

Questions and Answers About Membership at First Congregational UCC

Q. What must I believe to be a member of this church?

Ours is a non-creedal denomination, and thus there is no test of faith one must pass in order to be a member. We are specifically a Christian church, and as such, seek to live as fully as we can in the ways of Jesus. In our membership liturgy, we promise, according to the grace given us, to grow in the Christian faith, to resist oppression and evil, to show love and justice, and to witness to the work and word of Jesus Christ as best we are able. Members are asked to share in this covenant relationship of promise and journey.

Q. Has First Congregational adopted other statements that a prospective member should know about?

Yes. We have a Vision Statement, which reads as follows:

“First Congregational United Church of Christ is a Christian Community seeking to be a progressive, passionate, and compassionate presence in the Asheville area. As faith seeking and faith keeping people, we commit ourselves to follow in the ways of Jesus by honoring questions of faith, nurturing spiritual growth, embracing God’s creative diversity, and living as advocates of justice and peace.”

We also went through a lengthy process in 2001 that culminated in our decision in January 2002 to become an Open and Affirming Congregation. At that time we adopted the following covenant:

“We believe all persons are created in the image of a loving God, who not only creates but also embodies, embraces and celebrates diversity. As disciples of Jesus, we are called to restore justice wherever God’s creation is broken or divided.

We acknowledge that gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgendered persons have long been excluded, rejected and dishonored by the Church. This practice, often implicitly condoned by silence, continues today. While persons of minority sexual orientations have historically been a part of

faith communities, many, out of fear or rejection, have been unable to live openly the fullness of their lives. Others have left or never joined a church.

We also recognize that other marginalized people have been excluded. When any person's opportunity for spiritual growth and worship is limited by injustice, our own growth is restricted and our worship diminished. We celebrate that this congregation has been a welcoming community of faith and now wish to make our welcome explicit for all. Therefore:

We invite people of every race, nationality, age, gender identity, sexual orientation, marital status, ability, financial means, ethnic and spiritual background into the full life and ministry of this congregation.

As one expression of this invitation, we declare First Congregational United Church of Christ, Asheville, NC to be an 'Open and Affirming' congregation of the United Church of Christ. With God's help, we will challenge injustice based on sexual orientation. We promise to support and honor all loving and mutual relationships. With a spirit of thankfulness for all God's gifts we humbly and prayerfully enter into this covenant with one another."

Q. If I'm interested in the possibility of becoming a member, or if I have questions about membership, who should I speak to?

A. Anyone interested in learning more about membership can begin the process by speaking with Reverend Joe Hoffman (revjoehof@uccasheville.org; 252-8729) or with Terri McFadden, Chair of the Membership Committee. Reverend Hoffman is available to meet with prospective members at any time.

Q. What are the requirements for membership?

You can qualify for membership in one of the following ways:

1. By confirmation, having been baptized as a child.
2. By letter of transfer from another church.
3. By profession of faith.

If you've never been baptized, this sacrament will be done in worship before or at the time of joining. The sacrament of Baptism is the traditional entry into the Christian life. It is one

of only two sacraments in our tradition, the other being communion. It is a central part of our identity. And yet, there are times when baptism can be waived as a requirement for membership. For more information, please speak with Reverend Joe Hoffman.

Q. What does it mean to join “by profession of faith”?

A. It means that you desire to join in the life and faith of this congregation (see answer to the first question above), but that you aren’t currently a member of another church from which you are transferring.

Q. Do I have to attend an orientation or go to a special class before I can become a member?

A. We strongly encourage prospective members to know our church well before joining. This may be done in a variety of ways, including attending one of our Visitor Orientations offered every 6 – 8 weeks, taking a class on the United Church of Christ offered in Sunday School and other settings throughout the year, and by participating in our worship and various ministries. No specific class is required, but we emphasize that joining a church is an important decision, and we encourage visitors to take the time they need to make a thoughtful and informed decision about membership. If you’re visiting at the church and have given us contact information, you’ll receive a notice about upcoming classes and Visitor Orientations.

Q. Can I join this church and still retain my membership at another church?

Yes. If you have a membership in another church that you need to keep (e.g., you’re a college student whose primary residence is in another state, you only live in this area for part of the year, you’re ordained and must keep membership in another conference or denomination, etc.), you may join First Congregational UCC as an associate member. Associate members have all the rights of membership with two

exceptions - they can't vote to call a minister or to amend the constitution. If you're interested in discussing the possibility of joining as an associate member, please contact Reverend Joe Hoffman.

Q. What about my children? Do they become members of the church when I join?

- A. When parents join, their young children become preparatory members of the church. We offer a confirmation class that many of our young people attend sometime between middle school and high school. After completing confirmation class, youth are invited to join the church as full members with voting rights. Youth who are already confirmed when they come with their parents can join as full members with their parents. Youth who have not been confirmed may join the confirmation class or meet with the pastor to prepare for membership. At age 18, while we always want a new member to understand our church and our history well, young adults may join as full members with or without having been through confirmation.

R. Once I've spoken to the Minister and made a decision to join, how do I officially become a member?

- A. The Minister will work with you to set a convenient date for you to join during one of our Sunday services. Prior to that date, someone will be in contact with you to gather some biographical information about you, your partner/spouse (if applicable), and other family members. You may also be asked to fill out a brief membership questionnaire. On the Sunday that you join, you (and your family) will be called to the front of the sanctuary during service, where you'll be introduced to the congregation. After the introductions, you'll be asked to respond to a few questions asked by the Minister, and will be welcomed by the congregation as a new member.

Following is the text of the new member ceremony:

Pastor: Do you desire to affirm your baptism into the faith and people of Jesus Christ? Response: I do.

Pastor: Do you promise, by the grace of God, to follow in the ways of Jesus, to resist oppression and evil, to show love and justice, to witness to the work and word of Jesus, and to grow in your own Christian faith? Response: I promise, with the help of God.

Pastor: By your baptism you were made one with us in the body of Christ, the church. Today we rejoice in your pilgrimage of faith which has brought you to this time and place. We give thanks for every community of faith that has been your spiritual home, and we celebrate your presence in this congregation of God's people.

Pastor: Do you promise to participate in the life and mission of this family of God's people, sharing regularly in the worship of God and enlisting in the work of this local church as it serves this community and the world? Response: I promise, with the help of God.

Congregational Welcome: We welcome you with joy in the common life of this church. We promise you our friendship and prayers as we share the hopes and labors of the church of Jesus Christ. By the power of God's Spirit may we continue to grow together in God's knowledge and love and be witnesses of the living Christ.

Q. What does it mean to be a member of this church?

- A. Membership in a church is a significant decision. It is a statement of promise and covenant. Those promises are important to the life and well being of the congregation and the individuals who make up our church. Thus, membership is not to be taken lightly. And once entered into, it is to be prayerfully lived out – much as a covenant with a lifetime partner is lived out. Sometimes the experience is joyful and full of delight. At other times it is hard work. Our life together is lived in the midst of such tensions.

To be a member of this church is to join a journey of faith with a people of faith. You are asked, at the time you join, to affirm your baptism into the Christian faith. Baptism is an outward and visible symbol of the inward and invisible grace of God. It symbolizes a life that will be lived in the ways of Jesus, knowing the power of forgiveness, the renewal of the

Spirit, and the knowledge of the call to be God's people always. When you join this church, you promise, by the grace of God, to follow in the ways of Jesus, to resist oppression and evil, to show love and justice, to witness to the work and word of Jesus, to grow in the Christian faith, and to participate in the life and mission of this community of God's people, sharing regularly in the worship of God and enlisting in the work of this local church as it serves the community and the world.

These promises are not empty words. These statements, while not statements of particular, unchanging belief, are words of covenant that undergird our life as a congregation. It is on these promises that we build the church and are able to do the work of the church in the world. We seek to listen and learn from each other. We seek to resolve conflict with honesty, with compassion, with love, and with a growing understanding towards one another.

We ask you to participate regularly in the weekly worship of this church. This is the heart of our life together. We ask you to grow in your own faith, to deepen your own spirituality, to continue to ground yourself in the life of our Christian faith. We ask you to serve this church with your time, talent, and energy. To serve on committees and boards. To attend congregational meetings. To join us in service projects and in the work of justice. We also ask that you make a generous and faithful pledge to the work of the church. Our ministry is made possible by your support. We do not receive financial support from any other place than from our members and friends. Pledging is a way we can make our promise visible, and gives us important information to work from as we plan for our ministry in the year to come.

Last of all, we ask that you share with us your passion and help us know how we can support you in your faithful journey. We walk together as covenant partners.