

Welcome to Exploring Church Membership

We are glad you have chosen to find out more about SUSSEX CHRISTIAN REFORMED CHURCH! This class is the basic introduction to our church family. Since we have members from different church backgrounds, this class was designed to clearly explain who and what our church is.

Church membership is a way of recognizing that God provides for our spiritual growth by placing us in a community where our faith in Christ can be strengthened. It is an important step both for the individual and for the church community. If you are transferring your membership from elsewhere, it indicates that Sussex CRC is the place where God is calling you to make your spiritual home. If you are professing your faith for the first time, you are saying, in essence, that you recognize how God has been working through the Sussex CRC community to make His grace real to you in Christ.

Exploring Church Membership is divided in four sessions of about an hour or so each. The basic outline for this class follows the four questions found in our profession of faith form (found in this booklet). The basic topics are as follows:

Session 1: Salvation – What does it mean to be a child of God?

Session 2: Statements of Faith – What does this church teach about God?

Session 3: Signs of Grace – How do the sacraments and worship show us God's grace?

Session 4: Service – How does the Spirit enable me to serve God and grow in my faith?

The schedule for these sessions is as follows:

October 11 – Session 1

October 18 – Session 2

October 25 – Session 3

November 1 – Session 4

The basis for this class is the teaching of the New Testament which calls the church “God’s household” (1 Timothy 3:15) and the “family of believers” (Galatians 6:10). Like a family, God’s people have a common relationship (in this case, their relationship to Christ) and a mutual responsibility to one another. The goal of this class is to explain what it means to be a part of God’s family, particularly here at Sussex Christian Reformed Church, and to lead each one to commit himself or herself to Christ and to the church family.

Questions about the material we cover are not only permitted but encouraged. If you still have any questions at the end of the class sessions, the pastor and/or an elder would be happy to meet with you to discuss these things.

On behalf of the leadership of Sussex CRC, I am thrilled that you are taking this step to deepen your faith.

In Christ’s Service,

Pastor Joel Vande Werken

Form for the Profession of Faith (1976)

Congregation of our Lord Jesus Christ:

Today we are privileged to welcome into the full life of the church's fellowship those who wish to confess their faith in Christ as Lord and Savior. When they were baptized God made clear his claim on them as his own, and they were received into the church. Now they wish to share fully in the life of this congregation and of the whole church of God. And so today they will publicly accept and confirm what was sealed in their baptism, confess their faith in the Lord Jesus, and offer themselves to God as his willing servants. We thank God for having given them this desire and pray that as we now hear their confession, he will favor us with the presence and guidance of his Holy Spirit.

The Vows

(name), will you stand now, and in the presence of God and his people respond to the following questions:

1. Do you believe that Jesus Christ is the Son of God sent to redeem the world, do you love and trust him as the one who saves you from your sin, and do you with repentance and joy embrace him as Lord of your life?

Answer: I do.

2. Do you believe that the Bible is the Word of God revealing Christ and his redemption, and that the confessions of this church faithfully reflect this revelation?

Answer: I do.

3. Do you accept the gracious promises of God sealed to you in your baptism and do you affirm your union with Christ and his church which your baptism signifies?

Answer: I do.

4. Do you promise to do all you can, with the help of the Holy Spirit, to strengthen your love and commitment to Christ by sharing faithfully in the life of the church, honoring and submitting to its authority; and do you join with the people of God in doing the work of the Lord everywhere?

Answer: I do.

The Reception

Minister: In the name of our Lord Jesus Christ I now welcome you to all the privileges of full communion. I welcome you to full participation in the life of the church. I welcome you to its responsibilities, its joys, and its sufferings. "May the God of peace, who through the blood of the eternal covenant brought back from the dead our Lord Jesus, 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. Amen" (Heb. 13:20-21).

Congregation: Thanks be to God! We promise you our love, encouragement, and

prayers.

Session 1 – Salvation and Statements of Faith

Do you believe that Jesus Christ is the Son of God sent to redeem the world, do you love and trust him as the one who saves you from your sin, and do you with repentance and joy embrace him as Lord of your life?

1) What does it mean to believe in Jesus Christ as the Son of God who redeems us?

- Jesus' question: *"Who do you say that I am?" (Matthew 16:13)*
 - Inspirational teacher?
 - Moral example?
 - Savior and Lord?
- The church's teaching: *"Salvation is found in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given to men by which we must be saved" (Acts 4:12)*
 - Why do we need to be saved?
 - What other names are we tempted to turn to?
- But Jesus is not just the world's savior, but mine.
 - Head knowledge vs. heart knowledge
 - "Repentance and joy"
- A good summary of the Christian experience of salvation: Heidelberg Catechism Q&A 1

Q. What is your only comfort in life and in death?

A. That I am not my own, but belong—
body and soul, in life and in death—
to my faithful Savior, Jesus Christ.

He has fully paid for all my sins with his precious blood,
and has set me free from the tyranny of the devil.

He also watches over me in such a way
that not a hair can fall from my head
without the will of my Father in heaven;
in fact, all things must work together for my salvation.

Because I belong to him, Christ, by his Holy Spirit, assures me of eternal life
and makes me wholeheartedly willing and ready from now on to live for him.

How would you write your own story of becoming a follower of Jesus? What has led you to the church?

2) This leads to the next question, why become a member of a church? Is the church necessary for followers of Jesus?

- The definition of the church: God calls people to follow Jesus together.

You also are among those who are called to belong to Jesus Christ. (Romans 1:6)

To those sanctified in Christ Jesus and called to be holy, together with all those everywhere who call on the name of our Lord Jesus Christ... (I Corinthians 1:2)

- Our own claim: We are responding to God's call to follow Jesus.

So in Christ we who are many form one body, and each member belongs to all the others. (Romans 12:5)

Therefore, holy brothers, who share in the heavenly calling, fix your thoughts on Jesus, the apostle and high priest whom we confess. (Hebrews 3:1)

3) To summarize: What does it mean to believe in Jesus as Savior and Lord?

- I need a Savior because I cannot earn God's favor: *All have sinned and fall short of the glory of God (Romans 3:23; see also Ephesians 2:8-9)*
- Jesus, true God and true man, came to earth to save us from our sins through his death on the cross (Isaiah 53:6, 1 Timothy 2:5-6)
- The perfect death and obedience of Jesus are all we need for salvation (Galatians 4:9; Acts 4:11-12)
- Because he has saved me, I respond to the teaching and leading of Christ in all areas of my life (2 Corinthians 5:9, Ephesians 2:10). In other words, I become a disciple of Jesus Christ in community with other saved sinners.

The Heidelberg Catechism (Q&A 30) puts it well:

*Either Jesus is not a perfect Savior,
or those who in true faith accept this savior
have in him all they need for their salvation.*

For next time:

- Review what we've discussed, using the *Quest of Faith* book (especially lessons 2, 8, 11, 24, 26).
- Read and reflect on the Apostles' Creed and Q&A 1 of the Heidelberg Catechism.

Session 2 – Statements of Faith

Do you believe that the Bible is the Word of God revealing Christ and his redemption, and that the confessions of this church faithfully reflect this revelation?

1) How do we know that what we teach about God is correct?

The Bible is the only place where we learn about God and His promises. We believe that the Bible is... (see 2 Peter 1:20-21, 2 Timothy 3:16)

- *Inspired* (human beings wrote what God wanted them to write)
- *Infallible* (the truth of the Bible is without error)
- *Sufficient* (reveals everything we need to know about salvation)

The books of the Old Testament (39 books) and New Testament (27 books), written over a period of 1200 years, mainly in Hebrew and Greek. Today many churches (including ours) use the translation of the New International Version (1978).

2) What is a statement of faith? Why do we need them if we have the Bible already?

- In order to summarize the teachings of the Bible, the church has adopted various *creeds* and *confessions*. These documents are based on the Bible, but are not a higher or even equal authority to the teaching of the Bible.
- Our statements of faith summarize what we believe about *Christ and his redemption*.

3) What are the statements of faith that Sussex Christian Reformed Church uses to summarize the Bible's teaching?

Creeds of the Church: statements produced by the early church, defining what all Christians believe

- The *Apostles' Creed*, c. 250 A.D. This is one of the earliest and most basic statements of Christian teaching.
Note: The word "catholic" (describing the church) means "universal"
- The *Nicene Creed*, c. 350 A.D. Further clarified the church's teaching about Jesus and about the Holy Spirit. The Nicene Creed is probably the most widely used Christian statement of faith.
- The *Athanasian Creed*, c. 400 A.D. Explains 1) the doctrine of the Trinity and 2) the nature of Jesus Christ as true God and true man.

Confessions of the Church: documents produced by the church in the Reformation period, clarifying Christian teachings after a period of misrepresentation by the medieval church

- The *Belgic Confession*, 1561: Declarative statements about what we believe. Covers the topics of revelation, salvation, Jesus Christ, good works, the church, and the last judgment.
- The *Heidelberg Catechism*, 1563: Basic truths of the Christian life presented in question and answer format. Format: S ____ (Q&A 3-11), S _____ (Q&A 12-85), S _____ (Q&A 86-129)
 - Main idea of the Heidelberg Catechism: *My only comfort in life and in death... [is] that I am not my own, but belong... to my faithful Savior Jesus Christ. Q&A 1*
 - Studies topics of Apostles Creed and sacraments (salvation section), Ten Commandments and Lord's Prayer (service)
- The Canons of Dort, 1618-19: deals with questions about how we understand the working of God's grace in our lives: the so-called "Five Points of Calvinism" (see Romans 9:16, Titus 3:3-8)

The last three documents are often referred to as the "Reformed confessions," and define what it means to be a "Reformed church" (the "accent" with which we speak to our Christian faith). Some of the emphases of the Reformed tradition are:

- The **sovereignty of God**: God is in charge of history and makes all things work according to His purposes (see Romans 8:28, Proverbs 16:33, Matthew 10:28-29; Heidelberg Catechism Q&A 27-28)
- The **inability of man** to do any saving good (Romans 3:23)
- The **covenant** in which God binds Himself to His people in promise and commitment. The covenant is the glue that holds our understanding of all of salvation history together. Jesus is the fulfillment, not the replacement, for the Old Testament system (see Jeremiah 31:31-34, Hebrews 10:15-25)

The renewing work of the Holy Spirit which prepares Christians to serve God in all walks of life: a **kingdom vocation** (Colossians 3:15-17, Ephesians 4:1)

For next time:

- Review what we've discussed, using the *Quest of Faith* book (especially lessons 31, 32, 61, 62, 63).
- Read the baptismal form, especially the section on the promises of God.
- Write a summary of what it means for you to believe in Jesus and become a part of his church here in Sussex

Session 3 – Sacraments and Signs of Grace

Do you accept the gracious promises of God sealed to you in your baptism and do you affirm your union with Christ and his church which your baptism signifies?

1) What promises does God make to me? Where do I learn about these promises?

- God has promised His people that He would be their God (Genesis 17:7).
- God will enable us to keep our end of this covenant (Jeremiah 31:33-34)
- We can have our sins forgiven by the blood of Jesus (Acts 2:38-39)
- God will empower us to live for Him (2 Timothy 2:11-12)

2) How does God strengthen my faith in these promises?

The Heidelberg Catechism (Q&A 65) offers a good summary of the way we experience God's assurance and comfort in worship and service:

Q. It is by faith alone that we share in Christ and all his blessings: where then does that faith come from?

A. The Holy Spirit produces it in our hearts by the preaching of the holy gospel and confirms it through our use of the holy sacraments.

The **preaching of the Word** and the **sacraments** of baptism and the Lord's Supper are sometimes called "the means of grace" for this reason (see also 2 Timothy 3:17; 1 Corinthians 10:16-17).

3) What is the preaching of the Word? What is its role in worship?

Worship is the weekly celebration which takes place in the Christian community. It is the time when God's people come together to be strengthened in their common faith. Worship includes:

- Gathering – God invites us into His presence (Isaiah 41:9-10)
- Confession and Assurance – We discuss our relationship with God and hear the promise of forgiveness. (1 John 1:5-7)
- Prayer – We address God on behalf of one another and the world. (Romans 8:26-27)

- Sermon – In the central part of our worship, God speaks through His Word (1 Peter 1:24-25)
- Offering and Response – We dedicate ourselves to God in response to His Word (Romans 12:1-2)
- Blessing – God sends us into the world with the promise of His continued presence (Jude 24-25)

In the Reformed tradition, the **sermon** is the most important part of the worship service. The sermon makes Jesus known through the story of God’s salvation told in His Word.

4) What are sacraments? Why do we have them?

Sacraments are signs and seals of the gospel promises, instituted by Christ so that we can more clearly understand the gift of salvation. There are two sacraments:

- Baptism (Matthew 28:19-20, Titus 3:3-8): The *water* of baptism symbolizes the washing away of sin by Christ’s blood and our renewal by the Holy Spirit (see Heidelberg Catechism Q&A 69)
 - baptism marks us as members of Christ’s body, the church, to whom God’s promises are given (Romans 8:17)
 - we baptize infants as well as adults, because they too have been included in the covenant community and can receive God’s promises (Genesis 17:9-14, Colossians 2:11-13)
- The Lord’s Supper (Mark 14:22-24, Luke 22:19-20, 1 Corinthians 11:23-26): The bread and wine symbolize the broken body and poured-out blood of Jesus (see Heidelberg Catechism Q&A 75).
 - eating and drinking together symbolizes the unity of believers through the Spirit (1 Corinthians 10:17)
 - the food and drink symbolize the way God sustains our spiritual lives through Jesus’ work (John 6:35, 53-58)
 - the Lord’s Supper looks forward to the final coming of God’s kingdom (Luke 22:14-18, Revelation 19:9)

5) Where does church discipline fit into this?

- God’s people are called to be holy people (1 Peter 2:9) whose lives reflect the salvation Christ has won for us (1 Corinthians 5:11).
- The celebration of the Lord’s Supper includes a call to “examine ourselves,” that is, to see ourselves as God sees us (1 Corinthians 11:28). This involves both an awareness of sin and of the grace that holds us together in community. All Christians are responsible to help one another in this.
- The practice of official church discipline finds its basis in Matthew 18:15-17 Through discipline, the community calls erring believers to repentance

For next time:

- **Review** the information we've discussed today (q. 32, 36, 38, 65)
- **Read** the mission statement for Sussex CRC.

Session 4 – Our Strategy for Service

Do you promise to do all you can, with the help of the Holy Spirit, to strengthen your love and commitment to Christ by sharing faithfully in the life of the church, honoring and submitting to its authority; and do you join with the people of God in doing the work of the Lord everywhere?

1) What is the “life of the church” in which I am supposed to share?

- Our local church – the *church order* of the Christian Reformed Church makes the local congregation the basic unit of ministry.
 - a “caring, loving, and inspiring environment that will help all to mature in their faith and relationship with God”
 - guided by the *office bearers* of the church:
 - Pastors – teach, preach, administer sacraments
 - Elders – exercise oversight, lead in spiritual growth
 - Deacons – lead in stewardship and caring for the needy
- Regional ministries – the *classis* is a group of churches in the CRC which do ministry together. Our regional body, Classis Hudson, includes churches in Bergen County and in the New York City area
- Our denomination – the *Christian Reformed Church* has over 1000 congregations and about 250,000 members. As a denomination, we support a number of ministries together:
 - Missions (World & Home Missions; Back to God Ministries; Chaplains)
 - Education (Calvin Seminary; Calvin College; Board of Publications)
 - Mercy (World Renew)
 - Pastoral Ministries (Abuse Prevention; Disability Concerns; Pastor Church Relations; Race Relations)

This structure also helps us encourage one another to remain faithful to God’s Word in our doctrinal and moral teachings. Each year, office bearers of the CRC meet in an assembly called *Synod* to chart the direction for the church and its ministries.

2) What does it mean to be a member of Sussex Christian Reformed Church?

At Sussex CRC we recognize the need for formal membership. We encourage those who worship with us regularly to publicly join our congregation.

Membership in a local congregation is a way of recognizing that God brings us into a community of believers so that we can grow in faith together and join in doing the work of the church that God has called us to.

The life of our local church revolves around four poles:

- Worship: faithful participation in worship services, prayer for the church and its leaders, consciously seek to reject temptation and to live a godly life
- Learn: personal devotions and prayer, small group Bible studies, listen to each other's stories of faith
- Serve: give generously to the church and to Christian ministry (tithing), volunteer to work with the church's ministry, witness to others
- Share: welcome those around us in Christ's name, pray for each other, serve one another's needs



What are some of the specific ministries of Sussex CRC?

- ❖ The *deacons* distribute the offerings received at Sussex CRC. Some of these offerings include:
 - General Fund: heating, water, salaries, etc.
 - Ministry Share (part of general fund) – denominational and classis ministries
 - Benevolent: those in need in church or community
 - Tuition Assistance: tuition support for families with children in Christian education
 - Special: a variety of causes supported by our church
- ❖ All members have opportunity to share in service to the church and each other
 - Local ministries opportunities include the Sussex Help Center, Family Promise, Sussex Christian School, Today's Choice Pregnancy Center
 - Congregational ministries include Cadets, GEMS, Youth Groups, choirs, small group Bible studies, prayer partnerships, and service projects

How do we at Sussex CRC hope to pull all of these pieces together?

*The Sussex Christian Reformed Church's mission is
to proclaim that Jesus Christ is Lord
by creating a caring, loving, and inspiring environment
that will help all to mature in faith and relationship with God.*

Sussex CRC – Mission and History

The Sussex Christian Reformed Church's mission is to proclaim that Jesus Christ is Lord by creating a caring, loving, and inspiring environment that will help all to mature in our faith and relationship with God. This mission is based on our belief that Jesus Christ is the only way of salvation and on God's infallible word, the Bible, and is supported by tools such as the Heidelberg Catechism, and the Creeds and Confessions of the Reformed tradition. We will accomplish this through prayer, praise, education, worship services, and other church sponsored activities. This will empower our church to become a visible force in our community that reaches and serves families with the love of Jesus, bringing them into the growing family of God and influencing activities and policy in our rapidly changing world.

A BRIEF HISTORY OF SUSSEX CHRISTIAN REFORMED CHURCH

On December 8, 1949, a meeting was held in the Sussex Borough Hall for those desiring to have services in Sussex for the organization of a new congregation. The church was organized the following April. Services were held in homes or in other churches until the current church basement was completed in the spring of 1952. The sanctuary was finished in 1956 and has been used for worship ever since.

In August of 1955 there was a hurricane, and we had several feet of water in our basement church. The organ, books and chairs were destroyed. The Sussex Fire Department pumped the water out. One hundred new books and chairs and also a piano had to be purchased. Several churches of our classis helped with donations. Steps were taken to prevent this happening in the future. For two weeks the Baptist congregation offered us the use of their church for our Sunday services.

In September of 1958, the [Sussex Christian School](#) was officially opened with 59 students. Classes were held in the church basement until October 22, 1958, when the new school building was ready for occupation.

The congregation continued to grow throughout the 1960s and 1970s. At one point, forty to fifty people sat in the basement and watched the service on television monitors. Names were printed in the bulletin so each family could take turns.

Over the years, the Sussex Christian Reformed Church has been active in supporting the causes of Christian education and missions around the world. The congregation also constructed the Sussex Retirement Associates apartments just north of the church property. A number of members have also been involved in short-terms missions and service projects around the world with various organizations. Many more have had the opportunity to witness to members of the broader community in Sussex through their involvement in school, business, or community events.

Sussex Christian Reformed Church has been served by six pastors over the years: Rev. Benjamin Spalink (1952-1956), Rev. Louis Bouma (1957-1965), Rev. John Koopmans (1966-1973), Rev. John Kruis (1974-1983), and Rev. John Keizer (1984-2004). Our current pastor, Rev. Joel Vande Werken, was installed in March 2007.