

Chapter 2

MEMBERSHIP

A. Essence and Necessity of Membership

550. Membership in The Wesleyan Church is conditioned upon an experience of conversion whereby a person becomes a member of the body of Jesus Christ, followed by discipleship within a family of believers for spiritual life and growth. Therefore it is of high importance that immediate steps be taken to shepherd, disciple and train believers through the process of membership for mutual accountability and ministry to the church, community, and the world (cf. 568-570; 725:11; 782:7, 880:11; 2300:5).

551. The overall mission objective of membership in The Wesleyan Church is: To acknowledge believers as belonging to the body of Christ; to disciple them into covenant relationship with The Wesleyan Church; and to equip them to minister to the church, community, and the world.

(1) **The Vision of Membership.** It is our belief and practice that The Wesleyan Church is not a collection of independent churches unrelated to each other nor just merely an association of churches, but rather we constitute a “family” of believers connected by our identity in Christ and our identity with one another. Membership serves as the common thread that unifies us within our diversity as a community with the passion for developing fully committed disciples of Christ. Membership is a ministry tool to use in the process of spiritual development, subsequent to conversion and leading to maturity in Christ. To enhance the discipleship process of maturing people toward Christlikeness, membership is used as a means of accountability. The accountability used within the community of faith is based on the primary authority of the Scriptures. We also acknowledge the role of tradition, experience, and reason to shape the collective conscience reflected in the membership accountability commitments. Membership becomes the channel whereby people are disciplined and equipped to do ministry within the church and as a witness to the world at large.

(2) **The Value of Membership.** Membership in The Wesleyan Church is built on the premise that it is a discipleship tool within the life of the church. Each local fellowship adapts its ministry scope and sequence but a common path would involve the following steps:

Relationship – The personal conversion experience with Christ. This relationship with Christ incorporates the person in the universal Church and identifies one with the fellowship of believers.

Discipleship – The process of becoming more and more like Christ with the goal to proceed further in spiritual pilgrimage and spiritual leadership.

Ministry – The potential for believers to use their gifts and abilities to serve Christ and others, and demonstrate their allegiance and accountability to the doctrine, polity, and ministry of The Wesleyan Church.

Membership provides the personal and corporate benefits of:

Believing – Membership helps people identify the essential beliefs taught in the Bible, and how these beliefs impact our lifestyle, relationships, and our witness for Christ within the church and beyond.

Belonging – Every person being served by our churches needs a sense of belonging, which in turn gives the Church a wonderful opportunity to enhance the discipling process.

Building – The task of building or discipling our believers is the paramount task of the Church, and is best accomplished through the membership process.

Blessing – A member is expected to do what makes life worthwhile – contributing and serving with the ultimate goal of reaching the world for Christ.

552. Membership Structure. Membership in The Wesleyan Church shall be covenant membership. A local church that has a discipleship program may choose to implement the community membership category as part of that discipleship process. Community membership shall not be transferable. After consultation with the district superintendent, a local church may institute the community membership option upon two-thirds vote of the covenant members present and voting at a duly called local church conference. The community membership option may be discontinued upon the recommendation of the local board of administration, and approval of the district board of administration.

B. Categories of Membership

1. Covenant Membership

553. Those persons shall be admitted to covenant membership in The Wesleyan Church who meet the conditions set forth in the Constitution (297:1-5).

(1) Candidates for covenant membership shall be examined as provided for by the local board of administration (782:7; 835-837), to determine whether they meet the requirements of the Constitution

concerning their experience of regeneration, Christian baptism, their acceptance of the Articles of Religion, Covenant Membership Commitments, Elementary Principles and the authority of *The Discipline* in matters of church government, and their willingness to enter into covenant with the Church.

(2) Covenant members will further demonstrate their life in Christ and commitment to the local church upon becoming a covenant member, by signing a covenant affirming their personal experience in regeneration and commitment to an experience of heart holiness and a life of practical holiness; their acceptance of the Articles of Religion, the Covenant Membership Commitments, the Elementary Principles and the authority of *The Discipline* in matters of church government; their support of the church; their commitment to live in fellowship with the members thereof and to seek God's glory in all things.

(3) Candidates for covenant membership who have satisfactorily passed the examination by the local board of administration, shall be voted upon by the local church conference unless the local church conference has delegated this right to the local board of administration (297:5; 655:1). In either case, it shall require a majority vote of those present and voting to receive; and if objections are urged against the reception of a member, it shall require a two-thirds vote of those present and voting.

(4) Persons who have been duly accepted for covenant membership as explained in 553:3, should be formally received into covenant membership in a public service, in which they shall make their confession and vows public, according to the manner given in 5565, and be given the right hand of fellowship by the pastor or the representative of the pastor.

555. The rights of covenant membership are set forth in the Constitution (302). Any covenant member charged with failure to uphold the Articles of Religion or to observe the Covenant Membership Commitments must be dealt with by judicial process as given in *The Discipline* (5100-5130).

2. Community Membership

558. A local church may choose to implement the community membership category. Those who are converted to Christ but who are not yet able to assume the responsibility of covenant membership, either because they are young in Christ, young in years or come from a religious background different from The Wesleyan Church in areas of doctrine or discipline, yet demonstrate willingness to be disciplined in the Wesleyan convictions, may be received as community members.

(1) The local board of administration, having provided for their examination concerning their Christian experience and their intention to prepare for covenant membership may, if satisfied, receive them by majority vote.

(2) Community members will further demonstrate their life in Christ and commitment to growth and development in the body by signing, upon becoming a community member, a Community Member Agreement affirming their personal experience in regeneration and commitment to seek after an experience of heart holiness and a life of practical holiness; their participation in a discipleship program including further instruction in the Articles of Religion, Covenant Membership Commitments and the Elementary Principles; and by their support of the church and purpose to live in fellowship with the members thereof.

(3) Community members shall be formally received according to the manner given in 5575.

560. The rights of community membership are:

(1) The fellowship of the saints and the encouragement, admonition and spiritual guidance of the ministry.

(2) Access to the sacraments and ordinances of the Church. (This does not mean that The Wesleyan Church practices closed communion—cf. 5605; 5615.)

(3) Eligibility to fill any office or position in the local church other than those for which covenant membership is required by *The Discipline*, provided that the local board of administration considers the community member sufficiently mature in years and spiritual development, exemplary in conduct and gifted for such service.

(4) Community members have the right to vote on all issues presented to the local church conference except votes on the calling or renewal of the call of pastors or associate pastors, election of members to the local board of administration, reception of covenant members, election of nominating committee members and the delegates to district conference.

(5) The right of a hearing before the local board of administration in the event of dismissal from community membership, but if after such hearing the board reaffirms the vote of dismissal there shall be no further right of appeal; joining another religious body shall of itself sever membership in the church.

563. A community member may become a covenant member at any time the community member is qualified and received as given in 553. It shall be the duty of the pastor and the local board of administration to assist a community member in qualifying for covenant membership. If upon reception into community status, the member is sufficiently mature in years,

every effort shall be put forth to prepare the community member for reception into covenant membership. As a part of its annual review of the church membership roll (cf. 782:10), the local board of administration shall review the status of each community member and assess progress toward covenant membership.

C. Reception of Members

565. Covenant members in The Wesleyan Church may be received by confession of faith or by letter. Community members shall be received by confession of faith.

568. Those who are received as covenant members after having been community members, shall be considered as having joined on confession of faith. The pastor and the local board of administration shall be responsible to provide membership training classes for all community members, training them in the biblical doctrines and standards of the Church, acquainting them with the history and organization of The Wesleyan Church, and explaining to them the meaning of the vows and covenant of covenant membership (297; cf. 5565).

570. Those who present letters of recommendation from other denominations shall be examined by the pastor and the local board of administration. If it is discovered that the persons involved have indeed been previously converted and are fully committed to the doctrines and standards of The Wesleyan Church, they may be received as by letter (cf. 5570). But if it is discovered that these persons have only now given their hearts to Christ and are seeking after a full knowledge of the truth, they shall be encouraged to prepare for covenant membership.

D. Transfer of Membership

575. When any covenant member shall request a letter of transfer to another Wesleyan church, the pastor and local church secretary shall grant it on the proper form as given in 6000-6020 providing the member is neither under discipline nor under charges. Both pastor and secretary shall sign the letter, and shall forward it to the pastor and local church secretary of the church to which the member is transferring. The letter shall be presented to the local board of administration of the receiving church at its next session, but not later than thirty days from the date of issuance, and acted upon in the manner indicated in 578. When the member has been duly received, the second part of the form shall be completed by the receiving church and forwarded to the

church granting the transfer. The date the return letter is received shall mark the expiration of membership in the church granting the letter, and in the official membership record the local church secretary shall enter opposite the member's name, the date and *Withdrawn by letter of transfer*.

578. The receiving church shall handle transfers as follows:

(1) Covenant members shall be received, subject to the approving vote of the local church conference, unless the local church conference shall have delegated this right to the local board of administration (297:5). The transfer of covenant membership may be questioned by the receiving church if it is evident that the person involved is not in a state of grace or is living in open violation of the Articles of Religion or the Covenant Membership Commitments.

(2) The membership of a pastor, senior pastor, associate pastor, or assistant pastor and of such members of the pastor's family as so desire and have the proper credentials, shall be automatically transferred to the church to which appointed, or if the pastoral charge consists of more than one church, to the church of choice. The secretary of the church from which the pastor is moving shall forward the proper forms for the pastor's membership and that of family members who so desire to the secretary of the receiving church who shall record them without any further action by the local church conference or local board of administration.

580. A covenant member of The Wesleyan Church transferring from one local church to another shall not be required to be involved in a public service of reception.

581. Community membership is not transferable.

E. Termination of Membership

585. Covenant membership in The Wesleyan Church may be terminated only by one or more of the following (305):

- (1) Voluntary withdrawal.
- (2) Joining another religious body or joining a secret order.
- (3) Expulsion after proper trial and conviction (5115:5).
- (4) Persistent neglect of church relationship as defined in 600-605.
- (5) Death.

588. Community membership in a local church may be terminated by one or more of the following:

- (1) Voluntary withdrawal.
- (2) Joining another religious body.
- (3) Removal by the local board of administration.
- (4) Persistent neglect of church relationship.

(5) Death.

(6) The discontinuance of the community membership category in the local church.

590. When any covenant member requests a letter of recommendation to some other denomination, the pastor and local church secretary shall grant it on the proper form provided in 6030, if the member is neither under discipline nor under charges. Such a person's membership in the local church granting the letter shall cease immediately, and the secretary shall enter opposite the member's name, the date and *Withdrawn by letter of recommendation*.

592. When any covenant member requests a letter of withdrawal, the pastor and local church secretary shall grant it on the proper form provided in 6040. The secretary shall enter on the record book (610), opposite the member's name, the date the letter was granted and *Withdrawn by letter of withdrawal*. If the member's withdrawal occurs during the course of a judicial investigation, the secretary shall note on the membership record, *Withdrawn under accusation*, and if withdrawal occurs during the course of a trial, *Withdrawn under charges* (cf. 5048).

595. When any covenant member joins another denomination, or other religious body exercising the functions of a church, or a secret society, no trial is necessary to remove such a member. The pastor, having investigated and ascertained the facts, shall report the same to the next session of the local board of administration, and upon the board's order the local church secretary shall enter opposite the member's name the date of the session and *Withdrawn through having joined another body*.

598. When any covenant member moves away from the church in which membership is held, and it is evident that distance will not permit full and regular participation in the life of the church, the pastor shall encourage the member to transfer membership to the Wesleyan church nearest the new residence. To that end, the pastor shall notify the General Secretary of The Wesleyan Church of the name and address of the member.

600. When any covenant member moves away from the church in which membership is held, and does not leave a forwarding address, or fails to report spiritual standing or to send financial support, or to transfer membership to the nearest Wesleyan church, after one year the member may be dropped from the roll provided that every effort has been made to contact the member and notify the member of such an intention. The member's name shall be dropped upon the recommendation of the local board of administration and the majority vote of the local church conference, unless

the local church conference shall have delegated full responsibility in such matters to the local board of administration. The secretary shall enter opposite the member's name the date of the vote, and *Discontinued by vote*.

605. When any covenant member fails to attend the services of the church where membership is held for one year without a reason deemed justifiable by the local board of administration, or to support the church financially, as able, the pastor and local board of administration shall seek to restore the member to active fellowship, but if unable to do so, the member's name may be dropped upon the recommendation of the local board of administration and the majority vote of the local church conference, unless the local church conference shall have delegated full responsibility in such matters to the local board of administration. The secretary shall enter opposite the member's name the date of the vote, and *Discontinued by vote for persistent neglect*.

F. Record of Membership

610. Each local church shall have a permanent record maintained by the local church secretary, in which shall be recorded all the names of the members, category of membership, the time when received and whether by profession of faith or by letter, the time and manner of termination of membership, whether by some manner of withdrawal, or by discontinuance for neglect, dismissal or death; and all dedications, baptisms, marriages, pastoral terms and other information essential to a permanent written record of the life and ministry of the local church.