the church where the pastor is like a stand-up comedian”; “That’s the church where they give away fresh pour-over coffee that tastes like it just dripped down from heaven.”

Do you know what we pray people come to say about us? “That’s the church where they just can’t get over the cross. They’re always teaching about it, singing about it, talking about it, moved by it, showing it, sharing it.”

*Do you know what we pray people come to say about us?
“That’s the church where they just can’t get over the cross.”*

In this sense, then, we want to be a one-issue church. There are so many things our focus could drift to, but we will labor with all of our might to keep us focused here. Because God is focused here.

- Do you remember Jesus’ rebuke of the Jews? “You search the Scriptures because you think that in them you have eternal life; and it is they that bear witness about me” (John 5:39). “Everything in the Bible—every word God ever said—is pointing you to Me and what I’m about to accomplish for you on the cross!”
- Or do you remember what Paul says is of “first importance” in 1 Corinthians 15:3? “The gospel” (v. 1)—namely, “that Christ died for our sins in accordance with the Scriptures, that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day in accordance with the Scriptures” (vv. 3–4). Whatever else we believe or do as a church, this gospel is to take first place!
- Or when Paul knows he’s leaving the church in Ephesus, never to see them again, what does he leave them with? “And now I commend you to God and to the word of his grace, which is able to build you up and to give you the inheritance among all those who are sanctified” (Acts 20:32). “Oh I know you’ve already heard the gospel Ephesians, but you need to hear it again and again and again. For it is not only how you get saved, it is how you are sustained unto glory.” When we preach the gospel in this church, Paul is saying, we might as well be mixing cement and laying down bricks. For it is the word of His grace that builds His people up!
- That’s why he would say to the Corinthians: “I decided to know nothing among you except Jesus Christ and him crucified” (1 Cor 2:2). And that’s why the first sermon series I (Nick) ever preached through at this church was on this same verse! The cross of Christ was the first note I struck, and I pray by God’s grace I will strike that same note until the day I drop! May my ministry be a never ending riff on this one master theme: “Jesus Christ and him crucified.”



One Million Implications

This is not to say that we will not talk about anything else in this church. We most certainly will. It is to say, however, that whatever else we talk about, we will approach it through the lens of the gospel. You see, this one issue touches every issue. We may focus in on this one issue, but this one issue has one million implications.

This is the flow of almost every epistle in the New Testament. First, let's get the gospel right. Then, let's talk about what it implies for your Faith, Community, and Mission. What does the gospel imply for your relationship with God, with your spouse, with your kids, with your work, with your finances, with your neighbor, with the orphan and the widow, and on and on?!

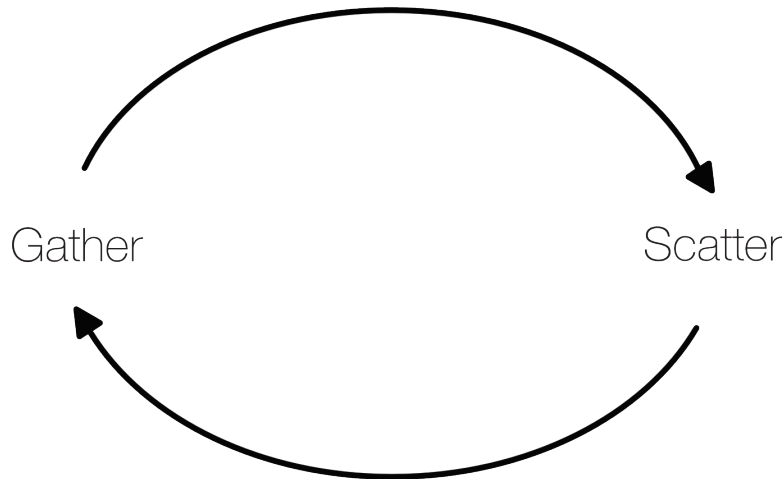
Knowing God's unconditional, even counter-conditional, love for us in Christ is what gives rise to fire-hearted Faith, deep-rooted Community, and life-sacrificing Mission.

By God's grace, we will keep this one issue at the center. But, in the years to come, we will set out to discover the one million implications that flow out from it.

Knowing God's unconditional, even counter-conditional, love for us in Christ is what gives rise to fire-hearted Faith, deep-rooted Community, and life-sacrificing Mission.

2. Strategic Rhythm: We Gather and Scatter

With the gospel as our Strategic Focus, we operate within a Strategic Rhythm. As a church, we gather and we scatter. We gather together as believers and then we scatter out into the world for Christ. Both sides of this rhythm are critical to our pursuit of Faith, Community, and Mission.



We want to help you see how the two relate by putting an image on it. When we speak of our gathering and scattering, think of the ebbing and flowing of the ocean's tide. The water recedes out into the depths and then pushes back onto the land. But even as the water recedes it leaves something of the depths on the shore—shells, sand-dollars, even sea creatures in some of the tide pools.

My (Nick) dad's side had a family reunion this past summer in a place called Fripp Island off the coast in South Carolina. At low-tide we would walk the beach looking for these sorts of things. If we got there too late, the best treasures would have already been taken by other tourists. But without fail, the tide would come back up from the depths, with more shimmering treasure in its flow.

Think about our Strategic Rhythm along these lines. We have gatherings—some larger, some smaller—scheduled throughout the week—opportunities to move towards the breathtaking depths of God's glory with His people. But we don't stay out in the depths any more than the tide stays out at sea. The tide returns, it comes back in towards land, towards the world. And when we move back in from the depths we bring tokens of our time with us—precious shells, as it were, that speak something to the world of the beauty and glory of our God. And we lay these shells out along the banks, like a trail of crumbs leading back to their source in Him.

Our family members, friends, neighbors, co-workers see our faith, our hope, our love, our joy, our peace; and they hear us speak of a world they've not yet seen but always longed for. They hear us speak of the love of God for sinners, of a redeemed and reconciled community, of a mission bigger than our day-planners and board meetings. They hear us speak of the church gathered.

And perhaps they'll be inclined to follow the crumbs, the shimmering shells, the sightings of glory, back out to the sea. Perhaps they'll want to catch a glimpse for themselves. Perhaps they too will find themselves breathless before the vast expanse of God's glory and grace. Perhaps they too will come to know the love of God for them in Christ. Perhaps they too will start to bring shells up from the deep and lay them out for the world to see.

At Mercy Hill, we do not pin the gathered church against the scattered church. Some think that Christians spend so much of their time gathering that they have no time to scatter out and reach the world. Now this is a legitimate concern. But many overreact in the other direction and start to spend so much of their time scattering that they lose the glow and shimmer that comes from spending time in worship with God's people.

Both extremes are problematic. We gather so that we can scatter—with renewed energy and zeal. We scatter so that we can gather—so that more and more people might come into the redeemed community of God.

We gather so that we can scatter—with renewed energy and zeal. We scatter so that we can gather—so that more and more people might come into the redeemed community of God.

Beyond this, we believe that the gathering is equally as missional as the scattering. We might be prone to think that the gatherings are where we really work out our Faith and Community, and the scattering is where we finally do Mission. But the Bible knows nothing of this disparity.

The gathered church is, in fact, a compelling witness to the power and validity of the gospel. It is the theater of God's glory, the showcase of a new humanity. What the unbelieving might not get from our tracts or gospel presentations, they just might get from witnessing our gatherings!

Read Acts 2:42-47. It was in light of the gathered church—their apostolic Faith, their radical, self-sacrificing Community—that they were given “favor with all the people. And the Lord added to their number day by day those who were being saved” (v. 47). Faith and Community worked out in the context of the gathered church is not at odds with the mission, it's a critical component of it!

Paul Himself assumes unbelievers will come into our gatherings. And he imagines some “falling on [their] face[s] . . . worship[ing] God and declar[ing] that God is really among [us]” (1 Cor 14:25).

John Bunyan describes how, before his conversion, he came upon a gathering of poor Christian women talking about the things of God: “I thought they spoke as if joy made them speak. They talked with such pleasantness of scriptural language and with such appearance of grace in all they said that they seemed to me as if they had found a new world.”³ Don't you want people to come in here and say that of us?

So we gather in our services, in our Home Groups, in our DNA Groups, in our prayer meetings; and we scatter into the city, into the neighborhoods, into the workplaces, into the grocery stores. We are not either/or on this issue. We are both/and. We gather and we scatter.

3. Strategic Activity: We Pray, Preach, Prune, and Persist

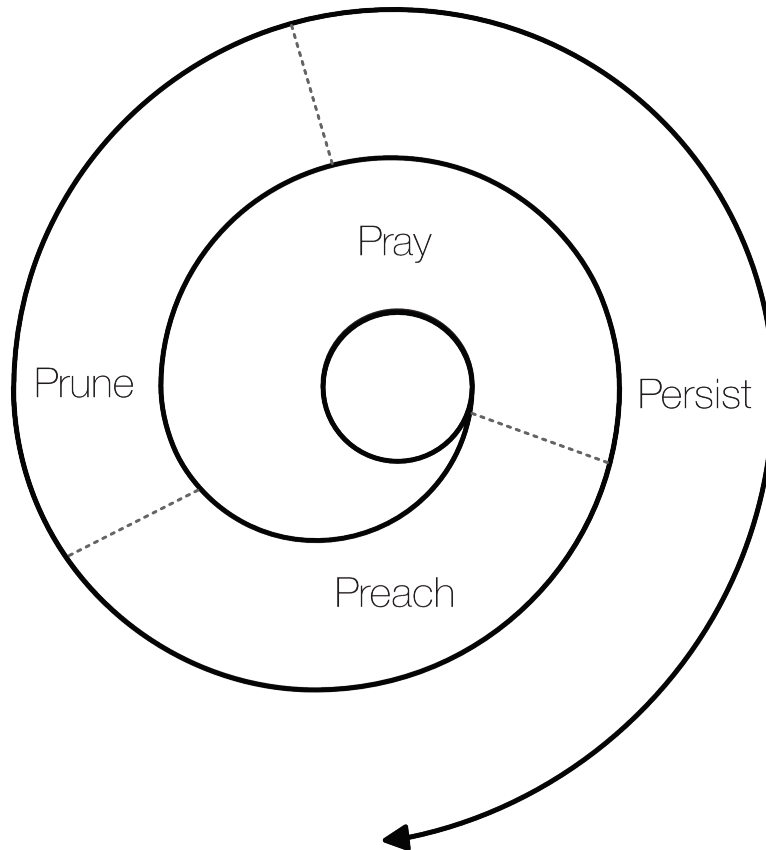
So many are scrambling these days, looking for new ways to grow the church. But we have to know that God cares infinitely more about church growth than we do. As such, He has not left the subject up to us. We do not need, nor should we dare, to reinvent what He has already laid down for us on the matter in His Word.

The book of Acts is concerned at a fundamental level with church-growth. It's grand thesis is Acts 1:8: “[Y]ou will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you, and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem and in all Judea

³ *Grace Abounding to the Chief of Sinners* (New Kensington, PA: Whitaker House, 1993), 25.

and Samaria, and to the end of the earth.” And the rest of the book is given over to detailing the unfolding fulfillment of this thesis. The gospel, the church, is growing.

While I would never claim that the book of Acts is a manual for church growth, I do think it identifies a dynamic, a strategic activity, that should not go ignored. It’s an activity that works out in four key steps: (1) We Pray; (2) We Preach; (3) We Prune; (4) We Persist.



Here is just one illustration of this from the book of Acts (though, really, this strategic activity appears again and again throughout the book).

1. We Pray

It’s interesting that, though Jesus says these disciples are going to be His witnesses even to the ends of the earth, His first order is that they “not . . . depart from Jerusalem, but . . . wait” (Acts 1:4). And after Jesus ascends and they are waiting in Jerusalem, what is it that they are doing? Praying: “All these with one accord were devoting themselves to prayer” (v. 14).

In a very real sense, growing the church, whether in quality or quantity, is not in a pastor’s (or any Christian’s) job description. That responsibility belongs to God alone: “I planted, Apollos watered, but God gave the growth” (1 Cor 3:6). If this is true, then, more important than any of our planting or watering, is our praying: “O God do what only You can do!” That’s why my (Nick) first move as pastor here was to start the Sunday evening prayer meeting. Prayer is the start of everything good.

2. We Preach

As they are praying and waiting, the Spirit of the risen Christ falls upon them. And what do they do? They preach: “Peter, standing with the eleven, lifted up his voice . . .” (Acts 2:14). He proclaims the gospel, and three thousand souls awaken from the dead.

Who cares what the modern world thinks of preaching. God says that it is His ordained means by which He calls this world full of Lazarus’ out of the tomb. So, God help us, as a church we will give ourselves to the preaching and ministering of His Word, whether we are gathered in our worship services or scattered throughout the city. For as the Word increases, so does the church (Acts 6:7; 12:24; 19:20).

3. We Prune

They Pray, they Preach, and thousands are added. The church begins to grow. The gospel takes root in the hearts of people and starts to bear fruit in their lives. By Acts 6, there’s so many people to take care of that the Apostles have to appoint others to help. They raise up new leaders and create new ministries around them. They develop systems and structure to support the growth and encourage the flourishing of the church’s members. In other words, as the church grows, they Prune it, to keep things going strong.

In this church, we want to Pray, we want to Preach, and then we want to sit back and watch how God stirs your heart. We want to see what kind of fruit crops up in your life. And then we want to tend the branches and help you flourish.

While we are unswervingly rigid on certain points of the ministry, we are actually quite flexible in our approach. Outside of the broad parameters we’re laying here with our mission and vision, our values, and our strategy, we don’t have the specifics worked out.

We know we want Faith, Community, and Mission. But who’s going to preach, what studies are we going to have, what events will we do to grow together, what kind of outreach should we get involved in? We might have things God puts on our hearts here or there, but we are trusting God to put things on your heart as well. We, the leaders of this church, see ourselves not only as *sources* of the church’s vision, but also as *stewards* of it. Meaning: yes, we will have ideas and vision for the church. But no, our opinions are not the only ones that matter. We want to see how and what God is moving in *you* and then equip and release *you* to do it!

4. We Persist

We minister in a fallen world. It’s going to be hard. After Acts 6 comes Acts 7, and the stoning of Stephen—the first martyr of the New Testament church. Now you might think that such a thing would cause the church to lose hope or give up. But instead they Persist.

It seems only to get stronger. For the great persecution that arises in all of this actually serves to help the church break those first barriers that Jesus mentioned (back in Acts 1:8): “[T]here arose on that day a great persecution against the church in Jerusalem, and they were all scattered throughout the regions of Judea and Samaria . . . [And] those who were scattered went about preaching the word” (8:1, 4).

I (Nick) can’t tell you how important this fourfold Strategic Activity has been for me throughout my time in ministry here. I get discouraged. I get tempted to turn to other methods. But then I come back to this: “Oh Nick! Don’t lose heart. Pray, Preach, Prune, and Persist! Stay the course for the long haul and let God do what only He can do. Let God bring the growth.”

I live in those words that the Apostle Paul wrote to Timothy: “Keep a close watch on yourself and on the teaching. Persist in this, for by so doing you will save both yourself and your hearers” (1 Tim 4:16).

Will you join me, will you join this church in executing this interlocking strategy? Will you make the gospel central? Will you gather and scatter? Will you partner with us in praying, preaching, pruning, and persisting? We so hope that you will!

Section III

Our Faith: How We Know and Love the Lord

"[F]or us there is one God, the Father, from whom are all things and for whom we exist, and one Lord, Jesus Christ, through whom are all things and through whom we exist"

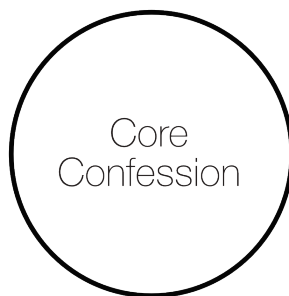
1 Corinthians 8:6

In this section of the Handbook, we will look more at our first of three values: Faith. In particular, we will look at: (1) Our Core Confession; and (2) Our Doctrinal Distinctives.

✦ For more on this value, see *Expansion 3: Faith—A Biblical Introduction to this Value*; and *Expansion 4: Faith—Our Passions that Flow from this Value*.

Our Core Confession

In Appendix 3 of this Handbook you will find what we call our Core Confession. This is Mercy Hill's statement of faith. It provides an index of core biblical teaching, all of which you would need to hold to in order to be a Covenant Member here. Many of the articles we would consider necessary for salvation. All of the articles we would consider necessary for spiritual health.



Our Core Confession has been adapted with some significant modification from the Southern Baptist Theological Seminary's Abstract of Principles. We modernized a bit of the language and modified a bit of the content.

If we could say a word about this modification. We actually modified the statement to be intentionally ambiguous regarding the secondary issues of the faith. We took out clear statements about God's sovereignty in salvation, about the proper administration of baptism, among other things. The goal was not to water down our church's positions on these secondary matters (as we'll see in our Doctrinal Distinctives), but to widen our church's doors so as to welcome into the membership of this local church more of those who seem to be genuine members in Christ's universal church.

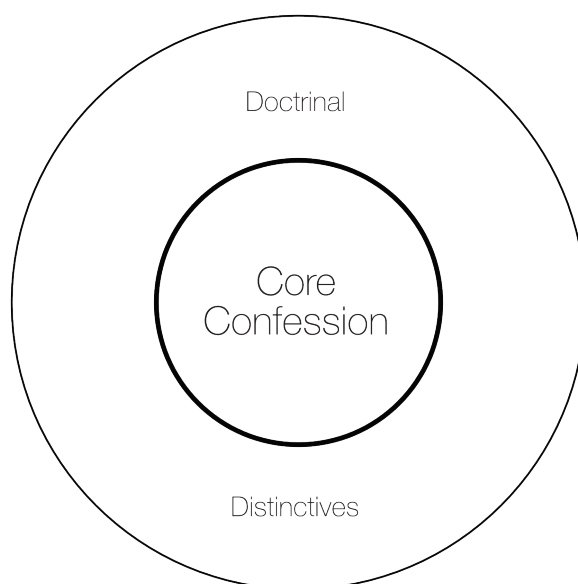
The goal was not to water down our church's positions on these secondary matters, but to widen our church's doors so as to welcome into the membership of this local church more of those who seem to be genuine members in Christ's universal church.

We also wanted to make space in our community for people to wrestle with these secondary matters. Yes, they believe that Jesus lived, died, rose again for their sins. But they might not yet understand the sovereign work of God in it all. It might take a while to see the Bible's teaching on this point. It certainly took most of us a while. As a church, we want people to be able to grow in their faith, and not frontload the whole index of our theology on every member.

It seems to us that this is how Jesus Himself approached His disciples. There were so many things that these guys didn't understand fully, or even rightly, about Him. But they had this going for them: they knew they needed a Savior, and they knew they wanted Him to be their Lord. Jesus could work with that. And so can we.

Our Doctrinal Distinctives

But from our Core Confession we press on into what we call our Doctrinal Distinctives. These Distinctives lay out our position on the more secondary matters and distinguish us from other churches and other Christians. Complete agreement here is not required for the sake of membership, but will be required for the sake of Eldership. So it should be known that we will preach, teach and counsel in accordance with these convictions.



Some churches and denominations would limit their theology and ministry to the Core Confession, to the lowest common denominator. They might claim that pressing into Doctrinal Distinctives is unnecessarily divisive and a hindrance to the church's witness before the world. After all, it is these secondary matters, these Doctrinal Distinctives, that in many ways have given rise to the myriad and ever-splintering Christian denominations that exist today.

But there is a significant problem with this from a pastoral perspective. It is our call from the Lord, to preach to you the whole counsel of God. How in the world do we do that and not address these secondary issues in some way? What do you do when you come to Romans 9 or 1 Corinthians 12? You teach on it. And, oftentimes, you'll need to land somewhere. If we don't make a decision about baptism—whether it's for infants or only believers—then what? For the sake of unity do we just start neglecting baptism altogether? If we don't make a decision about male and female design and roles in the church, then what? Who preaches? Who can become an Elder? On a lot of these issues you will need to land somewhere in order to function as a church. It doesn't mean you claim to have a monopoly on the truth, but it does mean you claim to have a conviction about it, and you are doing your best to be faithful to the full counsel of God.

A better way, in our opinion, has been forged by the Elders over at Bethlehem Baptist. This is how their Elder Affirmation of Faith ends:

We do not believe that all things in this affirmation of faith are of equal weight, some being more essential, some less. We do not believe that every part of this affirmation must be believed in order for one to be saved. Our aim is not to discover how little can be believed, but rather to embrace and teach—the whole counsel of God. Our aim is to encourage a hearty adherence to the Bible, the fullness of its truth, and the glory of its Author. We believe Biblical doctrine stabilizes saints in the winds of confusion and strengthens the church in her mission . . . We believe that the cause of unity in the church is best served, not by finding the lowest common denominator of doctrine, around which all can gather, but by elevating the value of truth, stating the doctrinal parameters . . . , seeking the unity that comes from the truth, and then demonstrating to the world how Christians can love each other across boundaries rather than by removing boundaries. In this way, the importance of truth is served by the existence of doctrinal borders, and unity is served by the way we love others across those borders.¹

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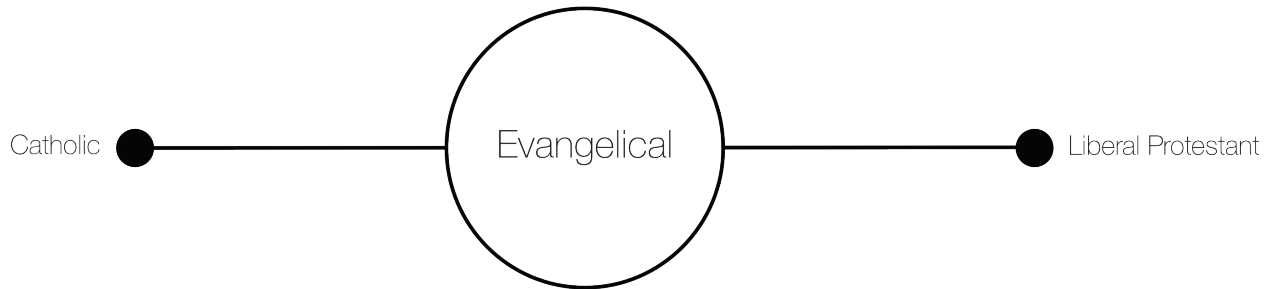
Draw your doctrinal boundaries, but cross over them in love! We're not lobbing grenades across the lines we've drawn but putting out the right hand of fellowship.

So what are Mercy Hill's Doctrinal Distinctives? Beginning with the most fundamental and moving out from there, we are: (1) Evangelical; (2) Reformed; (3) Continuationist; (4) Complementarian; and (5) Baptist in our theology.

¹ <http://www.desiringgod.org/articles/the-bethlehem-baptist-church-elder-affirmation-of-faith>.

If these words seem foreign or scary to you. Don't worry. We will try to spell them out one by one below. But, please remember, there is plenty of time and space to grow in an understanding of these things!

1. Evangelical



At the broadest level, we are Evangelicals. This really just serves to put a sharper point on all that our Core Confession maintains. By Evangelical we mean that we are not Catholic on the one hand—*adding to God's Word and gospel*; nor are we Liberal Protestants on the other hand—*taking away from God's Word and gospel*. We are Evangelical—*holding to the authority of God's Word and the centrality of the gospel*.

✦ For our conviction concerning the authority of God's Word, see *Expansion 5: The Chicago Statement on Biblical Inerrancy*.

For our conviction concerning the centrality of the gospel, consider the following statement (quoting the first distinctive of the Acts 29 Network):

We Are Passionate About Gospel Centrality

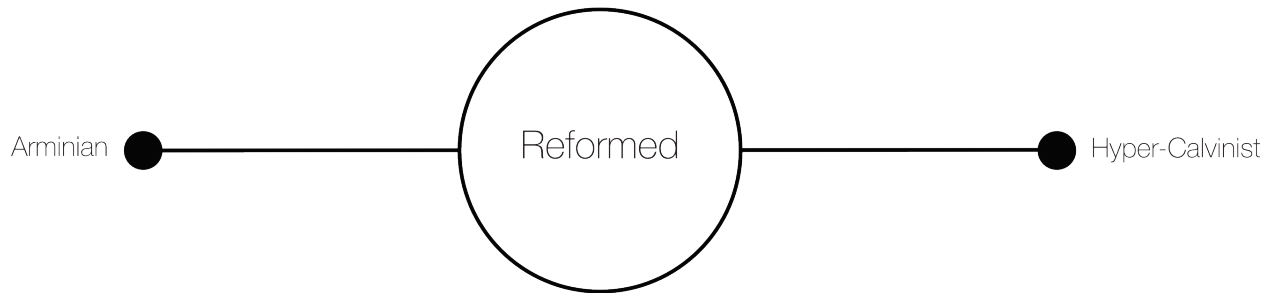
We believe the gospel is the good news of what God has graciously accomplished for sinners through the sinless life, sacrificial death, and bodily resurrection of his Son, our Savior, Jesus Christ, namely our forgiveness from sin and complete justification before God; this gospel is also the foundation for our confidence in the ultimate triumph of God's kingdom, and the consummation of his purpose for all creation in the new heavens and new earth.

This gospel is centered in Christ, is the foundation for the life of the Church, and is our only hope for eternal life; this gospel is not proclaimed if Christ's penal substitutionary death and bodily resurrection are not central to our message. This Gospel is not only the means by which people are saved, but also the truth and power by which people are sanctified; it is the truth of the Gospel that enables us to genuinely and joyfully do what is pleasing to God and to grow in progressive conformity to the image of Christ.

The salvation offered in this gospel message is received by grace alone, through faith alone, in Christ alone; no ordinance, ritual, work, or any other activity on the part of man is required in order to be saved.

Mark 1:1; Luke 24:46-47; John 3:16-18; Rom 1:16-17, 18-25; 1 Cor 1:18-25; 2:2; 15:1-4; 2 Cor 4:1-6; 9:13; Gal 1:6-9; Eph 1: 7-10; Col 1: 19-20; 2 Tim 1:8-14; 2 Pet 3: 11-13 Jude 3-4; Rev 21:1-22:21

2. Reformed



By Reformed we mean that we hold to a view of God, in general, and salvation, in particular, that was regained and clarified in the Reformation of the 16th century, especially by John Calvin.

In our understanding of salvation, we are not Arminian on the one hand—*man's will is decisive in his salvation*; nor hyper-Calvinist on the other hand—*man's will is irrelevant in his salvation*. We are Reformed—*God's will is decisive in determining our salvation but He works, in a mysterious way, not apart from our will, but in and through it*.

Consider, in summary of this, the following statement (quoting the second distinctive of the Acts 29 Network):

We Enthusiastically Embrace the Sovereignty of God's Grace in Saving Sinners

We affirm that God chose us in Christ before the foundation of the world, not on the basis of foreseen faith but unconditionally, according to his sovereign good pleasure and will.

We believe that through the work of the Holy Spirit, God will draw the elect to faith in his Son, our Lord Jesus Christ, graciously and effectually overcoming their stubborn resistance to the gospel so that they will most assuredly and willingly believe.

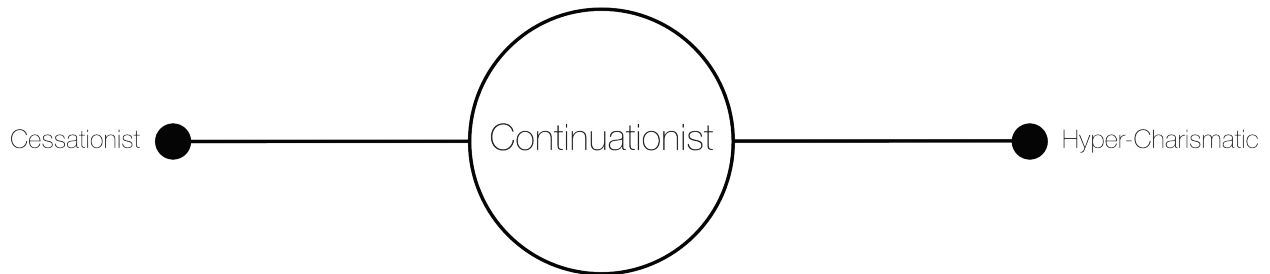
We also believe that these, the elect of God whom he gave to the Son, will persevere in belief and godly behavior and be kept secure in their salvation by grace through faith.

We believe that God's sovereignty in this salvation neither diminishes the responsibility of people to believe in Christ nor marginalizes the necessity and power of prayer and evangelism, but rather reinforces and establishes them as the ordained means by which God accomplishes his ordained ends.

John 1:12-13; 6:37-44; 10:25-30; Acts 13:48; 16:30-31; Rom 3:1-4:25; 8:1-17,31-39; 9:1-23; 10:8-10; Eph 1:4-5; 2:8-10; Phil 2:12-13; Titus 3:3-7; 1 John 1:7, 9

+ For more on our Reformed understanding of salvation, see *Expansion 6: TULIP*.

3. Continuationist



By Continuationist we mean that, with regard to spiritual gifts, we are not Cessationist on the one hand—*certain/all miraculous gifts have ceased*; nor are we hyper-Charismatic on the other hand—*the miraculous gifts are all operating in the same way today as they were in the apostolic age*. We are Continuationist—*the miraculous gifts have continued into the modern age, but are now subordinated to the apostolic deposit of Holy Scripture*.

Consider the following statement (quoting the third distinctive of the Acts 29 Network):

**We Recognize and Rest Upon the Necessity of the Empowering Presence
of the Holy Spirit for All of Life and Ministry**

The Holy Spirit is fully God, equal with the Father and Son, whose primary ministry is to glorify the Lord Jesus Christ; he also convicts unbelievers of their need for Christ and imparts spiritual life through regeneration (the new birth).

The Spirit permanently indwells, graciously sanctifies, lovingly leads, and empowers all who are brought to faith in Christ so that they might live in obedience to the inerrant Scriptures.

The model for our reliance upon the Spirit and our experience of his indwelling and empowering presence is the Lord Jesus Christ himself who was filled with the Spirit and entirely dependent upon his power for the performance of miracles, the preaching of the kingdom of God, and all other dimensions of his earthly ministry.

The Holy Spirit who indwelt and empowered Christ in like manner indwells and empowers us through spiritual gifts he has bestowed for the work of ministry and the building up of the body of Christ. Although there are different understandings in our network of the nature and function of these gifts, we all recognize that they are divine provisions central to spiritual growth and effective ministry and are to be eagerly desired, faithfully developed, and lovingly exercised according to biblical guidelines.

Matt 3:11; 12:28; Luke 4:1, 14; 5:17; 10:21; John 1:12-13; 3:1-15, 34; 14:12; 15:26-27; 16:7-15; Acts 2:14-21; 4:29-30; 10:38; Rom 8:9; 12:3-8; 1 Cor 12:7-13; 12:28-31; 14:1-33; 2 Cor 1:21-22; Gal 3:1-5; Eph 1:13-14; 5:18

✦ To learn about where we stand as to “the nature and function of these gifts,” see *Expansion 7: A Case for Continuationism*.

4. Complementarian



By Complementarian we mean that, with regard to manhood and womanhood, we are not Egalitarian on the one hand—*men and women are equal in every way without distinction*; nor are we misogynist on the other hand—*men are superior to women in every way without exception*. We are Complementarian—*men and women are equal in value and dignity, yet distinct in design and role*.

Consider the following statement (quoting the fourth distinctive of the Acts 29 Network):

We Are Deeply Committed to the Fundamental Spiritual and Moral Equality of Male and Female and to Men as Responsible Servant-Leaders in the Home and Church.

Both men and women are together created in the divine image and are therefore equal before God as persons, possessing the same moral dignity and value, and have equal access to God through faith in Christ. Men and women are together the recipients of spiritual gifts designed to empower them for ministry in the local church and beyond. Therefore, women are to be encouraged, equipped, and empowered to utilize their gifting in ministry, in service to the body of Christ, and through teaching in ways that are consistent with the Word of God.

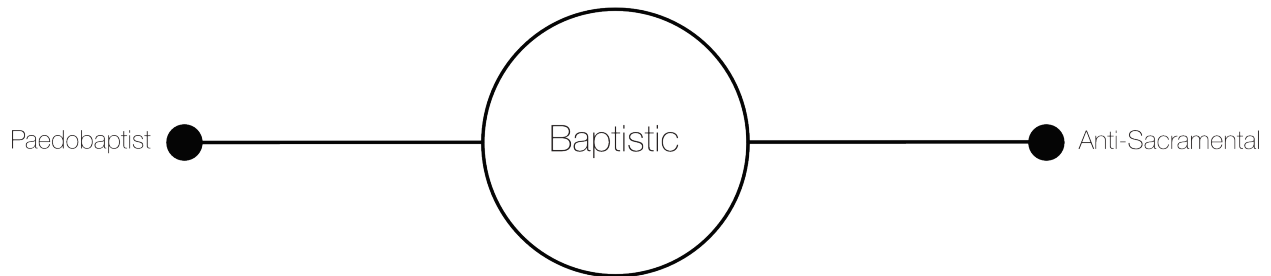
Both husbands and wives are responsible to God for spiritual nurture and vitality in the home, but God has given to the man primary responsibility to lead his wife and family in accordance with the servant-leadership and sacrificial love characterized by Jesus Christ. This principle of male headship should not be confused with, nor give any hint of, domineering control. Rather, it is to be the loving, tender and nurturing care of a godly man who is himself under the kind and gentle authority of Jesus Christ.

The Elders/Pastors of each local church have been granted authority under the headship of Jesus Christ to provide oversight and to teach/preach the Word of God in corporate assembly for the building up of the body. The office of Elder/Pastor is restricted to men.

Gen 1:26-27; 2:18; Acts 18:24-26; 1 Cor 11:2-16; Gal 3:28; Eph 5:22-33; Col 3:18-19; 1 Tim 2:11-15; 3:1-7; Titus 2:3-5; 1 Pet 3:1-7

✦ For more on our Complementarian convictions, see *Expansion 8: The Danvers Statement*.

5. Baptistic



By Baptistic, we mean that, with regard to the ordinance of baptism, we are not paedobaptist on the one hand—*baptism is a covenant sign for infants*; nor are we anti-sacramental on the other hand—*baptism isn't all that important either way*. We are Baptistic—*baptism is for believers upon their profession of faith as a sign of their union with Christ in His life, death, and resurrection*.

Consider the following statement (quoted from the 29th Chapter of The 1689 London Baptist Confession of Faith):

Baptism

Baptism is an ordinance of the New Testament, ordained by Jesus Christ. To those baptized it is a sign of their fellowship with him in his death and resurrection, of their being grafted into him, of remission of sins, and of submitting themselves to God through Jesus Christ to live and walk in newness of life.

Those who personally profess repentance toward God and faith in and obedience to our Lord Jesus Christ are the only proper subjects of this ordinance.

The outward element to be used in this ordinance is water, in which the individual is to be baptized in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit.

Immersion, or dipping of the person in water, is necessary for this ordinance to be administered properly.

Matt 3:16; 28:19, 20; Mark 1:4; 16:16; John 3:23; Acts 2:41; 8:12, 36-38; 18:8; 22:16; Rom 6:3-5; Gal 3:27; Col 2:12

Section IV

Our Community: How We Know and Love the Church

So then you are no longer strangers and aliens, but you are fellow citizens with the saints and members of the household of God.

Ephesians 2:11–19

In this section of the Handbook, we will look more at our second of three values: Community. In particular, we will look at: (1) Our Leadership; (2) Our Gatherings; and (3) Our Relational Commitments as a church.

✦ For more on this value, see *Expansion 9: Community—A Biblical Introduction to this Value*; and *Expansion 10: Community—Our Passions that Flow from this Value*.

Our Leadership

Leadership for the Sake of the Membership

When we talk about our leadership in this church, let's be clear: we are not talking about those who are better than others—for the ground is level at the foot of the cross; nor are we talking about those who are more important than others—for every member is gifted and called to play a vital role in Christ's body. But, nevertheless, because God cares for the church, He provides her with structure, authority, and leadership.

God cares not only for *ardor* in the church—that the spiritual gifts are being passionately pursued and exercised; He cares also for *order*—that the spiritual gifts are being used in an appropriate way (1 Cor 14:40).

God cares not only for the *organism* of the church—that, like a body, every member is doing its part; He cares also for the *organization* of the church—that, like a body, there is a skeletal structure designed to support and undergird the organic life.

God promotes *order* for the sake of *ardor*. He promotes *organization* for the sake of the *organism*. He establishes *leadership* for the sake of the *membership*.

Jesus, the Elder, and the Deacon

Any discussion of authority in the church has to start with Jesus. He is the Head (Col 1:18), the Cornerstone (Eph 2:20), the Chief Shepherd (1 Pet 5:4). All authority we are given in the church is derived from Him.

That said, it would seem from the Scriptures that Jesus has given the church two perpetual offices: namely, that of the Elder and the Deacon. Therefore, these are the two types of official leadership that we recognize here at Mercy Hill.

We define the two offices as follows:

- *Elders are under-shepherds of Christ, appointed by the Holy Spirit, through the church, to serve by leading, especially in the ministry of gospel word.*
- *Deacons are assistants to the Elders, appointed by the Holy Spirit, through the church, to lead by serving, especially in the ministry of gospel deed.*

Together Elders and Deacons represent Christ's ongoing and comprehensive care for the church and world.

We believe that the church is to be led, in particular, by a plurality of male Elders whom have been recognized and appointed to such a task by all her members. Though these Elders exercise authority in the church, they do so in a manner that in no way diminishes or disregards the inherent dignity and authority that still resides within every member by virtue of their union with Christ.

For a clearer sense of how the authority of Elders works together with the authority we believe still resides within every member, see Appendix 1 (esp. the discussion regarding “the Keys of the Kingdom”).

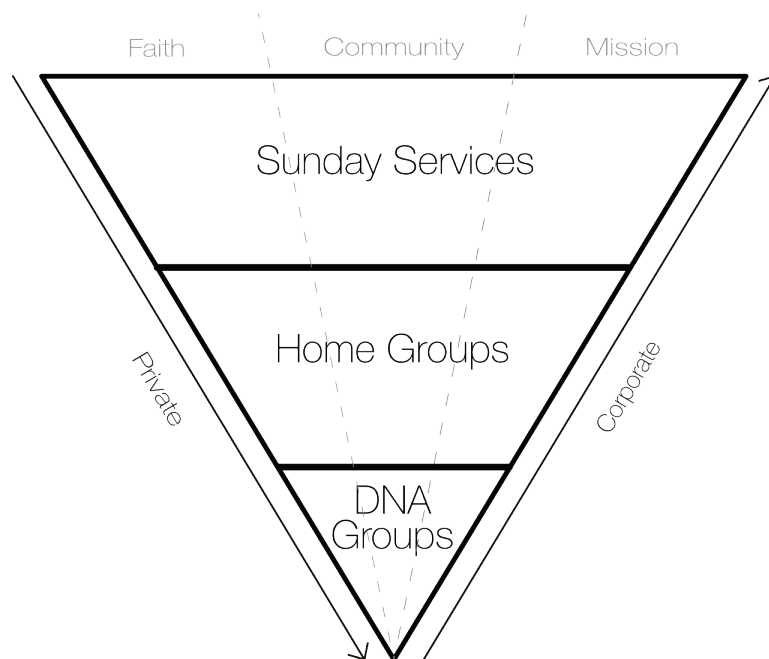
- + For a more detailed explanation of these two offices, see *Expansion 11: Elders and Deacons: Origin, Function, and Definition*.
- + We believe that the Scriptures restrict the office of Elder to men but open the office of Deacon to both sexes. For more on this, see *Expansion 12: Women and Church Leadership*.

Our Gatherings

The 20/20 Vision

As we begin now to consider our gatherings as a church, allow us to direct you to what we've called The 20/20 Vision. You'll find that vision laid out in Appendix 4, and we would encourage you to read it. But, in short, drawing from Acts 20:20, we simply make the claim that if we are to see and show Christ rightly (with 20/20 vision), we must be meeting in both large gatherings and small groups. The largest gathering we have is the Sunday Service. And our standard small groups are the Home Group and, diving down even deeper, the DNA Group.

In the diagram below, you can see how at every level we are pursuing our values of Faith, Community, and Mission as a church, but we do so in different and equally vital ways.



Sunday Services

Initially, it seems the early Christians gathered formally for worship on the last day of the week, Saturday (the Sabbath) with the Jews in the temple and synagogues. But as it became clear that the Jews were rejecting their Messiah and that the Christians were now a distinguished religious people, “Christians” (Acts 11:26), they began meeting on Sunday, the first day of the week, the day of Jesus’ resurrection, appropriately called “the Lord’s Day” (Rev 1:10; cf. Acts 20:7; 1 Cor 16:2).

Jesus’ resurrection on this first day of the week initiated a new creation, with a new humanity and, hence, a new day of worship!

It seems people are prone to neglect or downplay the Sunday gatherings because they don’t quite get what’s going on. For some it’s just another event on the calendar. And if something better comes up, well, there’s always next week. “I mean, really, what’s the point? We just get together and talk about the same basic thing and sing the same basic songs.”

The author of Hebrews comes in to help us at this point. Hebrews 10 begins with a discussion of Christ’s high priestly work in offering a full and final sacrifice for our sins (vv. 1-14). Then it moves to a discussion of the New Covenant Christ has made with us in His blood (vv. 15-18).

And then in vv. 19-25, the author begins to draw out implications for the covenant community, the local church. And with these implications he gives us a breathtaking vision for the local church in general, and the Sunday Service in particular:

Therefore, brothers, since we have confidence to enter the holy places by the blood of Jesus, by the new and living way that he opened for us through the curtain, that is, through his flesh, and since we have a great priest over the house of God, let us draw near with a true heart in full assurance of faith, with our hearts sprinkled clean from an evil conscience and our bodies washed with pure water. Let us hold fast the confession of our hope without wavering, for he who promised is faithful. And let us consider how to

stir up one another to love and good works, not neglecting to meet together, as is the habit of some, but encouraging one another, and all the more as you see the Day drawing near.

In light of Christ's work on the cross for us, the author calls us to three "let-us"s—three things we ought to do when we meet together.

1. First, when we meet together: "*let us draw near*" to God (v. 22). We gather together and we rush the throne of grace. Coming together is ultimately about coming into God's presence!
2. Second, when we meet together: "*let us hold fast the confession of our hope without wavering*" (v. 23). We encourage one another to keep holding onto the One who is holding onto us. Hearts can drift into doubt and denial. And we're here to hold up each other's arms.
3. Third, when we meet together: "*let us consider how to stir up one another to love and good works*" (v. 24). Hearts can grow cold and embittered, lazy and apathetic. And we're here to stir one another up.

And he closes with a final plea: "[Do] not [neglect] to meet together, as is the habit of some, but [encourage] one another, and all the more as you see the Day drawing near" (v. 25).

You're going to need one another in the days ahead. Your faith will be tested. Trials will come. If you're not gathering with the Saints, you're not going to make it. The world, the flesh, and the Devil are doing everything they can to keep your eyes off the coming Day and fixate them on the here and now. "Eat, drink, and be merry. Get your revenge. Indulge your lusts. Live it up." But we come in here and we say, "No way! Let's rush the throne. Let's hold fast the confession. Let's stir each other up. And let's keep waiting for that Day that is drawing near!"

Consider the words of Charles Spurgeon at this point:

One day a young man came to visit [Spurgeon] and said to [him], "I can be a Christian without the church; I don't need others." They were sitting in the lounge by an open fire and Spurgeon picked up some tongs, took a coal from the blazing fire and placed it on the hearth. They continued talking and after a while, Spurgeon said, "Look down at the hearth. What happened to the coal I took out of the fire?" The young man answered, "Well, it's become black. It's lost its heat and its flame." Spurgeon replied, "Young man, that's why you need to be part of the church, because it is only together we are stimulated and together that we grow. But like this coal taken out of the fire, on its own it dies out. But in the heat of the fire all the other coals are stimulating it to go on glowing and give off heat."¹

When we gather on Sundays, we are helping one another burn! O church, let's not neglect to meet together, as is the habit of some! It is not good that man should be alone. But "[b]ehold, how good and pleasant it is when brothers [and sisters] dwell [together] in unity"! (Psa 133:1).

Home Groups

Moving towards smaller groups at Mercy Hill, let's consider Home Groups for a moment. In the application I (Nick) filled out to apply for the pastorate here, I was asked to describe my understanding of Home Groups. I still today stand behind what I wrote back then:

Small groups are a central component to what I would term my 20/20 vision for the church. This vision comes from Acts 20:20 where Paul states that he taught the Ephesian saints the word of God both "in public and from house to house." So his pastoral practice, it seems, included both large gatherings and small groups. Upon consideration we can see how critical such small groups are for all ministry fronts—*upward* (to God), *inward* (to fellow believers), and *outward* (to the unbelieving world). Regarding the

¹ <http://www.livingtruthus.com/devotional.asp?date=12/7/2014>.

upper front, small groups give people a chance to digest, question, meditate on, and personalize the word of God. Opportunity is given for the church to act as Bereans and examine the Scriptures for themselves (Acts 17:11). Regarding the inner front, small groups provide the primary context in which the church can live out the “one-anothering” spoken of in the New Testament (i.e. Rom 12:9-18). Here is where we can truly get to know and love other saints and where we can be truly known and loved ourselves. Finally, regarding the outer front, small groups should serve as “missional communities,” strategically located in neighborhoods not to be dams of God’s grace but estuaries—places where the ocean of God’s love meets the parched riverbeds of this world. Small groups are the arms of the church, reaching into the neighborhoods. They can also serve as wonderful places to raise up young leaders and as potential seedbeds for future church plants.

In short, Home Groups are the place where our values of Faith, Community, and Mission gain traction in the everyday. We strongly encourage you to take a tour of our various Home Groups and commit to one as God leads!

DNA Groups

If Home Groups are the place where these things start to gain traction in our lives, DNA Groups press down for even more. They create space for us to get personal and specific. How is my Faith really doing? Am I really living in Community or am I running away, harboring bitterness, etc.? What would it look like for me to really be on Mission with Jesus in my home, my neighborhood, my office, etc.?

We define DNA Groups as follows:

A DNA Group is a smaller group of committed people who meet on a consistent basis to Discover, Nurture, and Apply Christ together until He is all in all.²

DNA Groups are essential to our understanding of discipleship at Mercy Hill. In fact, we define discipleship in virtually the same way.³ When you think about it, as Jesus set out to make disciples, He was really just calling people to follow Him (Discover), trust Him (Nurture), and obey Him (Apply). And in this they would come to look more and more like Him. Discipleship was a critical part of His plan to recode our genetics and renew us in His image.

But then He left. Well, not really. But we no longer see Him with our physical eyes. Instead He has given us His Spirit, and He calls us to follow Him together. We too are to make disciples, though not ultimately of ourselves, but of Him: “Go therefore and make disciples of all nations . . . , teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you” (Matt 28:19–20). DNA Groups exist for this very purpose.

The Resource Wheel

If you are looking for good resources to read on your own or (especially) with others in a DNA Group-like setting, we’ve created what we call the Resource Wheel (see Appendix 5). This Resource Wheel guides you first through what we consider to be the fundamentals of Christian doctrine and life and then proceeds from there to help you get a better grasp of our core values: Faith, Community, and Mission.

² DNA Groups are usually kept much smaller than Home Groups (and can even be composed of just two people meeting one-on-one). They are, therefore, more versatile and intimate.

³ We define discipleship as “the process of Discovering, Nurturing, and Applying Christ together until He is all in all.”

Our Relational Commitments

Please refer to Appendix 6 to read up on Our Relational Commitments as a church. These Commitments cover important relational issues, such as peacemaking and reconciliation, marriage and divorce, protecting children from abuse, counseling, confidentiality, and mutual accountability.

Section V

Our Mission: How We Know and Love the World

*Therefore, we are ambassadors for Christ, God making his appeal through us.
We implore you on behalf of Christ, be reconciled to God.*

2 Corinthians 5:11a, 14–21

In this section of the Handbook, we will draw things to a close by looking quickly at our third of three values: Mission.

✦ For more on this value, see *Expansion 13: Mission—A Biblical Introduction to this Value*; and *Expansion 14: Mission—Our Passions that Flow from this Value*.

Local and Global

We are those who have been reconciled to Christ and called back into the joy of partnering with Him in His mission to redeem the world. This mission is at once local and global. It begins in our city—in our neighborhoods and offices, in our corner stores and town squares—but it is not finished until the gospel has been carried unto the ends of the earth (Acts 1:8).

So with the world in our hearts, we begin in this place.

Time, Talent, and Treasure

As a way of bringing to a close all that we have said throughout this Handbook, we invite you now to join us in this mission by committing yourself to God with your *time*, *talent*, and *treasure*. When we come under God as the Lord of our lives, when we come into the rush of His mission, we simply give back to Him all that was His in the first place.

1. Time

Regarding *time*, He is the Alpha and Omega. And He has numbered our days. Each day is a gift from Him and provides an opportunity for us to give it back to Him in love. We do this by giving our time to Him in devotion, prayer, and worship; by giving our time to gather with His people; and by giving our time to the neighbor and the stranger, the unbelieving and the lost.

2. Talent

Regarding *talent*, He is one who knit us in our mother's womb. He is the One who has given us both our native abilities and spiritual gifts. He is the One who has engineered our circumstances and given us the history,

experiences, and skill sets that we now have. All of these things are gifts from Him and provide opportunity for us to give them back to Him in love. We do this by using our talents not for the building of Babel towers but for the building of tabernacles and temples; by using them for the building up of His body in love; and by using them for the common good of neighbor in an effort to see them too come under the loving lordship of Christ.

3. Treasure

Regarding *treasure*, He owns the cattle on a thousand hills. There is nothing that we can give back to Him that He has not already freely given to us (Rom 11:35). It is utterly impossible to out-give God. All of our possessions are gifts from Him and provide opportunity for us to give them back to Him in love. We do this by counting our treasure as nothing compared to the surpassing value of knowing Christ; by giving generously and cheerfully to support the church's worship and work; and by giving freely to the unbelieving in hopes that they too will see that a man's life does not consist in the abundance of his possessions (Luke 12:15).

✦ For more on "tithing" in the local church, see *Expansion 15: Toward the Tithe and Beyond*.

Conclusion

Thank you for making your way through this Handbook! We pray that you might seriously consider covenanting with us as we seek to know and love the Lord, the church, and the world. What a joy it would be to have you join us!

At this point, please refer back to the Checklist to find next steps.

Membership in a Body

It is important to note at the start that the church does not get her language of “membership” from secular culture but from 1 Corinthians 12. Listen to Paul, as he writes to the local church in Corinth:

- “For just as the body is one and has many *members*, and all the *members* of the body, though many, are one body, so it is with Christ. For in one Spirit we were all baptized into one body...” (v. 12-13a).
- “If all were a single *member*, where would the body be? As it is, there are many *members*, yet one body” (vv. 19-20).
- “Now you are the body of Christ and individually *members* of it” (v. 27).

Paul here moves our discussion of membership away from the more familiar arenas of membership in a club or voluntary society and directs us, rather, towards membership in a body: namely, Christ's body. Membership in the church, then, is not like membership with the YMCA, or the library, or a political party. It is membership in the body of Christ.¹

Two Implications

As we consider this “body image” that Paul gives us, two important implications follow:

1. Every Member Matters

In a body, each member, however big or small, strong or weak, visible or hidden, presentable or unpresentable, is critical to the proper functioning of the whole. Every member matters. This image, then, guards the church and her members from two debilitating errors:

1. *Spiritual Despair*—There are some members who might feel they have no role to play at all in the church. They have not the maturity, the cleverness, the skill of the others. They are base, low, and weak. But listen to how Paul uses the church's body image to move against the struggle of spiritual despair:

If the foot should say, “Because I am not a hand, I do not belong to the body,” that would not make it any less a part of the body. And if the ear should say, “Because I am not an eye, I do not belong to the body,” that would not make it any less a part of the body. If the whole body were an eye, where would be the sense of hearing? If the whole body were an ear, where would be the sense of smell? But as it is, God arranged the members in the body, each one of them, as he chose. If all were a single member, where would the body be? As it is, there are many parts, yet one body. (1 Cor 12:15–20)

Here the church's body image encourages the despairing member to take heart. The same Spirit that energizes the hand energizes the foot. The same Spirit that energizes the eye energizes the ear. As Paul would say elsewhere: “There is one body and one Spirit—just as you were called to the one hope that belongs to your call—one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all, who is over all and through all and in all” (Eph 4:4–6).²

In light of this *unity*, every member has *dignity*.

¹ Cf. 1 Cor 6:15; Eph 5:30

² Cf. Rom 12:4-5

2. *Spiritual Pride*—But Paul continues his use of the church’s body image in 1 Corinthians 12 to combat a second error: spiritual pride. While some members might be prone to think they are less important to Christ’s church, other members might be tempted to think they are more important. Listen to Paul address this:

The eye cannot say to the hand, “I have no need of you,” nor again the head to the feet, “I have no need of you.” On the contrary, the parts of the body that seem to be weaker are indispensable, and on those parts of the body that we think less honorable we bestow the greater honor, and our unpresentable parts are treated with greater modesty, which our more presentable parts do not require. But God has so composed the body, giving greater honor to the part that lacked it, that there may be no division in the body, but that the members may have the same care for one another. If one member suffers, all suffer together; if one member is honored, all rejoice together. Now you are the body of Christ and individually members of it. (1 Cor 12:21–27)

Here those of particular maturity and gifting are reminded that they are no better than the others and, indeed, even have need of the others. Wherever we find ourselves in the church—whether Elders or new believers, teachers or chair-stackers—we all have need of each other.³ Indeed, “we are members of one another” (Eph 4:25).

In light of this *unity*, every member has dignity. But even more, in light of this unity, every member is critical for the church’s *vitality*. If you decide you are either not good enough or too good for us, we don’t merely lose a member of our “club,” we lose a limb, an eye, an organ. We lose vitality.

2. Our Unity Is His Visibility

A second most important implication that emerges from the church’s body image is this: the church’s *unity* is Christ’s *visibility*. Calling the church *Christ’s* body makes us His physical, visible representation on earth. While His physical body is in heaven at the right hand of the Father, His Spirit is poured out upon and animates the church. If we want to know what Christ looks like, all we should have to do is look at His church, His body. When we are united, with each member dignified and vitally connected to the others, Christ is seen in all His glory—by us, by the world, and even by the spiritual beings!⁴

Unity, dignity, vitality...*visibility*!

Sadly, the church’s disunity does not reduce Christ’s visibility, it only distorts and disfigures it. Those who bear Christ’s name but walk not by His Spirit give everyone looking in wrong ideas about Him.⁵ If I live apart from the body, whether from spiritual despair or spiritual pride, I can’t possibly get for myself or give to the world the full picture of who Christ is. Such a vision of Christ is only seen when every member of the body is united. Again, our unity is His visibility!

Making Visible Christ’s Personality, Ministry, and Authority

If the church, as the body of Christ, is His visible representation on earth, it makes sense to ask: what of Him are we actually making visible? Christ’s visibility in and through the church, it seems to me, can be traced along three lines: His *personality*, His *ministry*, and His *authority*.

Every member is indwelt by Christ’s Spirit and therein is given some sense of His personality (the fruits of the Spirit), ministry (the gifts of the spirit), and authority (the keys of the kingdom). But no individual member represents the fullness of this. It is only as we come together in one body that the fullness of Christ’s personality, ministry, and authority are seen. Again, our unity is His visibility!

³ Cf. Rom 12:3; 1 Cor 4:7

⁴ Eph 3:10; 1 Cor 4:9

⁵ Cf. Rom 2:24

1. Christ's Personality (the Fruits of the Spirit)

Christ's Spirit in us is like sap flowing from the vine to the extremity of its branches. As Christ told His disciples: "I am the Vine; you are the branches. Whoever abides in Me and I in him, he it is that bears much fruit, for apart from Me you can do nothing" (John 15:5). While this "fruit" can be summed up in a single word—"love" (John 15:12⁶—its many varieties are itemized by Paul in Galatians 5:22-23a: "But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control." What do these various fruits remind us of but the very heart and personality of our Lord?! He is their essential expression, and by His Spirit, He causes them to blossom in the garden of His church.

Most of these fruits are relational in their expression: I love *you*, I am patient with *you*, I am kind towards *you*, I am faithful towards *you*, I am gentle with *you*, etc. *You* are required for these fruits to be seen in *me*. Hence, again, it is especially in light of our unity as His body that His personality becomes visible.

2. Christ's Ministry (the Gifts of the Spirit)

Christ's Spirit in us does not only conform us to His personality, it also empowers us to continue His ministry. When Luke refers to his gospel as "all that Jesus began to do and teach" (Acts 1:1), he therein implies that the book of Acts would be all that Jesus was continuing to do and teach, only now by His Spirit in and through the church. Christ's ministry and mission continues by His Spirit through the church! Each believer receives some measure or portion of Christ's power as a gift to be used in ministry for the sake of His glory being seen in the church and world.⁷

While there are many texts that deal with this,⁸ perhaps the most comprehensive statement is found in 1 Peter 4:10-11: "As each has received a gift, use it to serve one another, as good stewards of God's varied grace: whoever speaks, as one who speaks oracles of God; whoever serves, as one who serves by the strength that God supplies—in order that in everything God may be glorified through Jesus Christ. To him belong glory and dominion forever and ever. Amen." In all are stewarding of God's varied grace, whether in word or deed, it is not us but Christ who is seen!

Given the nature of these gifts of His Spirit, that we each only have a given measure or portion, it is yet again important to point out that it is only in the context of the united church that Christ's full-orbed ministry can be seen functioning in its fullest expression. We need one another for His mission to advance!

3. Christ's Authority (the Keys of the Kingdom)

Amazingly, the church is not only given by Christ a sense of His personality and ministry, it is also given His authority. This is most clearly seen in the scriptural image of the keys of the kingdom. These keys represent the authority to open and close the door to the kingdom of God. Before the keys of the kingdom are ever anyone else's, they are first Christ's.⁹ But, in His grace and by His Spirit,¹⁰ He entrusts them to His church. They are to be stewarded under the authority of His heavenly kingship as we serve as His vicegerents on the earth.¹¹ They are first given with reference to Peter,¹² but are then clearly mentioned with reference to the rest of the disciples,¹³ and even the church at large!¹⁴

⁶ Cf. 1 Cor 13

⁷ Rom 12:3; 1 Cor 12:11; Eph 4:7

⁸ Rom 12:6-8; 1 Cor 12:4-11; 28; Eph 4:11-12

⁹ Rev 1:18; 3:7; cf. Isa 22:22

¹⁰ John 20:22; 1 Cor 5:4

¹¹ 1 Pet 2:9; cf. Rev 22:5

¹² Matt 16:19

¹³ John 20:23

¹⁴ Matt 18:18; 1 Cor 5:3-5; 6:2-3 (where the saints, not just the Apostles or Elders, will judge the world and even angels!); 2 Cor 2:10

Again, it is important to emphasize that this authority is not wielded by a single member but to be exercised as the church comes together. Consider the last stage in church discipline as described in Matthew 18: “Tell it to the church” (v. 17). Here the case has risen to the highest court, and who’s involved? Not one leader, but all members. As Jesus would go on to say: “Where *two or three* are gathered in my name, there am I among them” (v. 19). It is only as we unite together that the authority of Christ functions properly in the church.

Now, an extra word is in order here lest there be misunderstanding. While the church at large holds the keys (and, with them, the broader delegated authority of Christ), she appoints by the Spirit some¹⁵ to lead in a more official capacity.¹⁶ But in this appointment, she never loses her inherent dignity and authority in Christ. Therefore, though she puts certain officers at the helm of the church, it is important that these officers continue to recognize the role the church at large has to play in the ongoing mission and ministry.

Indeed, we see the church in the New Testament exercising her authority in this more corporate manner (where, not just leaders, but every member is to be involved) with regard to certain critical decisions:

- Installing/uninstalling church officers.¹⁷
- Welcoming/excommunicating church members.¹⁸
- Discretionals—Other decisions of critical importance brought to the church at the discretion of the Elders.¹⁹
- Appeals—The congregation may at times appeal decisions made by the officers if enough members are concerned.²⁰

If we are to be a church that truly stewards the keys and authority of Christ responsibly we must hold together both the church’s *official* and *congregational* authority with great care and concern. Only then will we display for the world, not the mere baseness of man’s authority, but the sublimity of Christ’s!

May we all join together, then, as vital members of Christ’s body so that, in our unity, we might give Him even more glorious visibility!

¹⁵ The two offices mentioned along these lines in the New Testament are those of Elder and Deacon.

¹⁶ Acts 6:3; 14:23; 15:2-3, 22; 2 Cor 8:19; Titus 1:5

¹⁷ For installing see footnote 16. Uninstalling can be inferred from Gal 1:8, 1 Tim 5:19; 2 Tim 4:3; Jude 3-4.

¹⁸ 2 Cor 2:5-11; Matt 18:15-17; 1 Cor 5. Consider also that welcoming/excommunicating is inferred by the church’s use of the keys of the kingdom.

¹⁹ Acts 15:1-29

²⁰ The ability for the church to bring accusation against and even uninstall church officers implies the need for an appeals process of some sort.

Acts 29

From their website:

Acts 29 is a family of church-planting churches that stands in the tradition of historic evangelical confessionalism. While we believe it is vital that the Elders of each of our local churches determine where they stand on doctrines of second importance, we do wish to make known our convictions on the following five distinctive theological foundations:

1. We are passionate about gospel centrality.
2. We enthusiastically embrace the sovereignty of God's grace in saving sinners.
3. We recognize and rest upon the necessity of the empowering presence of the Holy Spirit for all of life and ministry.
4. We are deeply committed to the fundamental spiritual and moral equality of male and female and to men as responsible servant-leaders in the home and church.
5. We embrace a missionary understanding of the local church and its role as the primary means by which God chooses to establish his kingdom on earth.

For more please visit acts29.com.

The Gospel Coalition

From their website:

As a broadly Reformed network of churches, The Gospel Coalition encourages and educates current and next-generation Christian leaders by advocating gospel-centered principles and practices that glorify the Savior and do good to those for whom he shed his life's blood. A biblically grounded and united mission is the only enduring future for the church. We desire to champion the gospel of Jesus Christ with clarity, compassion, courage, and joy—gladly linking hearts with fellow believers across denominational, ethnic, and class lines. We invite all Christians to join us in an effort to renew the contemporary church in the ancient gospel of Christ so that we truly speak and live for him in a way that clearly communicates to our age.

For more please visit thegospelcoalition.org.

9Marks

From their website:

9Marks exists to equip church leaders with a biblical vision and practical resources for displaying God's glory to the nations through healthy churches. To that end, we want to see churches characterized by these nine marks of health:

- | | | |
|---------------------|--------------|----------------|
| 1 Preaching | 4 Conversion | 7 Discipline |
| 2 Biblical Theology | 5 Evangelism | 8 Discipleship |
| 3 The Gospel | 6 Membership | 9 Leadership |

For more please visit 9marks.org.

I. The Scriptures

The Scriptures of the Old and New Testament were given by inspiration of God, and are the only sufficient, certain, and authoritative rule of all saving knowledge, faith, and obedience.

John 10:35; 2 Timothy 3:15-17; 2 Peter 1:19-21

II. God

There is but one God—the Maker, Preserver, and Ruler of all things—having, in and of Himself, all perfections, and being infinite in them all. To Him all men owe the highest love, reverence, and obedience.

Deuteronomy 6:4; 1 Corinthians 8:4-6; 1 Timothy 1:17

III. The Trinity

God is revealed to us as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, each with distinct personal attributes, but without division of nature, essence, or being.

Genesis 1:1-3; Matthew 28:19; John 1:1-4; 2 Corinthians 13:14; Ephesians 4:4-6

IV. Providence

God from eternity, decrees or permits all things that come to pass, and perpetually upholds, directs, and governs all creatures and all events; yet so as not in any way to be author or approver of sin, nor to destroy the free will and responsibility of men.

Psalms 115:3; Proverbs 16:33; Daniel 4:34-35; Matthew 10:29-31; Hebrews 1:3; James 1:13-15

V. The Fall of Man

God originally created man in His own image, and free from sin; but, through the temptation of Satan, he transgressed the command of God, and fell from his original holiness and righteousness; whereby his descendants inherit a nature corrupt and wholly opposed to God and His law, are under condemnation, and, as soon as they are capable of moral action, become actual transgressors.

Genesis 1:27, 3:4-7; Romans 5:12-21; Ephesians 2:1-3

VI. The Mediator

Jesus Christ, the only begotten Son of God, is the divinely appointed Mediator between God and man. Having taken upon Himself human nature, yet without sin, He perfectly fulfilled the Law, suffered, and died upon the cross for the salvation of sinners. He was buried, and rose again on the third day, and ascended to His Father, at whose hand He ever lives to make intercession for His people. He is the only Mediator—the Prophet, Priest and King of the Church—and Sovereign of the Universe.

Matthew 3:17; Romans 5:6-11; 1 Corinthians 15:3-7; Philippians 2:5-11; 1 Timothy 2:5; Hebrews 1:3

VII. Regeneration

Regeneration is a change of heart, effected by union with Christ, through the working of the Holy Spirit, who quickens those dead in trespasses and sins, and renews their whole nature, so that they begin to love God with all of their heart, mind, soul, and strength, and their neighbor as themselves.

Jeremiah 31:33; Ezekiel 36:22-32; John 3:1-8; Ephesians 2:1-10; 2 Corinthians 3:3; Titus 3:3-8; Hebrews 10:16; 1 Peter 1:3

VIII. Repentance

Repentance is a gift of God's grace, wherein a person being, by the Holy Spirit, made sensible of the manifold evil of his sin, humbles himself for it, with godly sorrow and detestation of it, and purposes to walk before God so as to please Him in all things.

Mark 1:15; Acts 20:21; 2 Corinthians 7:9; James 4:6-10

IX. Faith

Saving faith is the belief, on God's authority, of whatsoever is revealed in His Word concerning Christ; accepting, trusting, and resting upon Him alone for justification and eternal life. It is accompanied by all other saving graces, and leads to a life of holiness.

John 1:12, 5:24; Romans 10:17; Ephesians 2:8-9

X. Justification

Justification is God's gracious and full acquittal of sinners from all sin through the satisfaction that Christ made on the cross. It is not for anything worked in them or done by them, but on account of the obedience and satisfaction of Christ; they receiving and resting on Him and His righteousness by faith.

Romans 3:21-26; 4:4-5; 5:1-2, 18-19; 2 Corinthians 5:21; Galatians 2:16

XI. Sanctification

Those who have been regenerated are also sanctified, by God's word and Spirit dwelling in them. This sanctification is progressive through the supply of Divine strength, which all saints earnestly seek, pressing after a heavenly life in heartfelt obedience to all of Christ's commands, while waiting eagerly to obtain the full freedom of the glory of the children of God.

John 14:15; 17:17; Romans 8:1-25; 2 Corinthians 3:18; 2 Thessalonians 2:13; Hebrews 12:14

XII. The Church

The Lord Jesus is the Head of the Church, which is composed of all His true disciples, and in Him is invested supremely all power for its government. According to His commandment, Christians are to associate themselves into particular churches; and to each of these churches He has given needful authority for administering that order, discipline, and worship which He has appointed. Being the Head, He unites, guides, and equips the church as members of His body so that, as each part is working properly, the whole is built up in love.

Matthew 16:18; 18:15-18; Acts 20:28; Romans 12:3-8; 1 Corinthians 12-14; Ephesians 4:1-16; Philippians 1:1; Colossians 1:18; 1 Timothy 3:1-15; Titus 1:5-9; 1 Peter 4:10-11; 5:1-4

XIII. Baptism

Baptism is an ordinance of the Lord Jesus, commanded of all believers, to be administered to them with water in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. It is a sign of their fellowship with the death and resurrection of Christ, of remission of sins, and of their giving themselves up to God, to live and walk in newness of life.

Matthew 28:19-20; Acts 8:38-39; Romans 6:3-5; 1 Peter 3:21

XIV. The Lord's Supper

The Lord's Supper is an ordinance of Jesus Christ, to be administered with the elements of bread and the fruit of the vine, and to be observed by His churches until the end of the world. It is in no sense a sacrifice, but is designed to commemorate His death, to confirm the faith and other graces of Christians, and to be a bond, pledge and renewal of their communion with Him, and of their church fellowship.

Matthew 26:26-27; 1 Corinthians 10:16-17; 11:23-26

XV. The Lord's Day

The Lord's Day is a Christian institution for regular observance, and should be employed in exercises of worship and spiritual devotion, both public and private.

Acts 20:7; 1 Corinthians 16:1-2; Hebrews 10:24-25; Revelation 1:10

XVI. The Civil Government

The civil government is of divine appointment for the interests and good order of human society. Governing authorities are to be prayed for, conscientiously honored, and obeyed; except in things opposed to the will of our Lord Jesus Christ, who is the only Lord of the conscience, and the King of the kings of the earth.

Daniel 3:16-18; Matthew 22:21; Acts 5:29; Romans 13:1-7; 14:1-12; 1 Timothy 2:1-4; Titus 3:1; 1 Peter 2:13-17; Revelation 19:16

XVII. The Resurrection

The bodies of men after death return to dust, but their spirits return immediately to God—the righteous to rest with Him; the wicked to be reserved under darkness until the judgment. On the last day, the bodies of all the dead, both just and unjust, will be raised.

Luke 23:43; John 5:28-29; 1 Corinthians 15; Philippians 3:21

XVIII. The Judgment

God has appointed a day, wherein He will judge the world by Jesus Christ, when everyone shall receive according to his deeds—the wicked shall go into everlasting punishment and sorrow; the righteous, whose names are found written in the Lamb's book, shall go into everlasting life and joy.

Matthew 25:31-46; 1 Corinthians 4: 5; 15:35-58; 2 Corinthians 5:10; 2 Thessalonians 1:5-10; 2 Timothy 4:1; Revelation 20:11-15

How's your vision? Are you farsighted? Nearsighted? Are things always a bit blurry? Or is everything in focus? If we want to function at full capacity in this world, if we want to experience the manifold richness that this life has to offer, our vision is essential. So is yours 20/20?

Mercy Hill's 20/20 vision is taken from Acts 20:20, where Paul is describing the ministry he had while with the church in Ephesus. Reading from verse 18 to verse 21 for context, let's listen in to his conversation:

You yourselves know how I lived among you the whole time from the first day that I set foot in Asia, serving the Lord with all humility and with tears and with trials that happened to me through the plots of the Jews; [verse 20:] **how I did not shrink from declaring to you anything that was profitable, and teaching you in public and from house to house**, testifying both to Jews and to Greeks of repentance toward God and of faith in our Lord Jesus Christ.

Paul's gospel ministry fired on two critical cylinders: "in public" and "from house to house"; or, in terms we might be more familiar with, in large gatherings and in small groups. Any ministry or member that doesn't incorporate both contexts is at risk of vision loss. Both are essential for seeing and showing Christ as He really is.

But, before we go any further, it's important to point out that Paul didn't invent this large-small dynamic. He inherited it. In fact, it's been an essential part of the church from her inception. When three thousand were first added to the church after Peter's Pentecost sermon, we are given window into this new community's life and practice:

They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and the fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers. And awe came upon every soul, and many wonders and signs were being done through the apostles. And all who believed were together and had all things in common. And they were selling their possessions and belongings and distributing the proceeds to all, as any had need. **And day by day, attending the temple together and breaking bread in their homes**, they received their food with glad and generous hearts, praising God and having favor with all the people. And the Lord added to their number day by day those who were being saved. (2:42-47)¹

The 2/46 Vision doesn't have quite the same ring to it as the 20/20 Vision, but the same reality is present here. The church was meeting together in "the temple" and "in their homes"—in large gatherings and in small groups.

But why? Why large and small? And what? What was the church doing in these contexts? It is quite refreshing to see that the values of our church today match the values of the church back then: *Faith, Community, Mission*.

- Faith: i.e. "They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching..." (v. 42a).
- Community: i.e. "and the fellowship, to the breaking of bread..." (v. 42b).
- Mission: i.e. "And the Lord added to their number day by day those who were being saved" (v. 47b).

These values become the *vital signs* of a healthy church. And these vital signs become, then, our *battle guides*. We are fighting to grow in Faith (the upper front), Community (the inner front), and Mission (the outer front). And the 20/20 vision says this battle, if we are to be most effective, must be waging at both a large gathering and small group level. When our ministries and members are taking both contexts into account Faith increases, Community deepens, and Mission expands. Again, both are essential for seeing and showing Christ as He really is.

¹ Cf. Acts 5:42

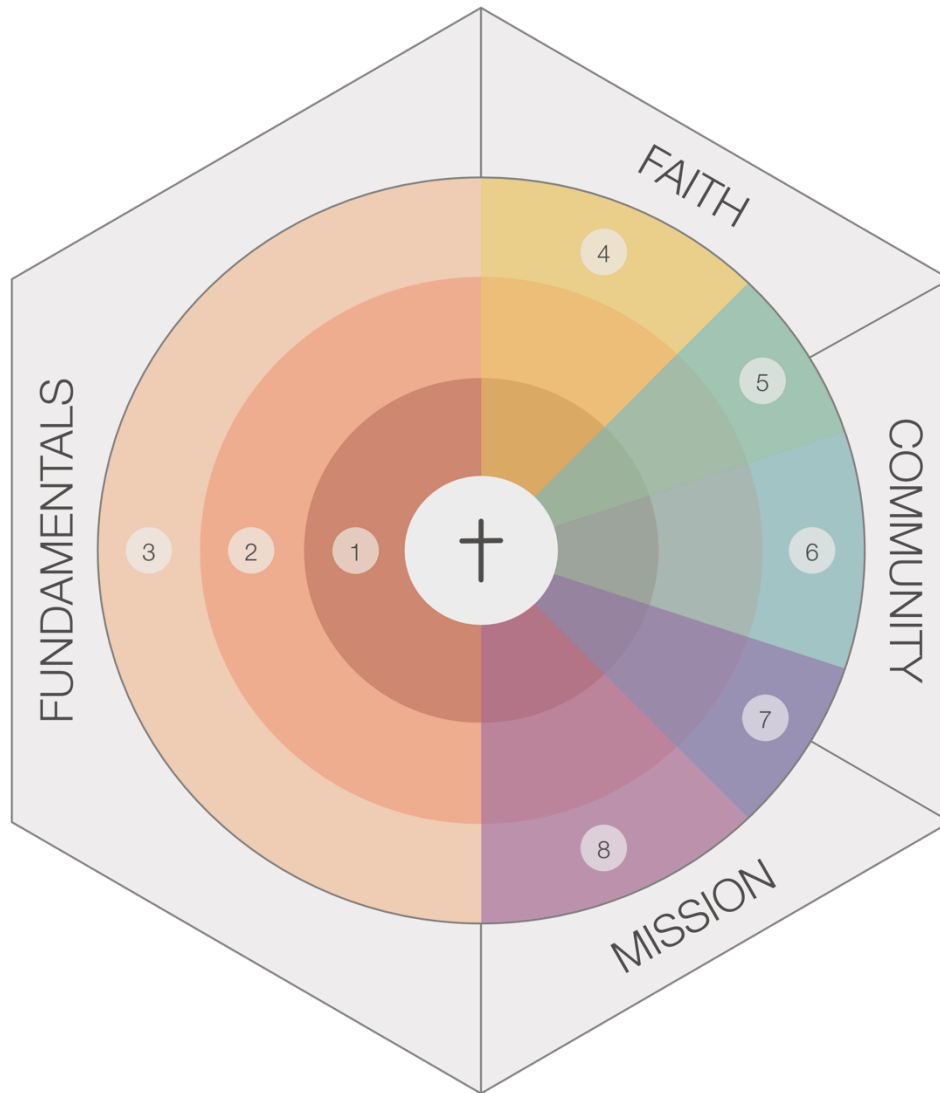
So then, if we are only pursuing Faith, Community, and Mission at a large gathering level, then many children of God might fall between the cracks, faltering and failing to grow. Anonymity would become the new norm as people are allowed to slip in and out without ever knowing others or being known themselves. We would miss the richness of the Scripture's "one-another"s. Our Faith, Community, and Mission would be big and loud but lack the depth required to sustain such magnitude. Consider our physical bodies. However big and strong they appear, they are only as healthy as their smallest cells.

On the other hand, if we are only pursuing our values at a small group level, the church and her members can become ingrown, cliquish, self-centered. Myopia would become the new norm as people grow closer to their small groups but further from the church's membership and mission at large. We would miss the grand theater of God's glory that is the gathered church—the fully functioning body of Christ that puts the myriad facets of His personality, ministry, and authority on display.

So how's your vision? Are you farsighted? Nearsighted? Anonymous? Myopic? Are you pursuing our values—the vital signs of a healthy church and battle guides for our spiritual mission—at both a large gathering and small group level? You won't see and show Christ clearly if you aren't. But O how you will if you are! Here's to pursuing 20/20 vision together!

Appendix 5

The Resource Wheel



- ① The Gospel (Ortlund)
- ② Living the Cross-Centered Life (Mahaney)
- ③ Humility (Mahaney)
- ④ The Christian Life (Ferguson)

- ⑤ How People Change (Lane & Tripp)
- ⑥ Side by Side | Life Together (Welch) | (Bonhoeffer)
- ⑦ Evangelism: Doing Justice and Preaching Grace (Conn)
- ⑧ Evangelism (Stiles)

These Relational Commitments are adapted from The Peacemaker Church. Used by permission of Peacemaker® Ministries (www.PeacemakerChurch.net).

Introduction

The following Commitments and Church Covenant are designed to help the people who attend our church relate to one another in a way that honors God and promotes authentic relationships. These Commitments cover important relational issues, such as peacemaking and reconciliation, marriage and divorce, protecting children from abuse, counseling, confidentiality, and mutual accountability.

They pull together key principles from God’s Word and serve as our relational guidelines. These Commitments accomplish several important purposes:

- They remind us of our mutual commitment to work together to pursue unity, maintain friendships, preserve marriages, and build relationships that reflect the love of Christ.
- They help to prevent surprises, disappointed expectations, confusion and conflict by describing how we expect to relate to one another within the church.
- They provide a clear track for us to run on when conflict threatens to divide us, and they remind us how to move quickly toward reconciliation.
- They establish guidelines for how our leaders will counsel others, guard confidential information, and protect our children from abuse.
- They define and limit the spiritual authority of church leaders and thereby insure that all members are treated fairly.¹
- Finally, they reduce our church's exposure to legal liability by clearly establishing our relational practices and by affirming our mutual commitment to resolve conflict biblically.

Commitment to Peacemaking and Reconciliation

Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called sons of God (Matt. 5:9).

Our church is committed to building a “culture of peace” that reflects God’s peace and the power of the gospel of Christ in our lives. As we stand in the light of the cross, we realize that bitterness, unforgiveness and broken relationships are not appropriate for the people whom God has reconciled to himself through the sacrifice of his only Son (John 13:34-35; Eph. 4:29-32; Col. 3:12-14).

Therefore, we look to the Scriptures and the Holy Spirit for guidance on how we can respond to conflict in a way that will honor God, promote justice, reconcile relationships, and preserve our witness for Christ. As God gives us his wisdom and grace, we are committed to actively teaching and encouraging one another to live out the following principles of peacemaking and reconciliation:

Personal Peacemaking

¹ When we use the term “leader” in these Commitments, we are referring primarily to the Elders of our church.

- Whenever we are faced with conflict, our primary goal will be to glorify God with our thoughts, words and actions (1 Cor. 10:31).
- We will try to get the “logs” out of our own eyes before focusing on what others may have done wrong (Matt. 7:3-5).
- We will seek to overlook minor offenses (Prov. 19:11).
- We will refrain from all gossip, backbiting and slander (Eph. 4:29). If we have a problem with others, we will talk *to* them, not *about* them.
- We will make “charitable judgments” toward one another by believing the best about each other until we have facts that prove otherwise (1 Cor. 13:7).
- If an offense is too serious to overlook, or if we think someone may have something against us, we will go promptly to seek reconciliation (Matt. 5:23-24; 18:15).
- When we offer a word of correction to others, we will do so graciously and gently, with the goal of serving and restoring them, rather than beating them down (Prov. 12:18; Eph. 4:29; Gal. 6:1).
- When someone tries to correct us, we will ask God to help us resist prideful defensiveness and to welcome correction with humility (Ps. 141:5; Prov. 15:32).
- When others repent, we will ask God to give us grace to forgive them as he has forgiven us (Eph. 4:32).
- When we discuss or negotiate substantive issues, we will look out for others’ interests as well as our own (Phil. 2:3-4).

Assisted Peacemaking

- When two of us cannot resolve a conflict privately, we will seek the mediation of wise people in our church and listen humbly to their counsel (Matt. 18:16; Phil. 4:2-3). If our dispute is with a church leader, we will look to other leaders for assistance.
- When informal mediation does not resolve a dispute, we will seek formal assistance from our church leaders or people they appoint, and we will submit to their counsel and correction (Matt. 18:17-20).
- When we have a business or legal dispute with another Christian, we will make every reasonable effort to resolve the conflict within the body of Christ through biblical mediation or arbitration, rather than going to civil court (1 Cor. 6:1-8). If the other party attends another church, our leaders will offer to cooperate with the leaders of that church to resolve the matter.
- If a person coming to our church has an unresolved conflict with someone in his former church, we will require and assist him to make every reasonable effort to be reconciled to the other person before joining our church (Matt. 5:23-24; Rom. 12:18).
- When a conflict involves matters of doctrine or church discipline, we will submit to the procedures set forth in our *Commitment to Accountability and Church Discipline*.

Above all, we pray that our ministry of peacemaking will bring praise to our Lord Jesus Christ and lead others to know his infinite love and peace.²

Commitment to Preserving Marriages

So they are no longer two but one. Therefore, what God has joined together, let man not separate (Matt. 19:6).

God designed marriage to reflect the beauty and permanence of Christ’s loving relationship with his bride, the church (Eph. 5:22-33; Rev. 19:7). Therefore, he established marriage to be a life-long, exclusive relationship between one man and one woman (Matt. 19:4-6). God also designed it to provide mutual companionship through

² Adapted from *The Peacemaker: A Biblical Guide to Resolving Personal Conflict*, by Ken Sande (Baker Books, 3rd Ed. 2004).

life's joys and difficulties, to create stability for raising and nurturing children, and to give strength and cohesiveness to society in general.

In our society, marriages fail under a wide range of circumstances. Many people have gone through a divorce before having a relationship with Christ, and others have experienced divorce through no desire or decision of their own. Still others may have divorced because of their own wrongful choices, but have since experienced the repentance and forgiveness offered through our Lord Jesus. We want all of you to know that you are welcome in our church.

Because our church recognizes both the divine origin of marriage and the devastating effects of divorce, we are deeply committed to preserving marriages and preventing divorce. Toward this end, we will devote a significant portion of our preaching and teaching ministry to strengthening marriages and families. We require and provide thorough premarital counseling to ensure that couples enter into marriage advisedly and are well prepared for its many challenges.

We also encourage couples to nurture their marriages by participating in midweek Home Groups in which people can grow together in their love for God and for one another (Heb. 10:24-25). As relationships deepen within these groups, we expect husbands to spur each other on in loving and cherishing their wives, and wives to encourage one another in respecting and loving their husbands (Eph. 5:33).

Our leaders are committed to providing counsel and support to couples who face marital difficulties. We will discourage couples from using divorce as a way to run away from issues that instead can be resolved through Spirit-guided counseling, repentance, forgiveness and ongoing discipleship.

We recognize, however, that there are times when God permits a believer to seek a divorce without sinning against God or a spouse. We believe divorce is permissible when the other spouse has been sexually involved with a person outside the marriage (Matt. 5:31-32), or when an unbelieving spouse abandons a marriage (1 Cor. 7:12-16).

Even though divorce is *permissible* in these situations, it is not *required*. God patiently bears with our sins, repeatedly calls us to repentance, and freely forgives us when we turn back to him (Ps. 103:8-12; Isa. 55:7). When divorce becomes an option, an offended spouse can imitate God's love by offering a straying spouse these same evidences of grace (Eph. 5:1-2). This may involve patiently bearing neglect or lovingly confronting serious sin (Col. 3:12-14; Gal. 6:1). In some situations, love may require asking the church to initiate formal discipline to rescue a spouse and a marriage from the devastating effects of unrepentant sin (Matt. 18:12-20).

Just as church leaders are involved in beginning a marriage, they should be involved when it ends. Therefore, when someone is considering divorce, he or she is expected to bring the situation to our leaders and cooperate with them as they determine whether grounds exist, promote repentance and reconciliation, and exhaust redemptive discipline, if appropriate.

Separated spouses who have filed for divorce should consider themselves married until the day a civil court issues a divorce decree. Thus they should refrain from dating or any other activity that is inconsistent with being married.

We are always interested in helping divorced people restore their previous marriage if that is possible and appropriate. We will support a decision to pursue a second marriage to a different person only when we have determined that it is biblically valid and that every reasonable effort has been made to seek and grant forgiveness of the sins that contributed to a previous divorce.

We rejoice that divorce never diminishes God's free offer of love, grace and forgiveness. He cherishes and loves every person who has been unwillingly divorced, as does our church. God graciously extends this same love to those who have wrongly left their marriages. That love moves him (and us) to call them to repentance, to

encourage and aid reconciliation when possible, and to gladly restore those who have done all they can to rebuild broken relationships.

Commitment to Protecting Our Children

The prudent see danger and take refuge (Prov. 27:12a).

Children are a blessing from God, and he calls the church to support parents in their responsibility to train children in the discipline and instruction of the Lord. Therefore, the church should be a safe and blessed place for children, where they can grow, play, form friendships, and learn to experience and share the love of Christ.

Since sin affects every person and organization in the world, however, it is possible that children could be harmed even during church activities. We cannot guarantee that such things will never happen within our fellowship, but we are committed to taking every reasonable precaution to protect our children from foreseeable harm. This commitment includes, but is not limited to, the following steps:

- We do not allow anyone to work regularly with our youth (children or teenagers), unless he or she has regularly attended our church for a significant period of time.
- We require all of our youth workers to complete a detailed application and screening process.
- We require that, whenever practicable, youth workers serve in teams of two or more and be visible to other workers.

If a child is harmed in our church, we will take immediate steps to inform the parents, to accept responsibility for our role in the situation, and to hold offending youth workers fully responsible for their actions. We will also evaluate our practices and procedures, considering changes that might reduce the likelihood of such harm to children in the future.

Commitment to Biblical Counseling

I myself am convinced, my brothers, that you yourselves are full of goodness, complete in knowledge and competent to instruct one another (Rom. 15:14).

All Christians struggle with sin and the effect it has on our lives and our relationships. Whenever believers are unable to overcome sinful attitudes or behaviors through personal efforts, God calls them to seek assistance from other believers, and when needed from church leaders, who have the responsibility of providing pastoral counseling and oversight (see Rom. 15:14; Gal. 6:1-2; 2 Tim. 4:1-2; Heb. 13:17; James 5:16). Therefore, this church encourages and enjoins its people to seek counsel from and confess sins to each other and to our leaders.

We believe that the Bible provides thorough guidance and instruction for faith and life (2 Tim. 3:16-17). Therefore, our counseling is based on scriptural principles rather than those of secular psychology or psychiatry. Unless they specifically state otherwise, none of those who counsel in this church are trained or licensed as psychotherapists or mental health professionals, nor should they be expected to follow the methods of such specialists.

God calls our leaders to set an example for us “in speech, in life, in love, and in faith and purity” (1 Tim. 4:12). Therefore, we expect them to treat counselees with every respect and courtesy, and to avoid even the appearance of impropriety or impurity during counseling (Eph. 5:3). We also expect counselees to promptly report to the leadership team any conduct that fails to meet this standard.

To prevent our leaders from being placed in situations that might compromise their pastoral commitments, we, the members and attenders of this church, agree that we will not try to compel them to testify in any legal proceeding or otherwise divulge any confidential information they receive through pastoral counseling or ministry (Prov. 11:13, 25:9).

Commitment to Confidentiality

*A gossip betrays a confidence,
but a trustworthy man keeps a secret (Prov. 11:13).*

The Bible teaches that Christians should carefully guard any personal and private information that others reveal to them. Protecting confidences is a sign of Christian love and respect (Matt. 7:12). It also discourages harmful gossip (Prov. 26:20), invites confession (Prov. 11:13), and thus encourages people to seek needed counseling. Since these goals are essential to the ministry of the gospel and the work of the local church, all members and attenders are expected to refrain from gossip and to respect the confidences of others. In particular, our leaders will carefully protect all information that they receive through pastoral counseling, subject to the following guidelines.

Although confidentiality is to be respected as much as possible, there are times when it is appropriate to reveal certain information to others. In particular, when our leaders believe it is biblically necessary, they may disclose confidential information to appropriate people in the following circumstances:

- when a leader is uncertain of how to counsel a person about a particular problem and needs to seek advice from other leaders in our church or, if the person attends another church, from the leaders of that church (Prov. 11:14);
- when the person who disclosed the information, or any other person, is in imminent danger of serious harm unless others intervene (Prov. 24:11-12);
- when a person refuses to repent of sin and it becomes necessary to promote repentance through accountability and redemptive church discipline (Matt. 18:15-20); or,
- when leaders are required by law to report suspected abuse (Rom. 13:1).

Commitment to Accountability and Church Discipline³

*And let us consider how we may spur one another on
toward love and good deeds (Heb. 10:24).*

1. Accountability and Discipline Are Signs of God's Love

God has established the church to reflect his character, wisdom and glory in the midst of a fallen world (Eph. 3:10-11). He loves his church so much that he sent his Son to die for her (Eph. 5:25). His ultimate purpose for his church is to present her as a gift to his Son; thus Scripture refers to the church as the "bride" of Christ (Rev. 19:7).

³ Like all of our Relational Commitments, the principles and practices described here apply to all the people who attend our church (both formal members and regular attenders).

For this reason the Father, Son and Holy Spirit are continually working to purify the church and bring her to maturity (Eph. 5:25-27).

This does not mean that God expects the church to be made up of perfectly pure people. He knows that the best of churches are still companies of sinners who wrestle daily with remaining sin (1 John 1:8; Phil. 3:12). Therefore, it would be unbiblical for us to expect church members to live perfectly. What we can do, however, is confess our common struggle with sin and our mutual need for God's mercy and grace. We also can spur one another on toward maturity by encouraging and holding each other accountable to love, seek after, and obey God with all of our hearts, souls, minds and strength, and to love others as we love ourselves (Mark 12:30-31; Heb. 10:24-25).

The Bible sometimes refers to this process of mutual encouragement and accountability as "discipline." The Bible never presents church discipline as being negative, legalistic, or harsh, as modern society does. True discipline originates from God himself and is always presented as a sign of genuine love. "The Lord disciplines those he loves" (Heb. 12:6). "Blessed is the man you discipline, O Lord, the man you teach from your law" (Ps. 94:12). "Those whom I love I rebuke and discipline" (Rev. 3:19).

God's discipline in the church, like the discipline in a good family, is intended to be primarily positive, instructive and encouraging. This process, which is sometimes referred to as "formative discipline," involves preaching, teaching, prayer, personal Bible study, small group fellowship and countless other enjoyable activities that challenge and encourage us to love and serve God more wholeheartedly.

On rare occasions God's discipline, like the discipline in a family with growing children, also may have a corrective purpose. When we forget or disobey what God has taught us, he corrects us. One way he does this is to call the church to seek after us and lead us back onto the right track. This process, which is sometimes called "corrective" or "restorative" discipline, is likened in Scripture to a shepherd seeking after a lost sheep.

If a man has a hundred sheep, and one of them wanders away, will he not leave the ninety-nine on the hills and go to look for the one that wandered off? And if he finds it, I tell you the truth, he is happier about that one sheep than about the ninety-nine that did not wander off (Matt. 18:12-13).

Thus, restorative or corrective discipline is never to be done in a harsh, vengeful or self-righteous manner. It is always to be carried out in humility and love, with the goals of restoring someone to a close walk with Christ (Matt. 18:15; Gal. 6:1), protecting others from harm (1 Cor. 5:6), and showing respect for the honor and glory of God's name (1 Pet. 2:12).

Biblical discipline is similar to the discipline we value in other aspects of life. We admire parents who consistently teach their children how to behave properly and lovingly discipline them when they disobey. We value music teachers who bring out the best in their students by teaching them proper technique and pointing out their errors so they can play a piece properly. And we applaud athletic coaches who diligently teach their players to do what is right and correct them when they fumble, so that the team works well together and can compete for the championship.

The same principles apply to the family of God. We, too, need to be taught what is right and to be lovingly corrected when we do something contrary to what God teaches us in his Word. Therefore, we as a church are committed to help one another obey God's command to be "self-controlled, upright, holy and disciplined" (Titus 1:8).

The leaders of our church recognize that God has called them to an even higher level of accountability regarding their faith and conduct (James 3:1; 1 Tim. 5:19-20). Therefore, they are committed to listening humbly to loving correction from each other or from any member in our church, and, if necessary, to submitting themselves to the corrective discipline of our body.

2. Most Corrective Discipline Is Private, Personal, and Informal

God gives every believer grace to be self-disciplined. “For God did not give us a spirit of timidity, but a spirit of power, of love and of self-discipline” (2 Tim. 1:7). Thus discipline always begins as a personal matter and usually remains that way, as each of us studies God’s Word, seeks him in prayer, and draws on his grace to identify and change sinful habits and grow in godliness.

But sometimes we are blind to our sins or so tangled in them that we cannot get free on our own. This is why the Bible says, “Brothers, if someone is caught in a sin, you who are spiritual should restore him gently” (Gal. 6:1). In obedience to this command, we are committed to giving and receiving loving correction within our church whenever a sin (whether in word, behavior or doctrine) seems too serious to overlook (Prov. 19:11).

If repeated private conversations do not lead another person to repentance, Jesus commands that we ask other brothers or sisters to get involved. “If he will not listen, take one or two others along” (Matt. 18:16). If informal conversations with these people fail to resolve the matter, then we may seek the involvement of more influential people, such as a small group leader, Sunday school teacher or church leader. If even these efforts fail to bring a brother or sister to repentance, and if the issue is too serious to overlook, we will move into what may be called “formal discipline.”

3. Formal Discipline May Involve the Entire Church

If an individual persistently refuses to listen to personal and informal correction to turn from speech or behavior that the Bible defines as sin, Jesus commands us to “tell it to the church” (Matt. 18:17a). This first involves informing one or more church leaders about the situation. If the offense is not likely to cause imminent harm to others, our leaders may approach the individual privately to personally establish the facts and encourage repentance of any sin they discover. The individual will be given every reasonable opportunity to explain and defend his or her actions. If the individual recognizes his sin and repents, the matter usually ends there, unless a confession to additional people is needed.

If an offense is likely to harm others or lead them into sin, or cause division or disruption, our leaders may accelerate the entire disciplinary process and move promptly to protect the church (Rom. 16:17; 1 Cor. 5:1-13; Titus 3:10-11).

As the disciplinary process progresses, our leaders may impose a variety of sanctions to encourage repentance, including but not limited to private and public admonition, withholding of the Lord’s Supper, removal from office, withdrawal of normal fellowship, and, as a last resort, removal from membership (Matt. 5:23-24; 2 Thess. 3:6-15; Matt. 18:17).

If the straying individual does not repent in response to private appeals from our leaders, they may inform others in the church who may be able to influence that individual or be willing to pray for him or her, or people who might be harmed or affected by that person’s behavior.⁴ This step may include close friends, a small group, a Sunday school class, or the entire congregation if our leaders deem it to be appropriate (Matt. 18:17, 1 Tim. 5:20).⁵

⁴ For example, it is not uncommon for a person to attend a church, develop relationships of trust, persuade people to give him money to invest, and then fail to return the money as promised. Senior citizens are particularly vulnerable to these schemes, and many people have lost much of what they had saved for retirement. When such sinful men are discovered, they usually leave a church, but continue to prey on members who have not heard about their schemes. If our leaders found such a man in our church, they would call him to repent and confess his wrongs. If he refused, they would bring him under formal discipline, and also warn the congregation not to trust him with their money.

⁵ If our leaders inform our entire congregation about a disciplinary situation, they have discretion whether to divulge the individual’s name. This decision usually will depend on a variety of factors, such as: how widely known the situation already is; whether there might be people in the congregation who could persuade the individual to repent; or whether the congregation

If, after a reasonable period of time, the individual still refuses to change, then our leaders may bring the situation before the congregation, with the recommendation that the individual be removed from membership and normal fellowship. If the congregation supports that recommendation, we will treat the individual as an unbeliever. This means that we will no longer treat him as a fellow Christian. Instead of having casual, relaxed fellowship with the individual, we will look for opportunities to lovingly bring the gospel to him, remind him of God’s holiness and mercy, and call him to repent and put his faith in Christ (Matt. 18:17; 1 Cor. 5:5; 1 Tim. 1:20).

We realize that our natural human response to correction often is to hide or run away from accountability (Gen. 3:8-10). To avoid falling into this age-old trap and to strengthen our church’s ability to rescue us if we are caught in sin, we agree not to run away from this church to avoid corrective discipline. Therefore, we waive our right to withdraw from membership or accountability if discipline is pending against us. Although we are free to stop attending the church at any time, we agree that a withdrawal while discipline is pending will not be given effect until the church has fulfilled its God-given responsibilities to encourage our repentance and restoration, and to bring the disciplinary process to an orderly conclusion, as described in these Commitments (Matt. 18:12-14; Gal. 6:1; Heb. 13:17).

If an individual leaves the church while discipline is in effect or is being considered, and our leaders learn that he or she is attending another church, they may inform that church of the situation and ask its leaders to encourage the individual to repent and be reconciled to the Lord and to any people he or she has offended. This action is intended both to help the individual find freedom from his sin and to warn the other church about the harm that he or she might do to their members⁶ (see Matt. 18:12-14; Rom. 16:17; 1 Cor. 5:1-13; 3 John 1:9-10).

Loving restoration always stands at the heart of the disciplinary process. If an individual repents, and our leaders confirm his or her sincerity, we will rejoice together and gladly imitate God’s forgiveness by restoring the person to fellowship within the body (see Matt. 18:13; Luke 15:3-7, 11-32; 2 Cor. 2:5-11; Col. 3:12-14).

People who have been excluded from another church will not be allowed to partake of the sacraments in our church, to become members, or to participate in the regular fellowship of our church until they have repented of their sins and made a reasonable effort to be reconciled, or our leaders have determined that the discipline of the former church was not biblically appropriate.

As we pursue the blessings of accountability and church discipline, we will hold fast to the promise of Scripture: “God disciplines us for our good, that we may share in his holiness. No discipline seems pleasant at the time, but painful. Later on, however, it produces a harvest of righteousness and peace for those who have been trained by it” (Heb. 12:10-11).

needs to be on guard against potential harm he might cause (see previous footnote). Even if our leaders decide it is not necessary to identify an individual specifically, they may still inform the congregation of the general situation and the disciplinary steps they have followed. This general information can help to enlist wide prayer support, let the congregation know that our leaders are obeying the Lord’s command to seek after those who stray, and warn people who may be flirting with secret sin that they, too, may face discipline if they do not turn back to God.

⁶ For example, if we confronted a man in our church for seducing young women, or for acting inappropriately around little children, or for sowing gossip and division, and he left and started attending another church, we would consider it our duty to urge the leaders of that church to counsel with him and to protect their people from his harmful behavior.

Administration			
Elder(s) Present			
Date of Conversation			

Contact Information ¹	
Name	
Address	
Phone	Home: <input type="text"/> Cell: <input type="text"/>
Email	<input type="text"/>

Personal Information		
Birth Date	<input type="text"/>	
Married?	Y / N	If yes, to whom? <input type="text"/>
		If yes, wedding date? <input type="text"/>
Children?	Name 1: <input type="text"/>	Birth Date: <input type="text"/>
	Name 2: <input type="text"/>	Birth Date: <input type="text"/>
	Name 3: <input type="text"/>	Birth Date: <input type="text"/>
	Name 4: <input type="text"/>	Birth Date: <input type="text"/>
	Name 5: <input type="text"/>	Birth Date: <input type="text"/>
Educational History	<input type="text"/>	
Occupational History	<input type="text"/>	
	Current Address: <input type="text"/>	Map? Y / N <input type="text"/>

Personal Testimony	
Discuss your personal testimony.	<input style="width: 100%; height: 100%;" type="text"/>
	Would you be willing to share your testimony during a Sunday Service? <input type="text"/> Y / N <input type="text"/>
Have you been baptized?	Y / N
	If no, would you be willing? <input type="text"/>

¹ When you are welcomed in as a Covenant Member, three things will happen automatically: (1) Your contact information will be added to our Church Directory; (2) You will be subscribed to receive our church e-newsletter; (3) You will be invited to like our Facebook page and join our Facebook group. All of this is to help us stay more closely connected as a church body. Please let us know if you have any concerns with this and we will do our best to accommodate you.

Conversation Starters

Introduction

Have you completed the Covenant Membership Class requirements? Do you have any initial questions/concerns?

We are so glad that you've applied for Covenant Membership. Please tell us why you want to join Mercy Hill Church?

What is the name of the previous church you attended? How would you describe your relationship with this church?

Faith

Do you have any questions/concerns with our Core Confession?

Do you have any questions/concerns with our Doctrinal Distinctives?

Community

On a scale of 1-10 (with 1 being "not at all" and 10 being "completely"), how connected do you feel to MHC? Explain.

Do you regularly attend the Sunday Service? Are you a part of a Small Group? Why or why not?

Mission

How can God use your SHAPE (Spiritual gifts, Heart, Abilities, Personality, Experiences) to serve His church?

In what areas of ministry have you served in the past? In what areas do you hope to serve in the future?

Conclusion

Do you have any suggestions for how we could better function as a church and serve you as a member?

Do you have any other questions for us?

I acknowledge that I am a Christian; that I have been saved from the wrath of God solely by His grace through faith in the Lord Jesus alone. I also acknowledge that I have been (or will soon be) baptized in the name of the Father, and the Son, and the Holy Spirit, as a public declaration of my union with Christ’s death and resurrection and of my desire to walk with Him in newness of life.

I have attended the Covenant Membership Class, looked through the corresponding material in the Covenant Membership Handbook, and desire to become a Covenant Member of Mercy Hill Church.

Having been saved by grace and continuing now to live by it, I agree with the following:

1 I will devote myself to the apostolic *Faith* of this local church as contained in Holy Scripture and crystallized in their confession.

- a I have read, understand, and fully agree with the Core Confession of Mercy Hill Church.
- b I have read, understand, and either (i) fully agree with, or (ii) promise not to be divisive over the Doctrinal Distinctives of Mercy Hill Church.
- c I will regularly seek the Lord in His Word and in prayer.

2 I will devote myself to the covenant *Community* of this local church, attempting to truly know and love them and allowing them to truly know and love me.

- a I have received and read the Relational Commitments of this church and will support and submit to them.
- b I will pray for the leaders of Mercy Hill and will follow their leadership as they follow Christ.
- c I will not forsake the gathering of the saints and will do my best to participate in the Sunday Services and in Small Groups throughout the week.

3 I will devote myself to the kingdom *Mission* of this local church, offering my time, talents, and treasure for the good of others and the glory of God.

- a I will seek to proclaim and adorn the gospel of Christ before my family, friends, and neighbors—partnering with Mercy Hill in bringing the good news to San Jose and the nations.
- b I will contribute cheerfully to the support of this local church, to the care of its members, and to the spread of the gospel both locally and abroad.
- c I will, if I move from this place, seek to unite with some other church where I can carry out the spirit of this covenant and the principles of God’s Word.

I understand that I should not delay to notify an Elder if I have any concerns regarding the church or my membership, or if the Lord is calling me away from Mercy Hill.

Finally, I understand that by signing this covenant I am not committing to fulfill these responsibilities perfectly, but merely acknowledging that it is my sincere desire to fulfill these responsibilities by God’s grace. May God be glorified, the church family edified, and the nations blessed by my affiliation with Mercy Hill Church!

Applicant Name: _____ Signature: _____ Date: ___ / ___ / ___

Elder Name: _____ Signature: _____ Date: ___ / ___ / ___

The following has been adapted from Mark Dever's book What Is a Healthy Church?, p. 57.

Before You Decide to Leave

1. Pray.
2. Let your current pastor know about your thinking before you move to another church or make your decision to relocate to another city. Ask for his counsel.
3. Weigh your motives. Is your desire to leave because of sinful, personal conflict or disappointment? If it's because of doctrinal reasons, are these doctrinal reasons significant?
4. Do everything within your power to reconcile any broken relationships.
5. Be sure to consider all the "evidences of grace" you've seen in the church's life—places where God's work is evident. If you cannot see any evidences of God's grace, you might want to examine your own heart once more (Matt 7:3-5).
6. Be humble. Recognize you don't have all the facts and assess people and circumstances charitably (give them the benefit of the doubt).

If You Go

1. Don't divide the body.
2. Take the utmost care not to sow discontent even among your closest friends. Remember, you don't want anything to hinder their growth in grace in this church. Deny any desire to gossip (sometimes referred to as "venting" or "saying how you feel").
3. Pray for and bless the congregation and its leadership. Look for ways of doing this practically.
4. If there has been hurt, then forgive—even as you have been forgiven.

What if after taking the Class and looking through the Handbook I've decided that I do not want to become a Covenant Member?

That is totally fine. All we would ask is that you please consider telling us why you feel the way you do. You can do this by filling out and submitting the Covenant Membership Reflections Survey online. We want to hear your thoughts, concerns, and questions and do our best to help in any way we can.

What are some of the benefits of becoming a Covenant Member?

Apart from those benefits laid out in *Expansion 1: The Five Aspects of Church Membership*, we can identify at least a couple more:

1. **Judicial Privilege:** Our Covenant Members are those who will be given the privilege of voting on critical matters concerning our church body. According to the Scriptures these matters include:
 - Installing/uninstalling church officers;
 - Welcoming/excommunicating church members;
 - Discretionals—Other decisions of critical importance brought to the church at the discretion of the Elders;
 - Appeals—The congregation may at times appeal decisions made by the officers if enough members are concerned.¹
2. **Leadership Opportunity:** While there are many roles that a non-member/regular attender can fill in the church, we reserve certain positions for those who have already formally covenanted themselves into the membership of this local body. In particular, we require that any who would be a formal officer at Mercy Hill Church (i.e. an Elder or Deacon), first go through our Covenant Membership process.

What about my kids? Can they become Covenant Members as well?

We have said from the beginning that we want the doors into membership at this local church to be as wide as the doors into membership of the universal church. In other words, if your child is a genuine believer with a credible profession of faith then, whatever his/her age, we want to make a way for him/her to be a formal member of Mercy Hill Church.

The process might look something like this:

1. First, your child, however young, comes to genuine faith in Jesus Christ. Amazing! At this point we would want to baptize your child and would consider him/her an informal member of this church.
2. When your child is old enough to meaningfully participate in and complete the Covenant Membership Class and homework, he/she may begin the process of formalizing his/her membership at Mercy Hill.
3. Upon completion of all the steps outlined in the Checklist (p. iii), he/she will be considered a Covenant Member of Mercy Hill Church.²

¹ For more on this, see *Appendix 1: The Church's Body Image*.

² It should be noted that the Elders, on principle of wisdom, thought it best to withhold voting privileges from children until the age of 18.