

# THE MEANING OF MEMBERSHIP

Rev. Dr. Bill Jones

The meaning of membership in The United Methodist Church is of vital concern whether you may be a new Christian planning to unite with the church or you may be transferring your membership from another denomination. It is important to understand the vows you make. Membership in The United Methodist Church really begins with the Sacrament of Baptism. Baptism symbolizes the initiative God takes in bestowing upon us grace and mercy. It celebrates our complete dependence upon God. Through the sacrament we accept God's gift of grace and yield our lives to the leading of the Holy Spirit.

Baptism has other implications. The Apostle Paul spoke of being baptized "into Christ" (Rom. 6:3). He may well have had in mind that we are partakers of the grace of Christ through baptism, as well as being initiated into the fellowship that had its origin in Christ. As far back as the Old Testament times, as Gentiles converted into Judaism, baptism has been regarded as an entrance into the community of faith, the Church. "Those receiving the Sacrament are thereby marked as Christian disciples and initiated into the fellowship of Christ's holy Church."

We are baptized into Christ's universal Church, not into a particular denomination or congregation. It is for this reason that we are baptized only once and that our baptism is recognized by most other denominations. United Methodists, therefore, acknowledge the baptism of other Christian churches. Those persons who transfer their membership from another denomination into our church are not re-baptized.

The United Methodist Church baptizes persons of all ages. Baptism may be administered by sprinkling, pouring, or immersion. Infant baptism symbolizes in a unique way our utter dependence upon God. It gives us one of our best insights into the true meaning of baptism at any age, because neither the infant, nor we, by our own works, can earn God's grace. In a free act of outpouring love, God's grace is bestowed upon us. God accepts us.

When infants or small children are baptized, their parents or sponsors praise God for this marvelous grace made known in Jesus Christ and make the vows on their behalf. They pledge to bring them up

in the Christian faith, to teach them the Holy Scriptures, to train them to give respectful attendance upon the public and private worship of God, and to keep them under the ministry and guidance of the Church. When the children reach the age of confirmation, they affirm the vows that were made in their behalf at their baptism.

A baptized person may become a member of Williamsburg United Methodist Church by . . .

- **Profession of faith** (or confirmation for youth). If you've never been a member of any church, you can join a United Methodist congregation by professing Jesus Christ as your Lord and Savior. The church espouses one baptism; if you've been baptized, "rebaptism" is not necessary. The church will honor your Christian baptism.
- **Renewal of vows.** If you once belonged to a church but are currently inactive, you can join by renewing your Christian vows.
- **Transfer of membership.** Members of a United Methodist church or another denomination may have their membership moved to another United Methodist congregation.
- **Affiliate or associate membership.** If you have reason to retain your membership in another church (such as your hometown church if you're relocated for an extended period), you can still become an affiliate (if you're United Methodist) or associate (if you're a member of another denomination) member of a United Methodist congregation.

If you choose to become a member of this congregation on our next Membership Sunday, you will be asked the following question:

***As members of this congregation, will you faithfully participate in its ministries by your prayers, your presence, your gifts, your service, and your witness?***

1. **Prayers** – Participate in at least one activity each year aimed at helping you grow in your faith apart from worship attendance (i.e. Sunday School, Bible Study, spiritual retreats, or other short-term, small group studies);

2. **Presence** – Attend worship every Sunday unless you are sick or out of town (if you're out of town, try to attend a worship service where you are);
3. **Gifts** – Give financially in proportion to your income, with the goal of tithing;
4. **Service** – Give of your time in Christian service at least once a year through the ministry and missions of the church; and
5. **Witness** – Be prepared to tell others about God's grace in your life, no matter when or where you are.