

A Guide for New Members

Church Membership & You



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CRC Publications
Grand Rapids, Michigan

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ISBN 1-56212-502-8

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

Contents

Introduction	7
The Church Is a Gathering	9
So, You're a Christian!	11
To Be Reformed	13
A Confessional Church	15
The Sacraments	19
The Blessings of Worship	21
Church Membership and Discipleship	23
Church Membership and Stewardship	25
The Government of Your Church	29
Denominational Ministries	33
Experiencing Community	39
Helpful Resources	41

Introduction

Welcome to the family of God in this place! Joining a particular church is a big step in your faith journey.

You'll find that new members come to this point in their lives along different routes. For some, membership is an outcome of their adult conversion to Christianity. Some come to the church through transfer from one Christian church to another. Others may have grown up in the church, perhaps participated in the Lord's Supper as children, and now assume the responsibilities of full membership through public profession or reaffirmation of their faith. And you too come with your own faith story to tell!

This booklet has been written to help you explore what membership in the Christian Reformed Church is all about. It can help explain topics discussed at new member classes or set the stage for a visit with the pastor or church leaders.

Church membership is both a privilege and a responsibility. And it's more—it's a foretaste of being a part of God's family in heaven. No other membership on earth can offer that!

Key questions you'll want to ask about membership in this church are

- What does the Bible say about being a believer?
 - What are the steps for becoming a member of this church?
 - What is the mission of this church?
 - What ministries does this church provide for its members?
 - What does this church expect of its members?
-

The church—it's not a *typical* organization.

The Church Is a Gathering . . .

The church of Jesus Christ is composed of thousands of churches around the world. By becoming a member of this local congregation, you join yourself to believers who are knit together by the Holy Spirit into that body of Christ. Jesus said, “Where two or three come together in my name, there I am with them” (Matthew 18:20).

*The church is a gathering
of forgiven sinners,
called to be holy,
dedicated to service.
Saved by the patient grace of God,
we deal patiently with others.
Knowing our own weakness and failures,
we bring good news to all sinners
with understanding of their condition,
and with hope in God.*

—Our World Belongs to God:
A Contemporary Testimony,
section 42

So, You're a Christian!

Among the reasons why you seek church membership, one stands out: you are a Christian! What does it mean to be a Christian?

You are a Christian because of what God did for you in Christ. Christ lived and died for you. Christ rose from the dead for you. The Holy Spirit enabled you to respond to the Word in faith. The Spirit laid the Savior's life in your inner being. You are saved by grace. God did it all!

Repentance is a fruit of grace; you did not receive grace in exchange for repentance. "For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith—and this not from yourselves, it is the gift of God" (Ephesians 2:8).

The apostle Paul, likely remembering his own dramatic conversion (Acts 9), sings the praises of this wonderful grace:

- Grace tells us who we are.
As for you, you were dead in your transgressions and sins in which you used to live (Ephesians 2:1).
- Grace tells us what God did.
But because of his great love for us, God, who is rich in mercy, made us alive with Christ even when we were dead in transgressions—it is by grace you have been saved (Ephesians 2:4-5).

If you confess with your mouth, "Jesus is Lord," and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved. For it is with your heart that you believe and are justified, and it is with your mouth that you confess and are saved. . . . "Everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved."

—Romans 10:9-10, 13

The greatest treasure in the universe is free—totally free!

- Grace tells us what we must do.
In him and through faith in him we may approach God with freedom and confidence (Ephesians 3:12).

What is true faith?

*True faith is
not only a knowledge and conviction
that everything God reveals in his
Word is true;
it is also a deep-rooted assurance,
created in me by the Holy Spirit
through the gospel,
that, out of sheer grace earned for
us by Christ,
not only others, but I too,
have had my sins forgiven,
have been made forever right with
God,
and have been granted salvation.*

—Heidelberg Catechism,
Q&A 21

The jailer at Philippi learned all about grace and faith in one earth-shaking experience (Acts 16:16-40). He was in charge of Paul and Silas, who were thrown in prison for preaching Christ. When God’s hand shook the prison and rattled the doors wide open, the frightened jailer could only think of suicide. But Paul stopped him just in time. “What must I do?” the jailer pleaded. Paul answered, “Believe in the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved—you and your household.” In that same dark night, Paul and Silas “spoke the word of the Lord to him and to all the others in his house. . . . Immediately he and all his family were baptized.” Marvelous grace! True faith!

To Be Reformed

During the sixteenth century, under the leadership of such Reformers as Martin Luther and John Calvin, believers returned to the Word of God as the only gospel of salvation and the rule of Christian conduct (Romans 10:17; 1 Corinthians 1:18; James 1:18). What does it mean when a church says it stands on this Reformed tradition?

To be a Reformed Christian means you believe that

- God created everything for his glory (Colossians 1:16; Revelation 4:11).
- God also provided for everything he made, creature and creation alike (Nehemiah 9:6; Matthew 10:30).
- God created people in his image and promised to keep company with his children. The Bible calls this the *covenant* (Genesis 9:17; Psalm 111:5). The Garden of Eden was a place of covenant keeping. God loved and cared for Adam and Eve, and they loved and served God in return. Sin worked havoc with this beautiful arrangement. What a fiasco! God and fallen humankind separated; Adam and Eve were driven from Paradise.
- God never gave up on the covenant promises. God sent his Son Jesus Christ to save and redeem sinners, and, through the Holy Spirit, to restore them to God for loving service. Since this great redemption is from start to finish the product of God's grace we call it *sovereign grace*. Believers walk with their God

*As God's creatures we are made in his image
to represent him on earth,
and to live in loving communion with him.
By sovereign appointment we are
earthkeepers and caretakers:
loving our neighbor,
tending the creation,
and meeting our needs.
God uses our skills
in the unfolding and well-being of his world.*

—Our World Belongs to God:
A Contemporary Testimony,
section 10

in a new covenant, the *covenant of grace*. Serving God in this covenant spans our entire existence.

That's why the Reformed vision is one of wholeness. Both creation and redemption (*re-creation*) are God's work. And God's people serve him everywhere—in their personal life, in society, and as keepers of God's creation. Through Christ, the entire world is now the place of covenant keeping. "For from him and through him and to him are all things. To him be the glory forever! Amen" (Romans 11:36).

Look to the Spirit, who is the finisher and perfecter of the Father's creation. The Holy Spirit

- inspired the writing of the Scriptures.
 - prepared God's people for the coming of Christ.
 - supported the Savior in his suffering.
 - built the believers into the New Testament church.
 - gives sinners faith to accept Christ as Savior.
 - enables Christ's followers to experience joy.
 - equips believers to live out their Savior's will.
 - helps believers walk in godliness.
-

To live this full-orbed Christian task is a daunting challenge! We can only do it when we depend on the Holy Spirit.

A Confessional Church

The Bible is God’s message to us, the trustworthy good news, the “good-spell,” the gospel, our dependable guide into all truth. Through human authors it was inspired by the Holy Spirit; it is “God-breathed.” That’s why we trust and obey the Bible. And that’s why it is authoritative for the church (Deuteronomy 8:3; Isaiah 55:11; John 1:1-5; 16:13; 17:17; 1 Thessalonians 2:13; 2 Timothy 3:16; 2 Peter 1:21).

The Bible tells us that God made the universe and created people in his image, provided redemption for fallen sinners by giving his Son to be their Savior and Lord, and through the Spirit formed the universal Christian church, whose members are the citizens of the new kingdom. The Bible, therefore, is the source of truth for the church’s teachings and practices; it is the church’s sure foundation.

Bible-based Confessions

Though the Christian Reformed Church believes the Bible to be the only reliable source for our faith, it also holds six confessions (sometimes called creeds, from the Latin *credo*, meaning “I believe”) as truthful because they are based on the Bible. We’ll look at each of these briefly. (You’ll find these ecumenical creeds and doctrinal standards in the back of the *Psalter Hymnal*, pp. 813-949.)

Apostles’ Creed

This most widely accepted creed of the universal Christian church stems from the early second century and is a summary of the apostles’ teachings. It sets forth their doctrine “in sublime simplicity, in unsurpassed brevity, in

beautiful order and with liturgical solemnity” (*Psalter Hymnal*, p. 813). The creed tells about the work and person of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. It is probably an expansion of the baptismal formula (Matthew 28:19).

Nicene Creed

This ancient creed is also trinitarian and can be seen as an expansion of the Apostles’ Creed, written in opposition to the heresy of Arianism, which teaches that only the Father is eternal and that the Son was created. This creed emphasizes that both the Father and the Son are eternal God.

Athanasian Creed

This creed too takes issue with Arianism and affirms that both the Father and the Son are eternal. It also deals with Christ’s incarnation, stressing that Christ has both a divine and a human nature and thus is able to reconcile us to God and represent us before him.

Belgic Confession

This creed from the Reformation era is a comprehensive statement of the Christian faith: God’s person and work, the nature of Scripture, creation and the fall of humanity, Christ’s person and work, the church, the sacraments, and the return of Christ.

Heidelberg Catechism

Written in 1563, the Heidelberg Catechism is the book of doctrinal instruction par excellence for churches of Reformed persuasion. Drafted in question and answer form, it explores the greatness of human *sin*, the gift of *salvation* provided by God through Christ and the Holy Spirit, and the new life of *service* as an expression of gratitude for salvation.

Canons of Dort

The Canons were drafted by the international Synod of Dort in 1618-19. This creed does not intend to set forth a summary of the faith but, rather, to take issue with the Arminians, who denied that salvation is totally the product of God’s grace. The Canons are a forthright declaration that our redemption is from start to finish the work of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, grounded in eternity.

For centuries, these six creeds defined the beliefs of members of the Christian Reformed Church. In 1986, the synod of the Christian Reformed Church adopted a contemporary testimony called *Our World Belongs to God*

(see *Psalter Hymnal*, pp. 1019-1038). It serves as a testimony of faith for our times and as a guide for discussion of current issues in the church.

The confessions can serve as a tool for your personal devotion time. In the Belgic Confession, you can read about

- the love and power of God, your heavenly Father.
- God’s matchless providence in your life and the world around you.
- God’s wonderful care for you in Christ.
- the agony of Christ’s suffering but also the power of his resurrection.
- the great certainty of your faith because of the presence of the Holy Spirit.
- the precious gift of unity, which believers may enjoy in Christ.
- God’s unsurpassed love for the church.

The Heidelberg Catechism has its own gems of encouragement and consolation. In answer to the question “What is your only comfort in life and in death?” (Lord’s Day 1), many generations of believers have responded, “That I am not my own, but belong—body and soul, in life and in death—to my faithful Savior Jesus Christ.” Read the catechism to learn more about

- reasons for exercising Christian patience.
 - the challenges of the Christian life.
 - the blessings of following God’s will.
 - the hope of eternal life.
-

Creeds—Who Needs Them?

“We believe that this Holy Scripture contains the will of God completely and that everything one must believe to be saved is sufficiently taught in it” (*Belgic Confession*, article 7). Then why does the church—why do we—need the creeds?

The church is called upon to do three basic things:

- The church must present its members with the way of salvation and a code of Christian conduct based on the Bible.

The churches of the Reformation laid down these biblical teachings in the confessions.

- The church is called to present a unified testimony to the world about what the Bible says, how it interprets the Bible, and how it applies the Bible to daily living.

One clear message of God’s love is brought in word and deed as believers live out biblically based confessions.

- The church as a body of believers is to test its confessions against the Word of God.

Confessions are sometimes called forms of unity. Believers read the Bible communally. Together they test the pronouncements of the creeds with the Bible and expect the confessions to reflect biblical truths. This prac-

tice created a sense of unity and agreement among the churches of the Reformation and does so in the church today.

As a member of the Christian Reformed Church, you are expected to be in agreement with what the church's six creeds teach. Should you find yourself in disagreement with any part of the creeds, you would do well to discuss this with the elders; perhaps the difference can be resolved or put in a helpful perspective. Should you find yourself in disagreement with these six confessions in major matters of the faith, and you are convinced that no amount of consultation could remove your objections, you would do better to join a church that you think better reflects biblical truth.

This may all sound a bit forbidding. Remember, however, that even though the Christian Reformed Church considers its confessions to be true interpretations of God's Word, and therefore agreed to by its membership, it does not place them on par with the Bible. The Belgic Confession states, "Therefore we must not consider human writings—no matter how holy their authors may have been—equal to the divine writings . . ." (article 7).

Through the generations the confessions have proven to be a great blessing to the church. The confessions have enabled believers to stand together in faith and in practice and to present a united front to the world. They can also help you live as one of Jesus' disciples in today's world.

The Sacraments

The sacraments of baptism and the Lord's Supper are God's love gifts to believers. For some who were baptized as infants, membership opens the way for partaking of the sacrament of the Lord's Supper (also called communion or Eucharist). For some, joining a particular church means receiving the sacrament of baptism along with admission to the Lord's table. And for other adults who join this church, membership involves bringing their children for baptism (see Matthew 19:14; Acts 2:39; 1 Corinthians 7:14).

The sacraments and the written gospel are closely connected. The Word of God *brings* you to salvation and *nourishes* you in your Christian life (Romans 10:14-17; 1 Corinthians 1:18; 15:1-2; James 1:18). The sacraments add nothing to the gospel; they *portray the gospel* and *assure believers* that they share in the gospel's promises. Sacraments are *signs* and *seals* of salvation.

In holy baptism, God portrays and certifies the washing away of our sins through the blood of Christ (Matthew 28:19; Mark 16:15-16; Acts 22:16; 1 Peter 3:21; Colossians 2:11-12).

In the Lord's Supper the bread we eat and the wine (or grape juice) we drink portray the Lord Jesus' offering his body and blood for our sins and reassure us that our salvation is firmly

*We believe that our good God,
mindful of our crudeness and weakness,
had ordained sacraments for us
to seal his promises in us,
to pledge his good will and grace toward us,
and also to nourish and sustain our faith.*

*He has added these to the Word of the gospel
to represent better to our external senses
both what he enables us to understand by his Word
and what he does inwardly in our hearts,
confirming in us
the salvation he imparts to us.*

*For they are visible signs and seals
of something internal and invisible,
by means of which God works in us
through the power of the Holy Spirit.*

—The Belgic Confession, article 33

established in him (Matthew 26:26-28; 1 Corinthians 10:16; 11:23-26). The Lord selected the elements carefully: as bread nourishes and wine quickens, so his grace revitalizes our faith.

The apostle Paul advised the believers of Corinth to engage in a special form of self-examination before partaking of the bread and wine. The sacrament had become a habit for the church members; even when they had become lax in faith and morals, they still continued taking the sacrament as if all were well. Paul called them to repentance and urged them to engage in wholesome self-examination (1 Corinthians 11:27-29). Before we participate in the Lord's Supper, we too are urged to do three things: "consider our sin and guilt . . . search our hearts to see whether we truly believe in Jesus Christ as our only Savior . . . and examine our consciences to see whether we resolve sincerely and gratefully to serve Jesus Christ as Lord . . ." (Preparatory Exhortation from "Celebration of the Lord's Supper," *Psalter Hymnal*, p. 983).

The celebration of the sacraments is a communal act; believers participate as a congregation both in baptism and the Lord's Supper. Even so, these celebrations are also intensely personal; you accept from the Lord's hand the assurance of saving grace. Treasure the sacraments. Participate in them with faithfulness, gratitude, and deepest reverence.

*Now it is certain
that Jesus Christ did not prescribe
his sacraments for us in vain,
since he works in us all he represents
by these holy signs,
although the manner in which he does it
goes beyond our understanding
and is incomprehensible to us,
just as the operation of God's Spirit
is hidden and incomprehensible.*

*Yet we do not go wrong when we say
that what is eaten is Christ's own natural body
and what is drunk is his own blood—
but the manner in which we eat it
is not by mouth but by the Spirit,
through faith.*

—Belgic Confession, article 35

The Blessings of Worship

If you could visit the world of the early Christian church, you would observe stunning differences between that group and the church in today's society. But one thing would be familiar to you: you would see people worshiping God. And in their worship services you would recognize these familiar elements:

- preaching
- prayer
- praise
- confession
- singing
- offerings
- fellowship

Worship does now what it did then—it enables church members to glorify God together and to be built up in their faith and Christian life. Like the early Christians, we are challenged to “consider how we may spur one another on toward love and good deeds. Let us not give up meeting together, as some are in the habit of doing, but let us encourage one another—and all the more as you see the Day [of Christ's return] approaching” (Hebrews 10:24-25).

In worship, believers meet their God. It is a two-way street: God addresses us through Word and grace, and we respond to God in faith, praise, and prayer. Through worship,

- you join God's people in bringing glory to God.
- your faith is enlightened and strengthened.

Worship is the primary business of the church, not first of all to do anything, but to be church, the redemptive community offering God the adoring love and worship of her life.

—William Temple

The Old Testament people were a worshipping community. To see what they did and what they received in worship, check these texts:

Psalm 5:7
Psalm 22:25-29
Psalm 24:3-6
Psalm 29:1-2
Psalm 86:7-13
Psalm 95:6-7
Psalm 132:7-9
Psalm 138:1-3

For an interesting description of the why and how of Old Testament worship, read 1 Chronicles 16:7-36.

The New Testament teaches us more about the joyful nature of worship in these texts:

Luke 4:16-21
John 4:19-26
Acts 2:42-47
Acts 3:1
Acts 13:13-16
Acts 17:1-4
Acts 18:4
Acts 24:11-16
Colossians 3:15-17
Hebrews 4:16
Revelation 4:9-11
Revelation 5:8-14
Revelation 7:9-10

- your sense of belonging is enhanced.
- you are challenged to and equipped for service.
- you find consolation in sorrow and pain.
- you are assured of pardon for sin.

In worship we enter into the presence of God. Be intentional about your preparation for entering God's holy presence. Here are some suggestions for how to prepare yourself for worship:

- Meditate and dwell on God's promises.
- Confess your sins; put your worries in their place.
- Pray for the pastor, the worship leaders, the musicians, and the congregation.

You will be a blessing to your church family when, motivated by love and goodwill, you are

- faithful in church attendance.
- faithful in partaking of the sacraments of baptism and the Lord's Supper.
- faithful in contributing your love and resources to the ministry of the church.

Church Membership and Discipleship

Christians are called to be disciples. The word *disciple* comes from the Latin word *discipulus*, meaning a learner, a pupil, a master's follower.

Discipleship is a trusted biblical institution. Disciples followed their master-teacher, learned from him, and sought to practice what he taught. They made his teaching their way of life. Moses had disciples (John 9:28). So did John the Baptizer (Matthew 11:2) and the Pharisees (Matthew 22:16).

Initially, Jesus had an inner circle of twelve followers whom he called "disciples" (Matthew 20:17). Later, all followers of Jesus were called disciples (Acts 11:26). These new believers had a lot of growing to do in their understanding and service. Peter denied Jesus (John 18:25-27), Thomas doubted him (John 20:24-25), the disciples deserted him (Mark 14:50). For Paul the Christian life was a frustrating struggle at times (Romans 7:14-25). Some believers at Ephesus didn't know that the Holy Spirit existed (Acts 19:1-3). Yet all these believers became useful for their Savior; they learned to be disciples.

Jesus was sent by God the Father to be your perfect teacher. Through the Spirit's work in you, you can follow Jesus and learn to do his work. You can experience communion with fellow disciples in this local church as you, individually and together,

- study the Bible.

Jesus promised, "But the Counselor, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name, will teach you all things and will remind you of everything I have said to you" (John 14:26).

*Believers one and all,
as members of this community,
share in Christ
and in all his treasures and gifts.*

*Each member
should consider it a duty
to use these gifts
readily and cheerfully
for the service and enrichment
of the other members.*

—Heidelberg Catechism, Q&A 55

- pray.
“The Spirit helps us in our weakness. We do not know what we ought to pray for, but the Spirit himself intercedes for us with groans that words cannot express” (Romans 8:26).

- confess Christ’s name.
Jesus said, “Whoever acknowledges me before men, I will also acknowledge him before my Father in heaven” (Matthew 10:32).

- share Christ’s love with others.
“For I was hungry and you gave me something to eat,

I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you invited me in, I needed clothes and you clothed me, I was sick and you looked after me, I was in prison and you came to visit me. . . .

Whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers of mine, you did for me” (Matthew 25:35-36, 40).

- live a life of obedience and service.

*The Spirit thrusts
God’s people into worldwide mission.
He impels young and old,
men and women,
to go next door and far away
into science and art,
media and marketplace
with the good news of God’s grace.
The Spirit goes before them and with them,
convincing the world of sin
and pleading the cause of Christ.*

—Our World Belongs to God:
A Contemporary Testimony, section 32

Paul gives a blueprint for living a life of discipleship: “Love must be sincere. Hate what is evil; cling to what is good. Be devoted to one another in brotherly love. Honor one another above yourselves. Never be lacking in zeal, but keep your spiritual fervor, serving the Lord” (Romans 12:9-11).

Does the prospect of such discipleship fill you with apprehension? Then stay close to God, seek Christ’s company, and lean on the continued guidance of the Holy Spirit.

Church Membership and Stewardship

Stewardship is as big as life. The word *stewardship* comes from *stay* (a place, a hall), *ward* (to keep or defend), and *ship* (as in shape, create, make). Stewards keep the place clean and safe, they bring well-being to life, they are responsible keepers of God's world. Stewards stand in the tradition of Adam and Eve when they cultivated and protected the Garden of Eden. Stewards are God's representatives on earth.

One segment of your stewardly calling is the use of your personal resources for the benefit of the local church and God's kingdom. Giving for church and kingdom has a strong biblical foundation. Old Testament believers were challenged to give 10 percent of their income for God's service (Genesis 28:22; Leviticus 27:30, 32; Deuteronomy 14:22-29). Christ affirmed the 10 percent principle (Matthew 23:23-24) but severely chided the Pharisees, who limited their giving to exactly a tenth of their fruits and crops but neglected to practice the greater ideals of justice, mercy, and faithfulness.

Should we as New Testament Christians still tithe? In his study *Becoming a Firstfruits Congregation* (Barnabas Foundation/CRC Publications/RCA Foundation), Robert C. Heerspink stresses both the abiding value of Old Testament norms and the New Testament emphasis on love as a motivation for giving (pp. 52-54). He points out that the Old Testament practice of tithing embodied certain lasting principles. A tenth was a significant portion of a person's income, especially in a subsistence culture. And the amount of the tithe increased with income. Our giving too should be marked by generosity. Ten percent is a good benchmark, but the greater our financial blessings, the greater the gift we should return to the Lord. The New Testament, while acknowledging the Old

Testament principle, stressed the importance of our motivation for giving—namely, our gratitude for salvation in Christ, which becomes evident in our actions. Giving of both our personal and financial resources is one way we express this gratitude to God.

Commenting on Paul’s advice to the Corinthians, Heerspink suggests four marks of Christian giving (pp. 58-59):

- Our giving should be systematic.
Paul instructed the Corinthian Christians to give weekly on the Lord’s Day (1 Corinthians 16:2).
- Our giving should be proportional.
The Corinthian Christians were to give in keeping with their income (1 Corinthians 16:2).
- Our giving should be without compulsion.
Paul suggests love, not a fixed percentage, as the motive for our giving (2 Corinthians 8:8; 9:7).
- Our giving should be done expectantly.
Generous sowing will lead to generous reaping (2 Corinthians 9:6, 11).

And now, brothers, we want you to know about the grace that God has given the Macedonian churches. Out of the most severe trial, their overflowing joy and their extreme poverty welled up in rich generosity. For I testify that they gave as much as they were able, and even beyond their ability. Entirely on their own, they urgently pleaded with us for the privilege of sharing in this service to the saints. And they did not do as we expected, but they gave themselves first to the Lord and then to us in keeping with God’s will.

—2 Corinthians 8:1-5

This compact passage tells us that giving

- is a privilege.
- stems from a redeemed heart.
- is an expression of generosity.
- sometimes comes from scarcity.
- often stems from fresh personal initiatives.
- is preceded by self-surrender to the Lord.
- is often prompted by compassion for the needy.
- is a response to God’s grace and goodness.

With an appeal to 1 Corinthians 9:15-23 and Philippians 4:14-19, Heerspink adds that giving is part of Christian *koinonia*, a “partnership in the gospel” (pp. 60-61). When we share our financial resources to meet needs, we enhance the spiritual fellowship of the church.

Your Personal Stewardship

Stewardship does not happen in a vacuum. You practice it in your own church and community, which have their own needs and challenges.

You’ll want to acquaint yourself with your church’s program and financial needs. Your church council submits the annual budget at the annual congregational meeting and explains each line item. Participating in this discussion will help you fully understand the ministry challenges and the resources needed to meet those challenges.

A careful assessment of your church’s budget and your own means and income will help you determine the actual amount

you should contribute on a weekly basis (1 Corinthians 16:2). Most churches also provide their members with guidelines that you may find helpful.

Note again that stewardship is much more than giving money. Your church has ministries that need your time, your energy, your unique skills, and your leadership. Even more important are your gifts of intercessory prayer and love for your church family.

As caretakers of God's world, you represent your Savior in a society of which you are a part. All around us is pain and distress. But there are also men and women who bring solace and justice. Give them a helping hand. Share in Christian and humanitarian enterprises in your community as well.

Your church also supports many ministries beyond its borders—literally around the globe. (For a description of these ministries, see the section titled Denominational Ministries, pp. 33-37.) Your careful stewardship makes that possible. Giving makes you truly a cosmopolitan person!

Stewardly living reminds us of God's own generosity to us. That, in turn, deepens our trust in God and ennobles our lives.

“. . . and whoever sows generously will also reap generously.”

—2 Corinthians 9:6

The Government of Your Church

When you become a member of a local Christian Reformed Church, you become a participant in its governmental deliberations. Your voice will be heard.

Christ, the Head

Your congregation is not governed democratically. It does not have a board whose members are first of all accountable to the membership. Written large in the charter of your church is that Christ is the supreme ruler of the community of believers (Matthew 28:18-20). The assembly of office-bearers who rule the church are responsible to Jesus Christ, the Head of the church. (In the Christian Reformed Church, the assembly of elders is called *consistory*. When elders and deacons meet together, they are known as *council*.)

How does this form of government work out in the affairs of the local congregation? Here's a brief picture of the church in action:

- Members of the church submit themselves to Christ's rule by seeking the guidance of the Word of God in their lives. Individual members also agree to be accountable to each other in matters of faith.
- In the affairs of the church, members submit themselves to the rule of the elders, who represent the authority of Christ (Matthew 16:19; Ephesians 4:11-13; 1 Timothy 5:17). The institution of the office of elder dates from

Our merciful Father in heaven, we thank you that you have provided faithful and gifted people to serve as elders and deacons. . . . In their work, grant them a sense of sustained awe which is rooted in daily adoration of you, their Lord.

—Prayer from "Ordination of Elders and Deacons,"
Psalter Hymnal, p. 1005

early New Testament times (Acts 11:30; 14:23; 15:6-7; 20:28; 1 Timothy 5:17; Titus 1:5; James 5:14; 1 Peter 5:1-2).

- Deacons promote faithful stewardship and show Christian mercy in Christ's name to the needy and to victims of injustice. Deacons were first appointed by the apostles in the early church (Acts 6:1-6; 2 Corinthians 8-9).

Collegial Government

You may feel a bit uncomfortable with belonging to an institution that is not governed democratically. But keep the following in mind:

- Elders rule as servants in obedience to Christ, who said, "Whoever wants to become great among you must be your servant, and whoever wants to be first must be your slave—just as the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many" (Matthew 20:26-28).
- Elders know that a congregation is composed of mature believers who share the offices of prophet, priest, and king with Christ and who have access to God through the Word and prayer. That's why elders will regularly consult with members, and that's why your attendance at congregational meetings is so important.
- The church council is composed of several officebearers. They do their work collegially and make decisions in a deliberative setting. No officebearer has the right to make decisions of consequence alone.
- The church council is not a self-perpetuating body. At the annual congregational meeting, the congregation chooses its officebearers. Use the privilege of voting carefully.
- Leadership is not confined to the council. Diligent and thoughtful members assert influence by their every word and deed. Perhaps you have the gift of edification, teaching, or administration; perhaps you can serve on one of the many committees. Be involved!

Broader Assemblies

Local Christian Reformed churches are part of a broader community of churches. This provides members an opportunity to experience a wider unity of faith and to engage in ministries far beyond the borders of one locality. Two assemblies make up this broader community:

Classis

A grouping of some twenty churches in a given geographic area forms a *classis*. A classis administers regional programs that churches conduct together

and may also assist local churches in problems they cannot solve on their own. The authority of a classis is delegated to it by the councils of the participating congregations. Most classes meet three times a year. Each local council delegates one minister and one elder to classis; some classes also seat deacons as members.

Synod

The ministry of the denomination as a whole is conducted by the *synod* within the authority delegated to it by the classes. Synod also addresses problems and matters that the classes cannot resolve. Synod usually meets once a year and is composed of delegations of two ministers and two elders from each participating classis.

Members of the local church are kept informed about the actions of these larger assemblies through their local councils and through *The Banner*, the official biweekly publication of the denomination. Also, the *Agenda for Synod* and the *Acts of Synod* are published annually to summarize the deliberations of this body of delegates.

Denominational Ministries

The Christian Reformed Church is involved in ministry throughout North America and around the world. Following is a description of these ministries.

Educational Institutions

Since its early history, the Christian Reformed Church has supported the training of its members for their roles in God's kingdom through two institutions:

- **Calvin College**, a liberal arts college located in Grand Rapids, Michigan. Calvin seeks to conduct its teaching and research programs from a biblical perspective and Reformed commitment. Its campus is home to over four thousand undergraduate students. Graduate programs are available in a number of academic areas.
- **Calvin Theological Seminary** in Grand Rapids, Michigan. The seminary trains students for the ministry both in the regular pastorate and in several types of specialized ministries. Post-graduate education toward a Ph.D. is also provided on the campus shared with Calvin College.

Over the past several decades, a number of other higher education institutions with Christian Reformed roots have been established throughout the United States and Canada. Seeking to integrate a biblical, Reformed perspective in their academic programs, these colleges are

- **Dordt College**, a liberal arts college in Sioux Center, Iowa.
- **The Institute for Christian Studies**, a graduate program in Toronto, Ontario, Canada.
- **The King’s University College**, a four-year undergraduate program in Edmonton, Alberta, Canada.
- **Redeemer Reformed Christian College**, an independent, undergraduate Christian university in Ancaster, Ontario, Canada.
- **Reformed Bible College**, a bachelor-degree program in Grand Rapids, Michigan.
- **Trinity Christian College**, a liberal arts college in Palos Heights, Illinois.

Along with its dedication to Christ-centered higher education, the Christian Reformed Church has supported Christian day-school education for over a century. **Christian Schools International** (CSI) serves more than 425 Christian schools in Canada and the United States.

Denominational Ministry Agencies

Local churches have faithfully supported the ministries of the Christian Reformed Church as carried on by these agencies:

- **The Back to God Hour**
As the “radio voice” of the Christian Reformed Church, the Back to God Hour proclaims the gospel in nine languages around the globe, mostly via radio, but also through television, telephone, and the Internet.
- **CRC Publications**
CRC Publications provides church school materials for toddlers through adults, small group materials, hymnals like the *Psalter Hymnal* and *Songs for LiFE*, and numerous resources for church leaders. It publishes two periodicals: *The Banner* and *Reformed Worship*. It also publishes the Friendship Series for people with mental impairments and Open Door Books for adult new readers.
- **Christian Reformed Home Missions**
Home Missions supports evangelism efforts in Canada and the United States through revitalization programs for established churches, new-church development, campus ministry, and other programs, including Coffee Break and Men’s Life. Each year, Home Missions provides financial support for more than twenty-five new churches, many composed primarily of non-Caucasian members.

- **Christian Reformed World Missions**
World Missions proclaims the gospel and develops churches in some thirty countries in Africa, Asia, Europe, and Latin America. Over three hundred full-time, associate, and short-term missionaries serve with World Missions. It works with Reformed and Presbyterian churches throughout the world to bring the gospel to more than two million people. Through these ministries an estimated fifty thousand people are won for Christ every year.

- **Christian Reformed World Relief Committee**
This diaconal arm of the Christian Reformed Church focuses on child health, adult literacy, and programs to increase family incomes and people's ability to work together in community-building. Because of the inordinate number of natural disasters around the globe in recent years, CRWRC's relief ministry has greatly increased. Since the blight of poverty has spread across the nations on an ever-widening scale, CRWRC has worked hard at building coalitions among relief organizations and agencies.

- **Denominational Ministries**
These five distinct ministries seek to address unique needs within the denomination:
 - **Abuse Prevention** seeks to raise awareness of the reality of abuse in church circles, helps victims of abuse, and assists churches as they minister to the abused and abusers.
 - **Chaplaincy Ministry** coordinates the placing of some eighty-five full-time chaplains who bring Christian hope and reconciliation in military settings, hospitals, correction facilities, and nursing homes.
 - **Disability Concerns** increases awareness of the needs of people with disabilities, provides information and services to them, and assists churches in removing barriers.
 - **Pastor-Church Relations** encourages healthy relationships between clergy and congregations. It equips and trains regional pastors in every classis to serve pastors in the classis and also teams newly ordained pastors with a mentor.
 - **Race Relations** raises awareness of racism, develops leadership to combat racism, provides consultation in racism situations, and serves as an advocate for ethnic-minority members of the churches.

- **Dynamic Youth Ministries**
GEMS (Girls Everywhere Meeting the Savior) Girls' Clubs, Calvinist Cadet Corps, Early Teens Ministries, and Youth Unlimited are the work of this youth-ministries agency. These programs provide churches with a wide variety of effective educational, inspirational, and training resources. Highly successful conventions are organized periodically for youth and youth leaders.
- **World Literature Ministries**, a division of CRC Publications, coordinates the publication of materials in Spanish, Korean, and Russian and is the largest publisher of Reformed books in Spanish in the world.

Ministry Shares

Every year the synod of the Christian Reformed Church considers how much each church will contribute toward designated denominational ministries. Such local church contributions are called *ministry shares*.

Ministry shares provide only a part of the funds needed to make these ministries possible. The larger agencies like World Missions, Home Missions, and Back to God Hour receive less than half of their budget from ministry shares. Others, like CRC Publications, receive only a small amount. Some, such as the Christian Reformed World Relief Committee, receive no ministry shares at all and are completely dependent on gifts collected locally, mostly by the deacons.

The local church looks to you and your fellow members to make ministry shares and other financial support of these denominational ministries possible. You may contribute to any of these causes directly or through your local church offerings. (For a list of ministry share recipients and other recommended causes, visit with your local church treasurer or check the latest edition of the *Yearbook* for the Christian Reformed Church in North America.)

Ministry Involvement

In addition to supporting the ministries of the Christian Reformed Church with your financial gifts, you can also be more directly involved in these ministry programs. We encourage you to

- keep informed.
The Banner regularly reports on actions undertaken and blessings received. In addition, *CRC Source*, a quarterly newsmagazine for the agencies of the Christian Reformed Church, is mailed to member households in the United States and distributed to members through the churches in Canada.

- be a prayer warrior.
God's great works on earth are accomplished through prayer! (Psalm 17:6; 20:6; Matthew 21:22; John 15:7; 2 Thessalonians 1:11).
- volunteer your time and talents.
Without the help of volunteers, most of these ministries would have to curtail their programs. Volunteers visit people who have contacted the Back to God Hour, bring relief to victims of disasters and care to the sick under CRWRC auspices, teach or witness in various parts of the world as associates of World Missions and Home Missions, and perform hundreds of other tasks through the agencies. Contact the ministry of your choice and ask for detailed information about how you can serve. (Addresses and phone numbers are listed in the *Yearbook*.)

Experiencing Community

When you become a member of a local church, you will join the community of God's people. It is a foretaste of being part of the redeemed in heaven, praising God forever.

Here are some steps you may wish to take to experience community in this church:

1. Take a survey of the the church's overall ministry program in these areas:
 - study-oriented activities
 - fellowship-oriented activities
 - service-oriented activities
2. Assess your own interests and gifts and your personal and work responsibilities when choosing activities in which you wish to participate.
3. Join a small group (also called cottage groups, district groups, households, and so on) to deepen your faith and strengthen fellowship.
4. Pray for fellow members and for the church's ministry programs.

As you become involved in the work of the church, you will get to know individual members of the church family in a whole new way. You will sense a unique spiritual quality about this community of believers that makes you want to be a part of it. You will grow in your faith walk alongside others who, like you, are striving to praise God in every part of their lives.

*The work is solemn, therefore do not trifle.
The work is difficult, therefore do not relax.
The opportunity is brief, therefore do not delay.
The path is narrow, therefore do not wander.
The prize is glorious, therefore do not faint.*

—Author unknown

May the God of peace, who through the blood of the eternal covenant brought back from the dead our Lord Jesus Christ, that great Shepherd of the sheep, equip you with everything good for doing his will, and may he work in us what is pleasing to him, through Jesus Christ, to whom be glory for ever and ever.

—Hebrews 13:20-21

Helpful Resources

Denominational Information

The denominational headquarters of the Christian Reformed Church in North America can link you with individual agencies (see list of denominational ministry agencies, pp. 33-37). In the United States, contact

Christian Reformed Church in North America
2850 Kalamazoo Ave. SE
Grand Rapids, MI 49560
Phone: 616-241-1691
Fax: 616-224-0834
Website: <http://www.crcna.org>

In Canada, contact the denominational office at
Christian Reformed Church in North America
3475 Mainway
P.O. Box 5970, STN LCD 1
Burlington, ON L7R 3Y8
Phone: 905-336-2920
Fax: 905-336-8344

The *Yearbook*, published annually by the office of the general secretary of the Christian Reformed Church in North America, serves as a denominational directory and as a resource for statistical information. Each edition contains information about classes, local congregations, ministers, and agencies, and a review of the current church year. To order a copy, contact

Office of the General Secretary
2850 Kalamazoo Ave. SE
Grand Rapids, MI 49560
Phone: 616-224-0833
Fax: 616-224-5895
E-mail: yearbook@crcna.org

Printed Resources

Following is a list of resources referred to in this guide and others you may find helpful as a new member of the Christian Reformed Church. To request a catalog describing additional resources or to place an order, contact

CRC Publications
2850 Kalamazoo Ave. SE
Grand Rapids, MI 49560
Phone: 1-616-224-0728
or 1-800-333-8300
Fax: 616-224-0834
E-mail order: sales@crpublications.org
Editorial staff: editors@crpublications.org
Website: <http://www.crcpublications.org>

(Note specific phone, e-mail and website for contacting *The Banner* and *Reformed Worship*.)

Acts of Synod. This annual publication contains all decisions made at the annual meeting of the synod of the Christian Reformed Church.

Authentic Worship in a Changing Culture. Grand Rapids: CRC Publications, 1997. This individual or group study version of the 1997 synodical report on worship helps readers understand the dynamics of biblical worship in our changing culture.

The Banner. This biweekly periodical of the Christian Reformed Church seeks to inspire, inform, educate, and challenge members of the denomination. For order information, call 616-224-0731 or 1-800-777-7270, or e-mail subscriptions@thebanner.org. Check out *The Banner* website at <http://www.thebanner.org>.

The Baptism of Children: A Guide for Parents. Grand Rapids: CRC Publications, 1997. This helpful booklet for parents explains the sacrament of baptism and the importance of claiming God's promises for our children.

Basics for Believers: An Introduction to Reformed Teachings. Grand Rapids: CRC Publications, 1991. This video course, along with a discussion guide and

leader's guide, presents basic teachings of the Reformed/Presbyterian faith. The discussion guide can be used for personal devotions.

The CRC and You. Grand Rapids: CRC Publications, 1991. This booklet is designed for new members of the CRC and is especially helpful for those who come from an ethnic-minority background. It's available in English, Khmer, Korean, Laotian, and Spanish.

DeRidder, Richard R. and Leonard J. Hofman. *Manual of Christian Reformed Church Government*, 1994 revision. This book, updated every five to seven years, presents a commentary on the practices of the Christian Reformed Church as governed by synodical regulations and the Church Order. Available in English and Korean.

Ecumenical Creeds and Reformed Confessions. Grand Rapids: CRC Publications, 1988. This book contains the most recent versions of the Apostles', Nicene, and Athanasian creeds, the Belgic Confession, Heidelberg Catechism, and Canons of Dort.

Heerspink, Robert C. *Becoming a Firstfruits Congregation: A Stewardship Guide for Church Leaders.* Grand Rapids: Barnabas Foundation/CRC Publications/RCA Foundation, 1996. This self-directed study guide builds on a solid, biblical understanding of stewardship to encourage each of us to be thankful believers who are rich in giving to God.

The Heidelberg Catechism with Scripture Texts. Grand Rapids: CRC Publications, 1989. This study aid presents the latest translation of the Heidelberg Catechism with all the supporting Scripture texts from the New International Version (NIV).

Nurturing Your Child's Faith: Leading Your Child to the Lord's Table. Grand Rapids: CRC Publications, 1996. This pamphlet provides background information and specific suggestions to help parents encourage their children to express their faith in Jesus, a prerequisite for participation at the Lord's Supper in the Christian Reformed Church.

Our World Belongs to God: A Contemporary Testimony, Study Version. Grand Rapids: CRC Publications, 1987. This study version contains the contemporary testimony plus commentary on current issues and discussion questions for use by study groups. Also available in Spanish (*Nuestro Mundo Pertenece A Dios*).

Patterns for Prayer: 52 Weeks of Prayer Ideas. Grand Rapids: CRC Publications, 1995. This book is designed to help you develop a meaningful and disciplined personal prayer life.

Plantinga, Jr., Cornelius. *Reformed: What It Means, Why It Matters*. Grand Rapids: CRC Publications. This very readable booklet spells out four hallmarks of the Reformed faith in clear, nontechnical language. Available Fall 2000.

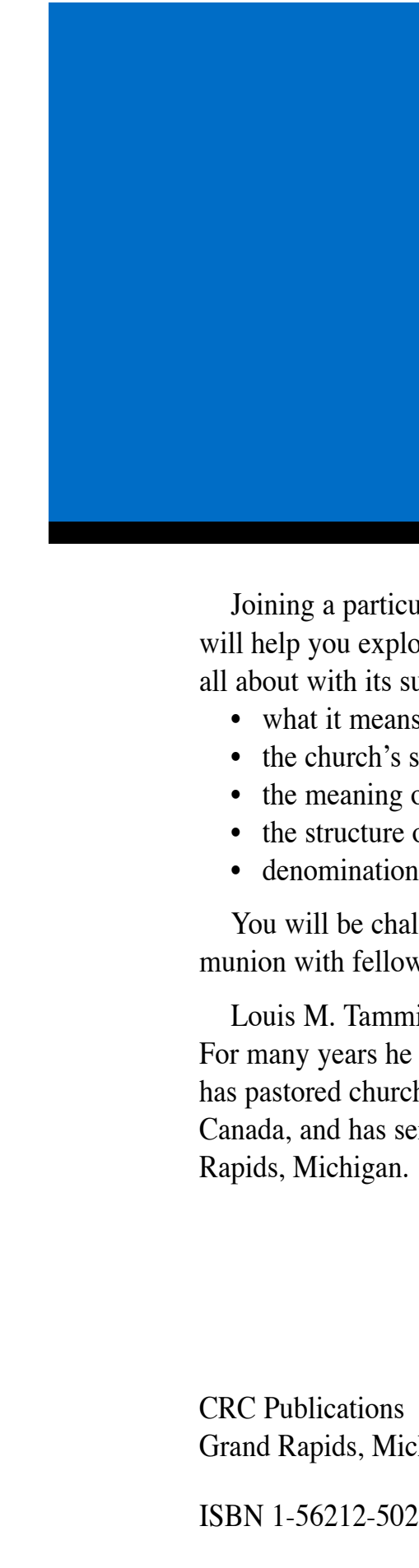
Psalter Hymnal, Worship Edition. Grand Rapids: CRC Publications, 1987, 1988. The worship edition contains the songs, ecumenical creeds, doctrinal standards, and liturgical resources of the Christian Reformed Church.

Reformed Worship. This quarterly journal provides creative resources for worship leaders. For order information, call 1-800-777-7270 or e-mail info@reformedworship.org. Check the RW website at <http://www.reformedworship.org>.

Van Dyke, Wilbert M. *Belonging: An Introduction to the Faith and Life of the Christian Reformed Church*. Grand Rapids: CRC Publications, 1982, 1987. This pamphlet explains the name, origin, beliefs, and practices of the Christian Reformed Church.

Welcome to Our Church: A Three-Minute Tour. Grand Rapids: CRC Publications, 1999. This visitor-friendly brochure explains what happens in the foyer, the fellowship hall, the nursery, and the sanctuary of a typical church.

What the Christian Reformed Church Believes. Grand Rapids: CRC Publications, 1996. This brochure provides a brief, clear introduction to the Christian Reformed Church and its teachings.



Joining a particular church is a big step in your faith journey. This booklet will help you explore what membership in the Christian Reformed Church is all about with its summary of

- what it means to be Reformed
- the church's six Bible-based confessions
- the meaning of the sacraments of baptism and the Lord's Supper
- the structure of church government
- denominational ministries

You will be challenged to experience the blessings of worship and communion with fellow disciples in a local church as you support its ministry.

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CRC Publications
Grand Rapids, Michigan

ISBN 1-56212-502-8