

New Hope's Philosophy of Church "Membership"

Approved by the Elders: August 5, 2009

There has been and will continue to be much debate over the biblical basis of church membership. On the one hand, the New Testament seems to infer membership through the various metaphors employed to describe the nature of the church (body, household, flock, etc.). On the other hand, those same metaphors and the teachings that surround them are more descriptive than they are prescriptive. In other words, the New Testament writers use those metaphors to describe and unpack something that was already inherently true. Namely, if someone became a follower of Christ, they became a part of the church. The New Testament has no prescribed process for people to "become a member" of a church. It is because of this that we feel there is freedom to develop current forms that fulfill the functions of membership. The following are our foundational understandings of how church involvement ought to "play out" in real experience:

1. ***When a person regularly participates in a church we believe they are inherently asking to be led to better know and become more like Christ.*** In New Testament times, church involvement was not only a spiritual reality, but it was also a functional reality. New believers seemed to inherently recognize that they needed sustained accountability, encouragement, and direction from fellow believers and church leadership. One author described it this way: "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)." Of course this was also imperfect and a messy work in progress (which is why we have all the NT letters written to correct church issues). As an application of this, we seek to lovingly and intentionally lead those the Lord brings into our midst. If an individual does not want to be led, we feel that this will become apparent via lack of participation.
2. ***The culture of New Testament Christianity was one characterized by an increasing unity of purpose, a growing community of diversely gifted servants of Christ, and a leadership community that unapologetically and passionately led the churches to more fully engage in growing in and advancing the Gospel locally and to the ends of the earth.*** Too often it seems the current understanding and experience of membership amounts to a mere formality or an institutional hoop to jump through. Furthermore, many in church leadership have observed people who engage in a membership process, get their certificate of membership, and then fade into a crowd of calloused consumers. This is counter to the culture we seek at New Hope. We believe that church connection should be filled with purpose and opportunity, and this will only be experienced as we each intentionally make ourselves available to be used of God for the advance of the Gospel. (For further study, start out by examining Acts 6:1-6; 1 Corinthians 12-14; Ephesians 4:1-16; 1 Timothy 3:1-13; Titus 1:5-9; Hebrews 13:7,17; 1 Peter 5:1-7.)
3. ***We agree that "membership" is no longer the best term to describe what we are seeking to build into people.*** Unfortunately, over the course of time "membership" as a term has often become ineffective in the local church (particularly in New Hope's case). While this term could be redefined and infused with meaning, we would rather avoid the misunderstandings and misperceptions that come from the term.¹

¹ In the rare instance in which an external organization requires us to demonstrate that an individual is a "member" of New Hope, we will document this by referral to our directory which lists all regular attenders of New Hope.

4. ***We believe the term “servant” accurately depicts what we are seeking to build into people at New Hope.*** A major challenge before us is to call people to become more than consumers of the church and its services. We believe a servant attitude is antithetical to the consumer mentality found in many churches. Servants live to give their lives away for others. We are in good company with our advocacy of servanthood because Jesus intentionally and continuously modeled the characteristics of a servant and called upon all disciples to follow His example (John 13:1-20, 31-35).
5. ***We prefer to place emphasis on joining a LIFE Group rather than going through a centralized membership process.*** In addition to being regularly exposed to clear and compelling corporate teaching, vision, and celebration, we feel growing believers are those who consistently commit to the accountability and personalized care that a LIFE Group offers. The relational, evangelistic, and flexible nature of a LIFE Group offers believers limitless opportunities to serve and express their varied gifts and callings. We also observe that much of the growth of the early church can be traced to the leaders intentionally identifying, developing, and releasing other servant-leaders to lead and care for smaller groups of believers (Acts 6:1-7). We are confident LIFE Groups are an ideal environment to develop such servant-leaders.
6. ***We see great value in developing and calling people to become part of a servant team.*** As mentioned above, a key to fulfilling our corporate vision is the multiplication of servant-leaders. New Hope’s Servant Team is composed of people who have purposefully committed themselves to the privilege of advancing the Gospel by helping accomplish New Hope’s vision. Members of the Servant Team fulfill a role similar to what the New Testament calls “deacons” (fittingly, the term “deacon” means “servant”). Servant Team members have participated in a training process, have a defined ministry role, and have committed to live according to the Servant Covenant.²

² The *Servant Team Development Process* and *Servant Team Covenant* are outlined in other documents.