



## WHAT DOES IT MEAN TO BE A MEMBER of the DOWNTOWN CHURCH OF CHRIST?

### **What beliefs do we share with Christians through the centuries?**

At this church, we begin with our belief in the “triune” (three-in-one) God—God the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. We are not left to figure out on our own what He is like and what He wants; He has revealed Himself in His creation, in the stories and instructions of the Bible, and most recently, most clearly, most definitively, in Jesus, “the Word” [who] was made flesh and made His dwelling among us” (John 1:14).

Jesus is the center of the Bible. That means that we interpret everything—both Old and New Testaments—in the light of this embodied Word. That also means that we take all of it very personally. Jesus is the unique Son of God, fully human and fully divine. We believe that He said and did (and still does) what the Bible says that He said and did. We believe “that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures” (that is, in fulfillment of prophecies about Him), “that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day according to the Scriptures, and that he appeared to Peter, and then to the Twelve [apostles]. After that He appeared to more than five hundred of the brothers at the same time” (1 Corinthians 15:3-6). We believe His ascension was witnessed by human eyes (Acts 1:9-11). That’s why we are convinced that He is still alive and well, interceding as our High Priest before God the Father (Hebrews 7:25). We are committed to following His lead as his own Holy Spirit continues to animate the body of Christ, the church, and gives us life.

Everything we do here, in one way or another, we do in pursuit of his agenda to “reconcile the world to Himself” (2 Corinthians 5:19) and in anticipation of His return. “Reconciliation” touches everything—body and soul, individuals, families and communities, the here and now as well as eternity. We believe God is moving in the world through His people to repair the damage that is the consequence of sin, which we believe is anything that is incompatible with the nature and will of God. We see ourselves as recipients of both the “grace and truth” that comes through Jesus (John 1:17) since we, too, are sinful people, and as dispensers of that grace and truth.

You won’t have to be with us too long before you notice that we are fallible; we can’t live up to this high calling. But this is our intention. To be a member here means that you, too, are committed to growing *with* us as a church family in the grace and truth of our Lord so that His agenda becomes your agenda and so that the gifts God has given you through His Holy Spirit will be fully employed in the work we do together.

### **What does it mean to be a member of the “Church of Christ”?**

To be a member of the “Church of Christ” means you are now affiliated with a movement of independent, loosely-related local congregations all over the world that share some common commitments. Those commitments make more sense when you consider what was happening in America just three decades after the Declaration of Independence. New immigrants, mostly from Europe, were wrestling with their denominational attachments from “back home.” Some found it distasteful, even wrong, to import the sectarian divisions that characterized the Christian experience in Europe. So they tried to figure out what it might look like to be “simply Christians” and not “denominate” (“to designate” or “to give a name to”) themselves like their Christian forebears had done for centuries. “Non-denominational” churches were formed in all parts of the U.S. in what constituted a “Restoration Movement”; that is, they sought to “restore” the Christian faith and practice as it had been in the beginning. To do that, they believed they had to unite with other Christians around the teachings of the Bible alone (“sola scriptura” as Martin Luther had said long before). They resisted “extra-biblical” (that is, not in the Bible) features that defined mainstream denominations such as written creeds, catechisms, and church hierarchies. They embraced slogans like, “In essentials, unity; in non-essentials, liberty; in all things, charity (love)” and “Christians only, but not the only Christians.”

Over time they discovered how difficult it is to abide by such ideals. We, like other Christians, have disagreed over what is “essential” and what isn’t. And we have, at times, descended into the sectarianism that we said we were rejecting, and spoke of ourselves as if we *were* the only *true* Christians. In some ways, the name “Church of Christ” hasn’t helped. Initially, our congregations just called themselves “Christians” or “Disciples.” Over time, despite our

commitment to unity, those became denominational labels that stuck. (Today, the fellowships known as “Disciples of Christ,” “Christian Churches,” and “Churches of Christ” all share common roots in the Restoration Movement.)

The churches known as “Churches of Christ” do not have any organizational structure beyond the local congregation that ties them all together or any official creedal statement that prescribes their faith and practices. But typically what guests from other churches might notice that makes these churches different from some other Christian groups is our emphasis on baptism (by immersion) as a part of the process whereby one enters into relationship with Christ. That emphasis has caused some to be concerned that we teach a kind of “baptismal regeneration” or “works salvation,” as if there is something magical about the water or as if we believe we can somehow “earn” salvation by being baptized. We believe, as the Scripture teaches, that *Jesus* saves and that baptism is not a work, but an act of faith (Galatians 3:26-27). We follow the examples given in Scripture of convicted believers coming to faith in Jesus in a spirit of repentance (the resolve to turn from sin to a righteous life) who are then “baptized into Christ” who makes them “new” (Romans 6:3-6). So baptism is the biblically prescribed way in which sinners (like us) receive the free gift of the grace of God through Christ (Acts 2:37-38; Ephesians 2:8-9). It is also at this point that the Lord (and not a church body) adds this new Christian to His body (see Acts 2:47). That’s a decision *He* makes, not us. So you may notice that we don’t speak of “joining the church.” Once you’re joined to Christ, you’ve automatically been “added to the church.”

Our weekly participation in the Lord’s Supper and the practice of “open communion” (that is, non-members are welcome to partake of the bread and juice at their own discretion) is also somewhat unusual in the Christian world. This, too, is based on biblical teaching and precedent.

When we sing in our worship assemblies, guests are often surprised that we sing “a cappella” (literally “like in church”). Once again, we do so on the basis of the biblical emphasis on congregational, participatory worship and on the strength of historical precedent. (Instrumental accompaniment was introduced in the Middle Ages; before that singing in the church was always without instruments.)

Our congregations are led by a group of church “elders,” also called “shepherds,” “overseers,” or “pastors,” all of which are biblical terms for the role of those who are entrusted with the spiritual care of the “flock.” (Different Churches of Christ appoint elders in different ways. At Downtown, our elders are chosen by the congregation in an open process that is repeated every three years.) Churches also appoint “deacons” who carry out specific assignments within the congregation. Churches are free to employ full-time staff, usually called “ministers,” not “pastors” (to avoid confusing their role with that of an elder).

We acknowledge that these and other distinctives of Churches of Christ have been a source of confusion and frustration to some of our Christian friends, mainly (we perceive) because of the judgmental attitude that has sometimes accompanied them. When we do this right, we simply uphold what we believe to be biblical practices with the humility that is the product of grace, minus the rancor, pride and sectarian spirit of the past.

### **What does it mean to be a member of the Downtown Church of Christ?**

First, being a member of the *Downtown* church means that you share the commitments outlined above in the first two sections. Second, it means that you have been baptized into Christ and have been added to His church. (If you have any questions about baptism, don’t hesitate to ask; we’ll be happy to discuss what we believe the Bible teaches on the subject.) Third, “membership” means that you cherish the church and recognize the importance of participating in its life and work. We encourage all of our members to experience at least three “touches” per week in congregational life—the Sunday morning assembly, a weekly Bible class, and a small group fellowship—all of which we believe contributes to our spiritual growth and development. Furthermore, our members are all assigned to one of the “shepherd groups” led by one or more of our church elders. Your participation in these groups helps keep our shepherds aware of the twists and turns of your life so that you might take full advantage of the “the fellowship of the Holy Spirit” (Philippians 2:1-2). Finally, membership at Downtown means that you embrace the mission of this congregation which is, in the words of Scripture, “to seek the lost, to bring back the strays, to bind up the wounds of the injured, to strengthen the weak” (Ezekiel 34:16). Our devotion to Christ inspires our resolve to be, as our shepherds have said in our vision statement, “outwardly focused at our spiritual core.” In other words, we are not a church of spectators who participate only passively. Instead, we aspire to be a body in which each part is equipped for “works of service” (Ephesians 4:12).

We hope this will be a church in which you, too, can use your God-given gifts in faithful, humble service to Him.