

The Vows We Take: Strengthen and Participate

Ephesians 4:1-7, 11-16

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October 5, 2025

As I start today, I'd like you to think about groups that you are a member of. For example, maybe you belong to a club like Rotary or Kiwanis or Eastern Star. Many of us have been members of sports teams, and our jobs make us members of a staff or, in some cases, a faculty. You might belong to a book club or musical group. And, of course, we are all members of a family of some sort - either biological or chosen.

Now, pick one of those groups you belong to and consider what is expected of you as a member. In some way, it's likely you are expected to contribute to the health and success of the group. That might be financially through dues, a membership, or a voluntary donation. Or it may be that you contribute your time by helping to do the day-to-day tasks involved in keeping a group running. Or you offer the skills that you have developed in the course of your life. Maybe you are exceptionally good at 3-point shots in basketball, or you are especially gifted at organizing social events. To be a member usually isn't a passive relationship but one of give and take. Membership suggests that you participate by offering something to the group and, hopefully, receiving something in return.

Of course, all of this can be said of church membership, as well. From the very beginning, followers of Christ have existed in groups. First, there were Jesus' twelve disciples. Then, there were the earliest Christians, who, as we read in Acts 2, "devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers...All who believed were together and had all things in common; they would sell their possessions and goods and distribute the proceeds to all, as any had need. Day by day, as they spent much time together in the temple...praising God and having the goodwill of all the people." This is the first model we have for what a church should be - a community of faith worshiping, learning, and growing together.

So, being a Christ-follower has always meant participating in a church community. As the United Methodist website says, "The Christian faith was never intended to be a solo journey." We need the community of faith to help us learn and grow, to support and care for us, to keep us accountable, and to help us teach the faith to our children. In his letter to the Ephesians, Paul describes what it looks like to live as part of a church community. "Walk in a manner worthy of the calling to which you have been called, with all humility and gentleness, with patience, bearing with one another in love".

The importance of faith in community brings us to the last of our sermons in this series about our baptismal vows, what they mean, and how they apply to our lives today. Last week, Pastor Jenaba preached a powerful sermon on the fourth vow: *According to the grace given you, will you remain faithful members of Christ's holy Church and serve as Christ's representatives in the world?* While this vow is really about our role as members of the Church universal, the last two vows are about our membership in our denomination and in our local church.

When we are baptized, we are ushered into God's covenant community. We become part of the family of God, our parents take the vows of baptism for us, and the church community

vows to help us grow in faith and discipleship. Then, there comes a point at which we are ready to profess our faith and take the vows of membership for ourselves. That is when we're asked these last two questions.

The first is: *As a member of Christ's universal Church, will you be loyal to Christ through The United Methodist Church, and do all in your power to strengthen its ministries?* This vow was actually changed in 2008. It used to ask that we be loyal to the United Methodist Church, which is how it appears in the hymnal. At some point, somebody recognized that our loyalty is not first to the church but to Christ. When we become members of the United Methodist Church, we're choosing to practice that loyalty in the context of this denomination.

Dr. Mark Stamm, professor of Christian worship, writes, "Each denomination bears its particular gifts and calling on behalf of the greater church and the world. As with individuals, so it is with the churches: God gives grace to each, yet none is perfect." We choose a denomination based on its particular calling and gifts. For example, some of the reasons I am a United Methodist are that we view becoming more and more like Christ to be a journey rather than a single moment of salvation. And we have an open Communion table. And that social justice is core to our identity.

In becoming United Methodist, we agree to do our part in strengthening the ministries of the denomination. For example, one of the most powerful ministries of the United Methodist Church is UMCOR, the United Methodist Committee on Relief, one of the world's most respected disaster response, relief, and recovery organizations. UMCOR is known for not only being among the first at the site of a disaster but also for staying long-term to help rebuild. Today is World Communion Sunday, and it is traditionally the day we invite you to make a gift to UMCOR because when we give directly to UMCOR, we support the important work our denomination does all over the globe.

The other membership question is specifically about this, our local church, FUMC Ann Arbor. It reads: *Will you participate in the ministries of this church with your prayers, your presence, your gifts, your service, and your witness?* Notice that the verb here is "participate" because, as we said earlier, membership is active. When you are a member, you both give to and take from the organization or group. Yet, in the United States today, the practice of religion has become increasingly a spectator sport. Many folks come to church with the idea that church is something to consume passively rather than a community to participate in actively. When we approach church as consumers, then we feel it should meet our personal expectations, do what we want, and change according to our needs. If the church falls short of that, then we "take our business elsewhere".

Whereas, when we treat church as a community to participate in, we understand that we are in this together for the long haul. Pastors will come and go. They will have different gifts and priorities. Styles of worship will come and go, too, with no single style being the "right" one. But, through all of those changes, the community, the congregation, stays on - if the members participate in maintaining its health and vitality.

We promise to do that by offering the church our prayers, presence, gifts, service, and witness. As Paul says in Ephesians, we all have something to give to build up the body of Christ, the church, to make it strong and healthy. "From him the whole body, joined and held together by

every supporting ligament, grows and builds itself up in love, as each part does its work.” As we do our work, we mature in faith - both as a community and as individuals.

Because, ironically, the practices that build up the church - prayers, presence, gifts, service, and witness are exactly the same ways in which we nurture our own faith. You can both give to the community and grow in your knowledge of God and service to Christ through the same spiritual practices.

This is why in two weeks, when we start the stewardship campaign, we’ll be focusing not only on your financial gifts to the church but on how you can participate in this community holistically with your prayers, presence, gifts, service, and witness. We’ll be using Adam Hamilton’s book, The Walk, as a jumping off point, and I encourage you to buy a copy and consider joining a group that is studying it together. Hamilton uses slightly different terms for these five practices - worship and prayer, study, giving, serving, and sharing - but they align with the membership vow just the same.

For the last five weeks, we have talked about what it means to be baptized into Christ’s community of love and what the vows of baptism and membership mean. My hope is that in this time when there is so much upheaval around us, when we can easily become overwhelmed by what we see and hear on the news, remembering your baptism vows will help you to feel grounded in your faith and who you are called to be as a child of God. If you haven’t been baptized and you think you might want to be, please come and talk with me or Pastor Jenaba. If you aren’t a church member, consider signing up for the membership class that is on October 19 at 4:00 p.m.

For today, as we wrap up this worship series, we are going to participate in one of the church’s most meaningful rituals - a reaffirmation of baptism. Before Communion, we will go through the liturgy that’s printed in your bulletin. This is your opportunity to recommit to the vows of Baptism and membership, to make them your own once again, and consider how you will live them out. Then, when you come up for Communion, you’ll have the opportunity to dip your hand in the baptismal waters and touch them to your forehead as a visible sign of your recommitment.

May you find in the fresh, clear water of Baptism and the fruits of the harvest formed into bread and juice strength for this journey we are on together and hope for the growth and fulfillment of God’s reign.