

So, You're Becoming a New Member...

Self-Study Guide

Introduction

This guide will help you in your preparation for membership in a local Presbyterian church. In addition to this guide you will need the video clips which are included with the purchase of this material. It may also be helpful for you to have the most recent copies of the *Book of Order* and *The Book of Confessions*. Most of the insights and information you will need as a church member you will acquire through experience and participation. You will not be expected to master all the responsibilities of church membership before joining your local congregation. This guide focuses on fundamentals that

will be helpful in understanding who Presbyterians are and in meeting the responsibilities of membership.

This guide is for persons interested in becoming members or who perhaps have just become new members of a Presbyterian church. It will also be helpful for sessions, pastors, and others in the Church who wish to learn more about Presbyterianism. Although intended for new members, this guide is useful in various areas of church life.

Part 1—Presbyterian Membership

STEP 1

In this segment, observe the three ways people join a Presbyterian church. Narrators Ann and Bill raise important questions of belonging: “Why are people joining the church today? How do you become a member? What is expected of you?” As you watch this segment, listen for responses to these questions of belonging. Perhaps some of the reasons you hear will correspond with your own.

STEP 2

View video chapter 1

STEP 3

Answer the following questions:

Did some of the statements and feelings expressed by the persons on the video remind you of some of your own questions and feelings? If so, write them on a piece of paper or share them with others.

STEP 4

Read the responsibilities of church membership in the *Book of Order*, section G-5.0102. Did the people in this video help to clarify the *Book of Order* passage regarding membership? Membership carries certain responsibilities. As you look over the responsibilities, note which one will be most challenging for you.

People bring their own expectations to and receive various benefits from church membership. What benefits do you expect to receive from church membership?

STEP 5

Read the *Book of Order*, section G-5.0101.

Persons may enter into active church membership in the following ways: by profession of faith, by reaffirmation of faith in Jesus Christ, or by transfer of certificate from another church.

When persons baptized as infants reach an age when they are ready to make public their profession of faith and accept their responsibility in the life of the church, the session should invite, encourage, and help them prepare for their responsibility as active church members.

STEP 6

Reflect upon or discuss:

Which of the above methods will you use to join the church?

This segment of the video responded to questions of belonging: Why are people joining the church today? How do you become a member? What is expected of you? Were your questions answered?

Part 2—Presbyterian History in This Country

STEP 1

Read the following. (Note the Glossary and Significant Happenings that follow.) In this segment, you will be given a brief overview of the history of Presbyterians in this country. You will see that ours is a church that is both diverse and inclusive. This is one of our greatest strengths and also a constant source of tension.

Presbyterians believe that God alone is Lord of the conscience. We feel free to believe and act strongly on our beliefs. From time to time while we are exercising our faith and Christian freedom, we find ourselves bumping into other Presbyterians who believe and act just as strongly on the other side of an issue. This happens in our denomination and within our congregations. Sometimes we find it happening within our families. In the video you may be struck by the almost rhythmic separation within the Presbyterian family. You will also note how our struggles seem to continually bring us back to renewed faithful life together.

Just as the development of American society has often been turbulent, so has the development of the Presbyterian Church in this country. As Presbyterians exercised their rights to act with a free conscience, they sometimes under-exercised their responsibility for “the upholding and preservation of one another.”

In the video, you will see Presbyterians divided over issues of the Great Awakening, but reunited before the Revolutionary War. Division was again the result of great conflicts in the church as the Civil War approached. These divisions were overcome but conflicts are still emerging that need our best efforts and prayer.

In the video, you will see how Presbyterian ideas and ideals remain deeply imbedded in American values: resistance to tyranny, education, the common good, separation of church and state, representative government with shared power and authority, and personal responsibility. Which of those ideas and ideals are most appealing to you?

[illegible]

STEP 2

[View video chapter 2](#)

STEP 3

Reflect upon or discuss:

Did some of the statements and feelings expressed by the persons on the video remind you of some of your own questions and feelings? If so, write them on a piece of paper or share them with others.

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STEP 4

In the video you saw that Presbyterians are people who care about social matters, their communities, the world around them, and the common good of individuals. You saw that Presbyterians work for justice and peace. Because they believe that all truth is God's truth, they believe in education.

Glossary

Covenanters and Seceders—These were Presbyterians from Scotland or Ireland who were persecuted for their rebellious attitudes toward the establishment, which, they felt, did not adhere to their strict attachment to the great principles of divine truth. They were known for their intelligence and piety.

New Side—Congregations and pastors who came out of the period of the increased revivalism nurtured by the Great Awakening in the eighteenth century. They tended to be more emotional in their religious practices, calling for conversion and spiritual evidences and frequently denounced those who did not conform to their standards.

Old Side—Congregations and pastors who rejected the demands and zeal of the New Siders. They strongly adhered to the Westminster Confession and were less concerned with the workings of the Holy Spirit.

Some Significant Happenings in American Presbyterianism

1562—Arrival of French Huguenots in Florida and South Carolina. This marks the first recorded visit of the French Reformed (Presbyterians) to the New World.

1611—Alexander Whitaker arrives in Virginia from England, organizes a church, and forms a congregational presbytery.

1629—Presbyterian Puritan colony arrive at Massachusetts Bay. By 1640, 4,000 Presbyterians are living in the Massachusetts Bay Colony.

1706—Organization of the first presbytery in Philadelphia under the impetus of Francis Makemie.

1717—The Synod of Philadelphia, Presbyterian Church of America, is organized.

1741—Division into New Side and Old Side over evangelistic fervor and methods, and plan of education for ministry.

1742—Associate Presbyterian Church begins at Londonderry, Pa., majority of which join in 1858 to form United Presbyterian Church of North America.

1743—Reformed Presbyterian Church (Covenanters) begins at Middle Octorara, Pa. Majority unite with Associate Presbyterian Church to form Associate Reformed Presbyterian Church (1782).

1745—Organization of Synod of New York. Reunites with Philadelphia in 1758, and is known after 1758 as Synod of New York and Philadelphia until the organization of the General Assembly in 1788.

1746—The growing church requires more ministers. Having undertaken the education of his four sons, William Tennent includes other candidates for the ministry in his Log College on Neshaminy Creek, about 30 miles north of Philadelphia. Soon after his death, a small group of Presbyterians secure a charter for the College of New Jersey (Princeton).

1758—Synods of Philadelphia and New York become one Presbyterian Church, accepting the main contentions of each synod, namely, that ministers of one presbytery shall not work within the bounds of another presbytery without the latter's consent. Candidates must have learning plus acquaintance with religion. Evangelism is accepted as part of the program of the church.

1776—The Rev. John Witherspoon and eleven other Presbyterians sign the Declaration of Independence.

1789—Formation of national church with the title General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church in the United States of America.

1801—Union with Congregational churches during the rapid expansion to the west.

1810—Withdrawal and organization of the Cumberland Presbyterian Church largely over the issue of educated ministry. The Cumberland church was thriving in pioneer territory where advanced education was difficult to obtain and some felt unnecessary. The majority reunite in 1906.

1837—The Old School rejects the former union with Congregational churches, and the New School holds on to it. Church divides on this issue.

1857—The New School, mostly in the West, divides again over the issue of slavery. The United Synod of the Presbyterian Church withdraws to form a southern branch of Presbyterianism.

1858—The United Presbyterian Church of North America is formed by the union of the Associate (Presbyterian) Synod (1742) and the General Synod of the Associate Reformed Church (1782).

1861—The Presbyterian Church of the Confederate States is founded. In 1864, the United Synod of the Presbyterian Church unites with the Presbyterian Church of the Confederate States to form the Presbyterian Church in the U.S. (Southern).

1870—The two northern branches, the Old School and the New School, unite again as the Presbyterian Church in the United States of America.

1870-1920—The Presbyterian Church experiences tremendous programmatic growth in areas of mission, education, evangelism, ecumenism, women's, and youth work.

1920—Union with Welsh Calvinistic Methodist Church consummated.

1930—General Assembly votes to allow women to become elders.

1956—Women admitted as ordained ministers.

1958—The United Presbyterian Church in the U.S.A. is created by union of the Presbyterian Church in the U.S.A. and the United Presbyterian Church of North America.

1983—The Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) is created by the union of The United Presbyterian Church in the U.S.A. and the Presbyterian Church U.S.

Part 5—Presbyterian Mission

STEP 1

Read the following:

In this final segment you will hear people talking about mission as a congregation responding to community needs. You will also hear people referring to mission as the organizing of new churches and church development. You will hear mission referred to as a “United School of the Church” provided by a synod. And you will hear mission referred to as ecumenical encounters, and a “missionary-in-reverse” program.

STEP 2

View video chapter 5

STEP 3

Reflect upon or discuss:

- * When do you get excited about doing the mission of the church?
- * When does your church get excited about doing mission?
- * As you continue your faith journey, in what areas of mission would you like to become involved?

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STEP 4

Write or share your reflections. Share in the struggles and enjoy your journey of faith in the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.).

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On camera hosts: Ann Gillies, Coordinator for Church and Public Relations of the General Assembly Council, and William Plank, Minister of the Word and Sacrament, Manitowoc, Wisconsin.

Executive producer and writer, Robert W. Jeambey, Synod of Lakes and Prairies.
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100 Witherspoon Street
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Call toll-free 1-800-524-2612

