

# OAKS

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# PARISH

## children's membership guide

### CHILDREN & MEMBERSHIP

The aim of a children's membership process can be seen in the story of young fish. A couple of fish are swimming along. A bigger, older fish swims toward them, and as he is passing the little ones, the big fish says, "How's the water boys?" The little fish swim a little farther, and then one of them turns to the other and asks, "What's water?" The aim of children's discipleship, both at home and in the church, is to help kids realize the environment in which they are swimming. Namely the faith and faithfulness of God that surrounds them and provides what they need for all of life.

In all, the process of children becoming members of the church is no different from that of adults. Both children and adults are personally affirming the five membership questions that are used across our denomination, the Presbyterian Church in America (P.C.A.). Because the first four membership questions focus on the gospel, children who are becoming members should have a basic understanding of the gospel and embrace faith in Jesus personally. This typically happens through a long process of discipleship that includes family devotions, prayer, and conversations at home as well as discipleship classes at church. Question number five has to do with one's relationship with the church and this involves three primary elements; praying for the church, living generously in the church, and handling sin and conflict in a biblical way (Matthew 18:15-20). These formative rhythms are important for a child's discipleship and can be apprehended in natural, rhythmic ways. Prayer for the church can happen during a devotional time, on the way to school, or before a meal. Tithing to the church and/or giving to someone in need can form a child's vision for personal finance management (practice with allowance money for example). Finally, sin and conflict are not hard to find in a child's life. Therefore, at a personal level the framework of Matthew 18:15-20 can help a child look to Jesus through the freeing power of repentance and faith. Whether it be a conflict with a friend on the playground or drama with a sibling, this framework can also equip a child to navigate conflict with others in a holy way. All said, the five membership questions form a wonderful framework for helping children understand what it means to follow Jesus.

One note should be added here about children and church discipline. Certainly, the ordained leaders of the church are called to shepherd God's people including children. To this end, parents are encouraged to cultivate a healthy relationship between their children, the church, and church leaders. Yet, the primary spiritual shepherds of children are their parents. This primacy can be seen in the qualifications of church leaders in 1 Timothy 3 and the exhortation of Proverbs 22:6 to "train up a child in the way he should go; even when he is old he will not depart from it." Therefore, parents are primarily responsible for the discipleship and discipline needs of their child. Until a child reaches adulthood, the church will seek to abstain from church discipline with a child even though they're a true member of the church.

In becoming a member of the church, no child will be able to articulate a theologically sophisticated description of the gospel. Nor will any child be perfectly consistent in praying for the church, giving generously, or resolving issues of conflict and sin. But that's the point of the gospel in the first place! In

becoming members children simply need to be looking to Jesus for life and salvation. Following Jesus as baptized members of the church who weekly hear from God in his Word and enjoy the feast of his Supper, they grow in the formative rhythms of membership.

## **GUIDING THE MEMBERSHIP PROCESS**

Each fall, we take our kids to the Corn Maze on Sauvie Island and we're faced with the challenge of working together as a family to reach the finish line. We could go about this in a few different ways. If an employee of the farm guided us through the maze we'd certainly make it because of the employee's expert knowledge, but it wouldn't be very meaningful experience for us as a family. On the other hand, if we simply walked in and wandered around, we might be doing it together but end up pretty lost. There's a third option available. Before entering the maze there are guides that are comprised of easy-to-answer trivia questions. These guides help our family make the right decisions inside the maze.

Helping children become communing members of the church can sometimes feel like a maze. Some churches opt to host a confirmation class where experts, usually pastoral staff, teach and guide students through the process. Children often get the development they need, but it's not a very meaningful experience for the family as a whole. On the other hand, without any support from the church many families feel lost on how to facilitate conversations of faith and membership with their children. At Oaks Parish we're hoping to create a third way of partnership. We want to welcome children into membership through the ongoing synergy between families and the church. No child should feel pressured into membership. Rather he/she should follow Jesus as he calls. In this way, Oaks Parish hopes resource families as they guide their children in becoming gospel-centered members of Christ's church. Simply put, we want to provide helpful direction in the maze.

Practically this process can play out in two different ways depending on your experience thus far in the church. Some children have been on a 'Covenant Path'. In this scenario a child becomes a non-communing member of the church through their baptism early on in life, as an infant for example. This child is definitively apart of the church but they've yet to express faith in Christ personally and therefore do not have all the rights and privileges of communing membership (voting at a congregational meeting would be an example of such a right). Eventually though the child begins to personally profess faith in Christ. This is something of eternal consequence and should be celebrated! We do just that by having children confess their faith and affirm the five membership questions in a membership conference with elders. At their first communion we then publicly recognize and celebrate their faith in Sunday worship.

Other children will be on what we might call a 'Credal Path'. Maybe the whole family is new to faith, the family has been apart of a church that didn't baptize children earlier in life, or the family has simply waited to baptize their child. In this scenario, children experience discipleship and then begin personally professing faith. Again this is something of eternal consequence and should be celebrated! We do just that by having children confess their faith and affirm the five membership questions in a membership conference with elders. Thereafter, we publicly recognize and celebrate their faith in worship through baptism and partaking of the Lord's Supper for the first time.

### ***Covenant Path***

Child Infant/Early Baptism-→Discipleship→Profession of Faith→Membership Conference→Lord's Supper

### ***Credal Path***

Child→Discipleship→Profession of Faith-→Membership Conference-→Baptism→Lord's Supper

## PREPARING A CHILD FOR MEMBERSHIP CONFERENCE

For a child membership conference should be the fruit of a cumulative process of discipleship. We recommend using the resources below for nurturing the gospel in your children's heart. To prepare a child for membership conference spend time reviewing the Covenant Membership Questions with them. Unpack the meaning of each question as we discussed in Membership Gathering and ensure that they can answer each question in the affirmative. The handout from Membership Gathering can be helpful in this regard. Regarding personal testimony of faith, most children aren't going to be able to tell a fully formed story of faith. A vivid personal testimony oftentimes comes with the benefit of maturity and hindsight. Therefore in the membership conference the elders are not listening for specific answers, but rather watching for God's work in the lives of our youngest brothers and sisters.

### COVENANT MEMBERSHIP QUESTIONS

1. Do you believe the Scriptures to be the Word of God and the final authority for life and faith?
2. Do you acknowledge your need for the grace of God, humbling yourself, offering no morality or righteousness of your own, but asking only for the mercy of God in Christ?
3. Do you accept Christ as the Sacrifice for your sin, as the Prophet for all your truth, and as the King of all your life, resting on him and his righteousness alone for your salvation?
4. Do you now resolve to live a life worthy of your calling, growing in the gospel of Christ and trusting in the power of the Holy Spirit for life?
5. Do you promise to support this communion with your prayers and offerings, to pursue its purity and peace, and to submit to its leadership according to the Scriptures?

### RESOURCES FOR NUTURING THE GOSPEL IN A CHILD'S HEART;

- **New City Catechism**-A great devotional and theological resource for discipleship at home. There are several versions of this resource geared to younger and older children as well as an app for iPhone/iPad.
- ***Why Do We Baptize Infants?* By Brian Chapell**-Available on a book table at church, this book will give a fundamental understanding of baptism and specifically address why we baptize infants and young children.
- ***What is the Lord's Supper?* By Richard D. Phillips**- Available on a book table at church, this book will give a fundamental understanding of the Lord's Supper.
- ***You Are What You Love* by Jamie Smith**-This is an Oaks Parish favorite that points to the power of formative rhythms. In this book, Smith seeks to unpack the dynamics and aim of Christian education and discipleship. This is not a children's book, but rather one that will help you think about discipleship for your children.
- ***How to Share the Gospel with Your Kids***-Oftentimes it can be daunting to actually explain the nuts and bolts of the gospel with your kids. While understanding the power of the gospel is the endeavor of a lifetime, we all need a place to start. Reference the attached guide for having this initial conversation with your kids.