

Introduction

What It Means to Be a Member of The United Church of Canada

Taylor Croissant

Grace and peace to you in the name of Jesus Christ.

If you are reading this book, it is likely that you are beginning a process of becoming a full member of The United Church of Canada. You may also already be a member of the church and seeking to enrich your own faith through deeper study. No matter what brings you to this book, I hope it will be useful to you.

Within the church, our ritual of membership is called **baptism**, a symbolic washing that Jesus also participated in as he began his public ministry. (Definitions of the words found in bold text throughout this book are also provided in the glossary.) Within The United Church of Canada, baptism may take place at any time in our journey of faith—whether we are an infant, child, or adult. As infants or children, a profession of faith in the **Triune God**—God the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit—and other promises, is made by our parents or guardians, committing us to the

purpose and ministry of the church, to following in the way of Jesus Christ, and to seeking justice and resisting evil in our lives.

When we become old enough to make these decisions for ourselves, we can choose to “confirm” those promises that were made at our baptism. This ritual is called confirmation, where we join the church as full members by making a profession of faith.

In *The Manual*—the book that, along with the Bible, shapes our church’s policies and practices—it says there are three categories of people who participate within the life of our congregations: members, full members, and adherents.³ A member is someone who was baptized as a child but has not yet confirmed their baptism as an adult. Once someone undertakes a period of preparation and makes a profession of faith—through confirmation or adult baptism—they become a full member of the church. An adherent is someone who participates in the life of the church, but has chosen not to become a full member of the church, perhaps because they belong to another Christian denomination that is not present in their community, so they have chosen to worship at their local United church.

So why should we become full members of the church? In becoming full members through the process of confirmation or adult baptism, we participate in something called Christian formation. We deepen our spiritual understanding of the Christian faith and its place in our life. Acquiring a better understanding of things like the Bible, theology, prayer, and the history of the Christian church will enrich our faith and, in turn, enrich the gifts that we will bring to the church’s purpose. As full members, we can serve on the council or board of our congregations, and vote on important matters in a congregational meeting, such as the calling of a new minister. As full members, we are able to inquire within the wider church about

whether we are called by God to **ordered ministry** through the discernment process.

All of us are called by God to grow in our faith and to serve the church, each in different ways. In The United Church of Canada, we prepare for this lifetime commitment of becoming disciples of Jesus Christ as we become full members. *The Manual* has this to say about becoming a full member: “a person must have enough knowledge about the Christian faith and the United Church to make their commitment with understanding.”⁴

In the Bible, the first non-Jewish person to be baptized was an African person with a complex gender identity. The apostle Philip crossed paths with them on the road while they were riding in a chariot and reading the Book of Isaiah from the Hebrew scriptures. The Ethiopian eunuch asked Philip to help them interpret the book, because Philip was Jewish. After being taught the meaning of the Book of Isaiah as it related to Jesus Christ, the Ethiopian eunuch asked to be baptized by the Apostle Philip in a muddy slough on the side of the road. In just one day, they became an enthusiastic disciple of Jesus.⁵

However, during the first 600 years of the church, the period of preparation for baptism was much longer, usually two or three years. Candidates would be sponsored by a member of the congregation, tested on their understanding of the Christian faith, and judged as to whether they lived a holy and upright life. At the end of the three years, both the candidate and the minister would fast for three days before the baptism took place on Easter Sunday.

Today in the United Church, our practice of preparing for membership falls somewhere between the single afternoon of the Ethiopian eunuch and the three years of study in the early church. Membership classes across the United Church are organized in different ways. This book has been written

as a resource for you during that time of preparation; it contains what we believe are the essentials you require to begin your lifelong journey of faith. You are encouraged to deepen your understanding beyond the contents of this book, and the authors have included suggestions for further reading at the end of each chapter. In addition, it is the church's belief that the book you should be reading throughout your life to enrich your faith is the Bible. As it says in A Song of Faith, one of the four statements of faith of the United Church,

Scripture is our song for the journey, the living word
passed on from generation to generation
to guide and inspire,
that we might wrestle a holy revelation for our time and place
from the human experiences
and cultural assumptions of another era.
God calls us to be doers of the word and not hearers only.⁶

In later chapters of this book, we will discuss how to understand and interpret the meaning of the Bible for our faith, as well as look closer at A Song of Faith.

A longer period of preparation for full membership might seem difficult. We all have busy lives with many different commitments, but discover that this is a special and sacred time in our life of faith. In confirmation, we have a unique opportunity to study and discuss deep topics within a supportive community. Christianity does not have the presence in Canadian society that it once did, and knowledge of the Christian faith must be acquired intentionally rather than by cultural osmosis. As Canadian Presbyterian theologian Ross Lockhart has said, spiritual formation today is kind of like Ikea furniture: it requires more assembly than it did for people in the past.⁷

Preparation for confirmation or adult baptism should not be a rush for the congregation to turn you into their “brand” of Christian, and then funnel you into committees, choirs, and fellowship groups. By intentionally extending the time of newcomer inquiry and allowing the candidate’s questions, insights, and experiences to reverberate through the entire congregation, both the candidate and the church are changed.⁸ A longer confirmation or adult baptism course that spent one class on each of the chapters of this book would be ideal.

In recent decades, being a Christian has changed significantly in Canada. It used to be that everyone went to church, so family ties and friendships were strengthened through the church and community events were organized around it. Christians were kind of like salmon, swimming along with the river’s current that pushed us toward religious participation. Today, however, church is not a part of people’s lives as it once was. Those of us who regularly go to church may now be seen as countercultural.

Interestingly, the Christian faith has, throughout its history, often been countercultural. Christians today are like salmon that swim *against* the river’s current, in a society that pivots toward different activities on Sundays, like sports or shopping. Swimming to the home that we’ve found in the church is now done outside the mainstream. Similarly, there was once an expectation that people would automatically adopt the religion of their parents, but that is also no longer taken for granted in our culture. It is more correct to say that Christians are not born, but rather made.⁹

Becoming a full member of the church through a period of intentional preparation is an invitation to both relationship and practice. This process first starts by cultivating a relationship with God and seeking to understand God’s purpose for our life. As A New Creed teaches us, our purpose together as Christians is “to celebrate God’s presence.”¹⁰ We were created

to enjoy this wonderful world that God has made for us. Our faith aims to put us in contact with the source of our life, and to sing out with joy for all that God has given us. That is why we join together as the church to offer God our worship and praise. A lifelong faith incorporating prayer and study seeks to draw us closer to God.

In addition to considering our life's purpose and our connection to God, our preparation for confirmation or adult baptism gives us a time of structured spiritual formation, rooting us in the tradition of The United Church of Canada. We can explore our understanding of God, how we interpret the Bible, and how our faith and practice have changed over time. We have the opportunity to examine rich and diverse worship practices and be disciplined into the wider body of Christ.

Finally, our invitation to relationship and practice seeks to reorient us to community. Christianity is done best in community, and our churches should be places of belonging. Often we use the language of family within the church, but hopefully this love extends past the walls of the church and sends us out to serve those who are broken and hurting in God's world. The call of Jesus to be a disciple is to live a life in the kingdom of God.¹¹

I pray this book serves you well in your Christian formation as a member of The United Church of Canada. May the blessing of Christ be always with you.