

# Relational Commitments<sup>®</sup>

Guidelines for Church Life and Pastoral Care



Mutual Accountability



Peacemaking  
&  
Reconciliation



Preserving Marriages



Biblical Counseling



Protecting Children

Church Name

Church Logo

## A WORD TO CHURCH LEADERS

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These model Relational Commitments are designed to help you establish clear biblical guidelines for relational interactions and pastoral care within your church. These guidelines describe how you deal with conflict, abuse and divorce, protect children from abuse, conduct counseling, guard confidentiality and carry out church discipline. By clarifying these key relational policies, you can avoid misunderstandings, prevent major conflicts and reduce exposure to legal liability, which promotes peace and unity in your body and makes your church appealing to visitors.

### **Legal Liability Poses a Major Threat to American Churches**

In addition to strengthening body life and enhancing your church's Christian witness, these guidelines can provide invaluable protection from legal threats.

America is one of the most litigious countries in the world. Our culture is also becoming increasingly hostile toward biblical values. Therefore, when a church carries out culturally rejected practices of pastoral care and personal accountability, such as biblical church discipline, it will sometimes receive a letter from a member's attorney threatening to sue the church for defamation, invasion of privacy and intentional infliction of emotional distress.

Church leaders who refused to back down from such threats have sometimes found themselves forced into court, subjected to days of stressful cross-examination and shocked to see juries penalize their churches with six-figure damages awards.

This trend was accelerated by a 1984 court decision called [\*Guinn v Collinsville Church of Christ\*](#), which resulted in a \$390,000 judgment against a church and its leaders in their individual capacity (i.e., personal liability!), and has continued to expand through similar court decisions since then.<sup>1</sup> Many of these judgments have occurred because churches failed to clearly establish and communicate how they will exercise pastoral care over members who persist in conflict and sin.

As a result, unrepentant members have been able to persuade modern juries that a church's actions were unreasonable and offensive, which is not difficult to do in a culture that prizes autonomy and despises accountability. Even when churches have won in court, they usually pay an enormous price in terms of legal fees, lost time and energy, damaged witness, distraction from ministry and congregational confusion and dissension.

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<sup>1</sup> The initial damages award was overturned by the Oklahoma Supreme Court because the jury verdict did not distinguish between the elders' action prior to the member's resignation and their actions after her resignation. The case was eventually settled for an undisclosed amount.

## Proactive Steps to Reduce Exposure to Legal Liability

Therefore, in today's legal climate, it is not good enough for a church to behave so well that it will *prevail* in a lawsuit. Instead, churches must act with such wisdom and integrity that they will *prevent* lawsuits from being filed in the first place.

The most important step in avoiding legal liability is to obey Jesus' timeless command to treat others the same way you would like to be treated yourself (Matt. 7:12). For church leaders, this means, among other things, being authentically approachable and accountable, building safeguards against the misuse of power in the church, exercising discipline in a gentle and redemptive manner, and making every reasonable effort to protect members from foreseeable harm. (You can learn additional leadership safeguards through RW360's free online course, [The Relationally Wise Leader](#)). The consistent practice of these principles will help your church avoid many of the relational missteps that cause offense and lead to legal threats.

But even when you treat others in a way that is loving, redemptive and biblically appropriate, some people may still take offense, especially if they are angry that their sins of dishonesty, pride, lust or adultery are being addressed in an attempt to restore them to a right relationship with God and others, as Jesus commands in Matthew 18:12-20. In these situations, one of the most effective ways to prevent a lawsuit is to have *previously adopted explicit biblical policies* that clearly and comprehensively describe how your church will shepherd its members, especially when carrying out pastoral ministry intended to restore a member who is caught in sin (Gal. 6:1; Luke 15:1-7; Matt. 18:12-20).

These types of policies will provide your church with one of the most effective defenses against any lawsuit: *informed consent*. To secure this defense, a church needs to be able to prove that the person complaining of a wrong was *fully informed* of the church's pastoral policies and procedures and *knowingly consented to be bound by them*.<sup>2</sup> Although many churches have provisions in their bylaws about "exercising discipline pursuant to Matthew 18," this kind of general statement may prove to be insufficient for today's individualistic and anti-church legal climate.

Therefore, it is essential that churches update their governing documents by adding detailed language that preserves the church's right to shepherd its flock and rescue wayward members from sin. This added language should address specific challenges that may arise, such as disclosing or withholding confidential information, continuing discipline after a member attempts to leave the church or informing your members of your disciplinary actions in order to protect others from harm (e.g., when a dishonest businessman is defrauding senior members through misleading investment schemes, or an immoral man is seducing young women in singles groups ).<sup>3</sup>

Based on our experience in mediating and arbitrating hundreds of lawsuits against churches, RW360 has developed these model "Relational Commitments" that churches can use to define and communicate their policies on conflict resolution, divorce and

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<sup>2</sup> See [Smith v. Calvary Christian Church](#) (Supreme Court of Michigan, 2000)

<sup>3</sup> See [How to Avoid a Lawsuit When Exercising Church Discipline](#) (Simms and Showers, 2016)

remarriage, counseling methodology and limitations (including the “[clergy-penitent privilege](#)”), confidentiality and church discipline.

These Commitments are written in pastoral language so that church members can easily see them as being relevant to church life. At the same time, these Commitments contain carefully drafted legal language that is designed to protect churches from lawsuits based on allegations of breach of confidentiality, defamation, invasion of privacy, intentional infliction of emotional distress or breach of fiduciary responsibility.

Churches may adapt these model commitments according to their ecclesiastical beliefs and practices and then make this document available to their members to clearly establish the pastoral and relational practices that will be followed in their church. By adopting this type of governing document, churches can strengthen their ability to live out the gospel and obey God’s command to restore straying sheep, while simultaneously reducing their exposure to legal threats.

It is also wise to periodically remind your members of these Commitments through an annual email or congregational meeting, always making it clear that your leaders are open to hearing questions or concerns about these Commitments. As new people join your church, you could introduce them to these Commitments during your membership classes and include a reference to them in your membership covenant (see sample covenants at the end of this document).<sup>4</sup>

### **Modify These Commitments to Fit Your Polity and Convictions**

Please feel free to modify the language in these Commitments (using the Word version of this document) to fit the polity and convictions of your church. As mentioned above, however, some of the language in these Commitments has been drafted to address specific church liability issues. If that language is changed, you may lose some legal protection. Since laws related to church rights, responsibilities and potential liabilities vary from state to state, RW360 recommends that you retain an attorney in your state with expertise in corporate or church law who can ensure that your final version of this document conforms to the laws of your state.

Modifications to this document may include the following changes:

- 1) Change the cover to match your church’s branding.
- 2) Search for and replace the expression “[Our Church Name]” throughout these documents with the name of your church.
- 3) Change the definition of “leader” in footnote #1 to fit your polity (e.g., change to “pastor and deacons”) or search for the term “leader” throughout these documents and replace it with an appropriate word or phrase.
- 4) Consider the changes suggested by footnotes marked with an “\*” and then delete these footnotes.

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<sup>4</sup> Be sure to document all the dates and ways that you inform your congregation of these policies. If a disgruntled member later hires an attorney who threatens to sue your church, this documentation will be the easiest way to prove informed consent and convince an attorney that filing a lawsuit will be pointless.

- 5) Select and modify one of the model Church Covenants provided at the end of this document and delete the other Covenant. Whichever covenant you use, be sure to retain the last provision about receiving and submitting to the Relational Commitments.
- 6) Delete this entire “Word to Church Leaders” section from your final document.

### **Formal Adoption**

Once you have modified these Commitments to suit your polity and the convictions of your church, you could formally adopt them in a variety of ways.

- 1) If your church is not already familiar with the kind of mutual accountability described in these commitments, it may be wise to precede adoption of these commitments with a preaching series on these concepts and a Sunday school or small group study campaign using RW360’s group study materials on Relational Wisdom and Relational Peacemaking.
- 2) If your polity allows, your leaders could formally adopt these Commitments and then present them to your members during a congregational meeting.
- 3) Even if your leaders have the authority to unilaterally adopt these Commitments, in many cases it is wiser to take a two-step approach: (1) Present these Commitments to your church body, explain why your leaders believe it would be wise to adopt them, and then invite questions and feedback from your members; this approach tends to give members a greater sense of comfort and support for these concepts; (2) assuming you are able to successfully address members’ questions and concerns and are also able to make minor changes some may suggest, your leaders could then move ahead with a formal adoption of these commitments.
- 4) If your church reserves to the congregation the authority to adopt these types of policies, you could follow the first part of option 3) above and then call for a congregational vote to adopt these Commitments. The downside of having the congregation adopt these types of policies is that subsequent changes would need to be approved by the congregation as well, which can be a cumbersome process.
- 5) One way to involve the congregation in this process without creating a situation where skeptical members could complicate future modification of the Commitments would be to follow the first part of option 3) above and then ask the congregation to adopt this amendment to your constitution:
 

“The elders shall adopt “Relational Commitments” that set forth our church’s commitments on relational issues such as peacemaking and reconciliation, marriage and divorce, protecting our children from abuse, biblical counseling and confidentiality, and accountability and church discipline. The elders shall notify members of any proposed changes to these Commitments and allow feedback and discussion on proposed changes prior to finalizing any changes. New members will be required to affirm these commitments when joining the

church, and our leaders will apply these commitments as they minister to and shepherd our congregation.”

### Uses After Adoption

These Relational Commitments may be used in a variety of ways:

- 1) Use them in membership classes to inform prospective members of your relational commitments and to gain informed consent to your pastoral care practices.
- 2) Create a bookmark with a QR code that links to an online copy of your commitments and place this bookmark in visitors’ packages or resource racks in your lobby to inform visitors of your church’s commitment to nurture and protect relationships in biblically faithful ways. This information could move many visitors to say, “This is the kind of church we’ve been looking for.”
- 3) Refer to these commitments periodically from the pulpit (while including a bookmark in church bulletins) to remind people of your pastoral care practices and to encourage your people to live these principles out in their daily lives.



### Training Resources

For real-life examples of how relational wisdom and biblical peacemaking have been applied in pastoral ministry, please see the real-life examples listed at [Christian Conciliation Service](#).

RW360 has created an array of training resources that your church leaders can use to enhance their shepherding skills and to improve the relational and peacemaking skills of your entire congregation, which can greatly reduce your vulnerability to major conflicts. For more information, go to [Bringing Relational Wisdom into Your Church](#), where you can learn about our foundational courses in Relational Wisdom and Relational Peacemaking, as well as our [RW Shepherd Certification Program](#) and how to build a [Peace Sower Team](#) in your church.

**Remember to delete this entire “A Word to Leaders” section before publicizing these commitments to your congregation.**

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# RELATIONAL COMMITMENTS

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## Introduction

The following Commitments and Church Covenant are designed to help the people who attend our church relate to one another in a way that honors God and promotes Christ-honoring relationships. These Commitments cover important relational issues, such as peacemaking and reconciliation, responding to abuse, marriage and divorce, protecting children from abuse, soul care, confidentiality and mutual accountability.

These Commitments are intended to help us build a strong community of faith. By *community*, we mean a group of people who have voluntarily joined together to encourage and support one another as we worship God, grow in our understanding of his love for us, and seek to tell others about the salvation and peace they, too, can find through faith in Jesus Christ.

We know that true community isn't easy to achieve. Each of us brings our own expectations and agendas into the church. This diversity usually leads to rich discussions and creative ministries; but sometimes it can lead to conflict. As James 4:1-2 warns, "What causes fights and quarrels among you? Don't they come from your desires that battle within you? You want something but don't get it."

That certainly describes us! At times, no matter how hard we try to build a close community of faith, our desires and expectations still clash. That's where these Commitments come in. They pull together key principles from God's Word and serve as our relational guidelines. These Commitments accomplish several important purposes:

- 1) They remind us of our mutual commitment to work together to pursue unity, maintain friendships, preserve marriages and build relationships that reflect the love of Christ.
- 2) They help to prevent surprises, disappointed expectations, confusion and conflict by describing how we expect to relate to one another within the church.
- 3) They provide a clear track for us to run on when conflict threatens to divide us, and they remind us how to move quickly toward reconciliation.
- 4) They establish guidelines for how our leaders will counsel others, guard confidential information and protect our children from abuse.
- 5) They define and limit the spiritual authority of church leaders and thereby guard against abuse and ensure that all members are treated lovingly, justly and fairly.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> When we use the term "leader" in these Commitments, we are referring to the pastors and elders of our church.

- 6) Finally, they reduce our church's exposure to legal liability by clearly establishing our relational and pastoral practices and by affirming our mutual commitment to resolve conflict biblically.

As you read our Relational Commitments, we encourage you to study the Bible passages that are cited next to various provisions. We want you to be confident that these Commitments are based solidly on the Word of God. If your study does not answer all your questions and concerns, please do not hesitate to approach our leaders, who will be happy to talk with you about these principles.

We encourage you to expressly embrace these Commitments and formally join our church by going through our membership class, acknowledging your faith in Christ, and signing the Church Covenant provided at the end of this document. If you are not yet prepared to become a member, we hope you and your family will continue to attend our worship services, find fellowship in a small growth group, and call on our leaders if you need counsel and support in difficult times.

If you choose to continue attending our church without formally joining as a member, that will imply that you have consented to these Commitments, which will guide our relationship with you. As followers of Christ, we will do all we can to encourage you to grow in faith and godliness and to live a life that honors our Lord Jesus Christ and enhances the witness of our church.<sup>2\*</sup>

The Leaders of [Our Church Name]

Adopted on [Date]

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<sup>2</sup> These Relational Commitments were developed by Relational Wisdom 360 (rw360.org) and adapted with permission by the leaders of our church to align with our theology and policies for pastoral care.

\* This language will allow your church to assert that people who attend your church on an ongoing basis after receiving a copy of this document have given "implied informed consent" to these policies even if they have not formally joined as members. This will provide a legal defense of "informed consent" if someone attempts to sue your church as you carry out your normal pastoral care practices. Please delete this footnote after you have modified this document to suit your church.

## A. COMMITMENT TO PEACEMAKING AND RECONCILIATION

*Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called sons of God (Matt. 5:9).*

Our church is committed to building a culture of peace that reflects God's peace and the power of the gospel of Christ in our lives. As we stand in the light of the cross, we realize that bitterness, unforgiveness and broken relationships are not appropriate for the people whom God has reconciled to himself through the sacrifice of his only Son (John 13:34-35; Eph. 4:29-32; Col. 3:12-14).

Therefore, we look to the Scriptures and the Holy Spirit for guidance on how we can respond to conflict in a way that will honor God, promote justice, reconcile relationships and preserve our witness for Christ. As God gives us his wisdom and grace, we are committed to teaching and encouraging one another to live out the following principles of peacemaking and reconciliation.

When dealing with situations that may involve power imbalances or abuse (emotional, physical, spiritual, sexual, elder, etc.), we will modify our approach to peacemaking and reconciliation as described in this article: "Peacemaking and Abuse."<sup>3</sup>

### *Personal Peacemaking*

- 1) Whenever we are faced with conflict, our primary goal will be to glorify God with our thoughts, words and actions by imitating the love, kindness, patience, mercy and forgiveness that God has shown to us through the gospel (1 Cor. 10:31; Eph. 5:1; Rom. 2:4, 5:8; Luke 6:35-36; Eph. 4:31-32).
- 2) In normal (non-abusive) situations, we will try to get the "logs" out of our own eyes (take responsibility for our actions) before focusing on what others may have done wrong (Matt. 7:3-5; see footnote 2 below).
- 3) We will seek to overlook minor offenses (Prov. 19:11).
- 4) We will refrain from all gossip,<sup>4</sup> backbiting and slander (Eph. 4:29-32). If we have a problem with others, we will seek to talk *to* them, not *about* them. When someone seeks to share negative information with us, we will gently say, "Before you go any further, please help me understand your motive for sharing this with me." If the complaining person is unable to overlook or resolve the problem personally, we will offer to go with him either to talk with the other person or to seek advice from a church leader.
- 5) We will make "charitable judgments" toward one another by believing the best about each other until we have facts that prove otherwise (1 Cor. 13:7).<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> [rw360.org/peacemaking-and-abuse](http://rw360.org/peacemaking-and-abuse)

<sup>4</sup> Gossip may be defined as sharing negative information about another person with someone who is not part of the problem or clearly qualified to be part of a solution.

<sup>5</sup> See [rw360.org/charitable-judgments](http://rw360.org/charitable-judgments)

- 6) If an offense is too serious to overlook, or if we think someone may have something against us, we will go promptly to seek reconciliation (Matt. 5:23-24; 18:15).
- 7) When we offer a word of correction to others, we will do so graciously and gently, with the goal of serving and restoring them, rather than beating them down (Prov. 12:18; Eph. 4:29; Gal. 6:1).
- 8) When someone tries to correct us, we will ask God to help us resist prideful defensiveness and to welcome correction with humility (Ps. 141:5; Prov. 15:32).
- 9) When others repent, we will ask God to give us grace to forgive them as he has forgiven us (Eph. 4:32; 1 Cor. 13:5).
- 10) When we discuss or negotiate substantive issues, we will strive to look out for others' interests as well as our own (Phil. 2:3-4).

### *Assisted Peacemaking*

- 11) When two of us cannot resolve a conflict privately, or when one person feels uncomfortable or unsafe going to another person in private due to power imbalances, perceived abuse or any other reason, that person may request the participation or mediation of other trusted people in our church without first attempting a private conversation, and all parties commit to listening humbly to their counsel (Matt. 18:16; Phil. 4:2-3; *Guiding People Through Conflict* <sup>6</sup>). If our dispute is with a church leader, we will seek assistance from other leaders in the church.<sup>7</sup>
- 12) When informal mediation does not resolve a dispute, we will seek formal assistance from our church leaders or people they appoint, and we will respect counsel and correction that is consistent with God's Word (Matt. 18:17-20).
- 13) When we have a business or legal dispute with another Christian, we will make every reasonable effort to resolve the conflict within the body of Christ through biblical mediation or arbitration, rather than going to civil court (1 Cor. 6:1-8). If the other party attends another church, our leaders will offer to cooperate with the leaders of that church to resolve the matter.
- 14) If a person coming to our church has an unresolved conflict with someone in his former church, we will require and assist him to make a reasonable effort to be reconciled to the other person before joining our church (Matt. 5:23-24; Rom. 12:18).
- 15) When a conflict involves matters of doctrine or church discipline, we will submit to the procedures set forth in our Commitment to Accountability and Church Discipline (see below).

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<sup>6</sup> Copies are available in the church office and at [rw360.org/gptc](http://rw360.org/gptc).

<sup>7</sup> Our church recognizes the power imbalance between church leaders and members and realized that even when leaders sincerely intend to exercise their power appropriately, members may feel uncomfortable or unsafe when seeking to communicate concerns to them. Therefore, our leaders will welcome the participation of other leaders or trusted members when addressing concerns or conflicts with members.

- 16) Our leaders recognize that there are times when they may need assistance in dealing with unresolved disagreements within our leadership team (see Prov. 11:14; 15:22). Therefore, each year they will select three godly leaders who can be invited to offer them advice when they are unable to reach agreement on a leadership issue. A request for advice will be made when our leaders have had at least two discussions on a particular issue and two or more of them believe the issue is still unresolved and significant enough to require outside advice.
- 17) If we have a conflict with our church or any of its members or leaders and cannot resolve it internally through the steps given above, we will make a sincere effort to resolve it with the help of other Christians rather than going into civil court (1 Cor. 6:1-8). Therefore, before pursuing any legal action, we will prayerfully consider resolving the matter through biblical mediation or arbitration with the Christian Conciliation Service™, a division of RW360, as described in the *Handbook for Christian Conciliation*.<sup>8</sup>

Above all, we pray that our ministry of peacemaking will bring praise to our Lord Jesus Christ, reflect the love and mercy of the gospel, and lead others to know his infinite love and peace.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> Copies are available at [rw360.org/ccshandbook](http://rw360.org/ccshandbook).

<sup>9</sup> For more detailed guidance on how to resolve conflict, see *The Peacemaker: A Biblical Guide to Resolving Personal Conflict*, by Ken Sande (Baker Books, 3<sup>rd</sup> Ed. 2004). Our church also recommends the training in peacemaking and relational wisdom that is available through [rw-academy.org](http://rw-academy.org) and [rw360.org/bookstore](http://rw360.org/bookstore).

## **B. COMMITMENT TO PRESERVING MARRIAGES**

*So they are no longer two but one. Therefore, what God has joined together,  
let man not separate (Matt. 19:6).*

God designed marriage to reflect the beauty and permanence of Christ's loving relationship with his bride, the church (Eph. 5:22-33; Rev. 19:7). Therefore, he established marriage to be a life-long, exclusive relationship between one man and one woman (Matt. 19:4-6). God also designed it to provide mutual companionship through life's joys and difficulties, to create stability for raising and nurturing children, and to give strength and cohesiveness to society in general.

In our society, marriages fail under a wide range of circumstances. Many people have gone through a divorce before having a relationship with Christ, and others have experienced divorce through no desire or decision of their own. Still others may have divorced because of their own wrongful choices but have since experienced the repentance and forgiveness offered through our Lord Jesus. We want all of you to know that you are welcome in our church.

Because our church recognizes both the divine origin of marriage and the devastating effects of divorce, we are deeply committed to preserving marriages and preventing divorce. Toward this end, we are committed to providing preaching and teaching on how our members can strengthen their marriages and families. We also require and provide thorough premarital counseling to ensure that couples enter into marriage advisedly and are well prepared for its many challenges. We reserve the right to deny officiating a marriage if the couple refuses to participate in premarital counseling.

We also encourage couples to nurture their marriages by participating in weekly fellowship groups in which people can grow together in their love for God and for one another (Heb. 10:24-25). As relationships deepen within these groups, we expect husbands to spur each other on in loving and cherishing their wives, and wives to encourage one another in respecting and loving their husbands (Eph. 5:33).

Our church leaders are committed to providing counsel and support to couples who face marital difficulties, whether those difficulties involve minor communication or parenting issues or have grown into ongoing patterns of neglect or abuse. If either spouse believes that such problems exist in their marriage, we exhort and expect them to come to the elders to seek assistance so that these problems can be resolved, and their marriage can come to reflect the beauty of Christ's loving relationship with the church.

We will encourage couples to not use divorce to run away from issues that might possibly be resolved through counseling, repentance, forgiveness and ongoing discipleship and pastoral accountability.

We recognize, however, that there are times when God permits a believer to seek a divorce without sinning against God or a spouse. For example, Scripture teaches that divorce is permissible when the other spouse has been sexually involved with a person outside the marriage (Matt. 5:31-32), or when an unbelieving spouse abandons a marriage (1 Cor. 7:12-16). Our church believes that the continued use of pornography or ongoing patterns of emotional, spiritual, physical or financial neglect or abuse may also

constitute biblically legitimate grounds for divorce. If you have questions about these issues, please talk with one of our leaders.\*

Even though divorce is *permissible* in these situations, it is not *required*. God patiently bears with our sins, repeatedly calls us to repentance, and freely forgives us when we turn back to Him (Ps. 103:8-12; Isa. 55:7; 1 Cor. 5:1-13). When divorce becomes an option, an offended spouse can imitate God's love by offering a straying spouse these same evidences of grace (Eph. 5:1-2). This may involve patiently bearing neglect or firmly confronting serious sin and advocating for oppression to cease (Col. 3:12-14; Gal. 6:1). In cases involving serious sin, such as ongoing neglect or abuse, love may require asking the church to initiate formal discipline to provide safety for other family members and to rescue a spouse and a marriage from the devastating effects of unrepentant sin (Matt. 18:12-20).

Just as church leaders are involved in beginning a marriage, they should be involved when it ends. Therefore, when someone is considering divorce, he or she is expected to bring the situation to our leaders and cooperate with them as they determine whether grounds exist, promote repentance and reconciliation, and exhaust redemptive discipline, if appropriate.

Separated spouses who have filed for divorce should consider themselves married until the day a civil court issued a divorce decree. Thus, they should refrain from dating or any other activity that is inconsistent with being married.

We are always interested in helping divorced people restore their previous marriage if that is possible and appropriate. We will support a decision to pursue a second marriage to a different person only when we have determined that it is biblically valid and that a reasonable effort has been made to seek and grant forgiveness of the sins that contributed to a previous divorce.

We rejoice that divorce never diminishes God's free offer of love, grace and forgiveness. He cherishes and loves every person who has been unwillingly divorced, as does our church. God also graciously extends this same love to those who have wrongly left their marriages. That love moves Him (and us) to call them to repentance, to encourage and aid reconciliation when possible, and to gladly restore those who have done all they can to rebuild broken relationships.

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\* RW360 recognizes that different churches hold different positions on what constitutes biblical grounds for divorce. For relevant articles on this issue, please see [rw360.org/articles-divorce](http://rw360.org/articles-divorce). After your church establishes its position and modifies the language above, please delete this footnote.

## C. COMMITMENT TO PROTECTING OUR CHILDREN

*The prudent see danger and take refuge (Prov. 27:12a).*

Children are blessing from God, and he calls the church to support parents in their responsibility to train children in the discipline and instruction of the Lord. Therefore, the church should be a safe and blessed place for children, where they can grow, play, form friendships and learn to experience and share the love of Christ.

Since sin affects every person and organization in the world, including the local church, we are committed to taking every reasonable precaution to protect our children from foreseeable harm. This commitment includes, but is not limited to, the following steps:

- 1) We do not allow anyone to work regularly with our youth (children or teenagers), unless he or she has regularly attended our church for at least six months and is a formal member.
- 2) We require all our youth workers to complete a detailed application form and application interview.
- 3) We screen all youth workers through a national database.
- 4) We require that, whenever practicable, youth workers serve in teams of two or more and are visible to other workers when serving or engaging children.
- 5) We review our child protection policies and practices on an annual basis and consult with experts in this field to identify ways that we can further improve our ability to provide children with a safe environment.

If a child is harmed in our church or allegations of harm arise, we will take immediate steps to inform the parents, to fully investigate the allegations, to accept responsibility for our role in the situation, to report it to civil authorities as mandated by law, and to hold offending youth workers fully responsible for their actions.\*

To review a detailed copy of our Child Protection Policies, please contact our Children's Ministry Director, [name].

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\* These are the *minimal* steps a church should take to protect its children from abuse. For more detailed guidance and resources on screening and supervising youth workers, see the resources recommended by the [Evangelical Council for Abuse Prevention](#) and the [SBC Abuse Prevention and Response Ministry](#). [Screening Your Youth Volunteer: Is Not Knowing Worth the Risk](#) provides additional information. [Ministry Safe](#) provides widely respected training and screen services. For guidance on how to respond to abuse, including the importance of supporting an independent investigation by qualified experts, see [Recommendations for Churches Dealing with Abuse](#), [Telios Law Investigations](#) and [Fact Finding Ministry](#).

## D. COMMITMENT TO BIBLICAL COUNSELING

*I myself am convinced, my brothers, that you yourselves are full of goodness, complete in knowledge and competent to instruct one another (Rom. 15:14).*

All Christians struggle with sin and the effect it has on our lives and our relationships. Whenever believers are unable to overcome sinful attitudes or behaviors through personal efforts, God calls them to seek assistance from other believers, and especially from church leaders, who have the responsibility of providing pastoral counseling (which may also be referred to as shepherding, soul care or discipling; see Rom. 15:14; Gal. 6:1-2; 2 Tim. 4:1-2; Heb. 13:17; James 5:16). Therefore, this church encourages and enjoins its people to seek counsel from and confess sins to each other, and especially to our leaders.\*

We believe that the Bible provides thorough guidance and instruction for faith and life (2 Tim. 3:16-17; 2 Pet. 1:3). Therefore, our approach to counseling is based on our understanding of scriptural principles rather than those of secular psychology or psychiatry. Unless they specifically state otherwise, none of those who counsel in this church are trained or licensed as psychotherapists or mental health professionals, nor should they be expected to follow the methods of such specialists.

God calls our leaders to set an example for us “in speech, in life, in love, and in faith and purity” (1 Tim. 4:12). Therefore, we expect them to treat counselees with every respect and courtesy, and to avoid even the appearance of impropriety or impurity during counseling (Eph. 5:3). With this in mind, we typically arrange to have a second person present in a counseling session, especially if the counselee and the counselor are of the opposite sex. We also expect counselees to promptly report to the leadership team any conduct that fails to meet this standard.

To prevent our leaders from being placed in situations that might compromise their pastoral commitments, we, the members and attenders of this church, agree that we will not try to compel them to testify against their will in any legal proceeding or otherwise divulge any confidential information they receive through pastoral counseling or ministry (Prov. 11:13, 25:9).

There are occasions when our leaders do not have sufficient time to meet with every person who asks for counseling. At such times we expect our leaders to give priority to people who have formally joined the church (Gal. 6:10), and to serve those who only attend the church by referring them to another source of godly counsel.

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\* This sentence is designed to help churches claim the “[clergy-penitent privilege](#),” which can protect their leaders from being subpoenaed to testify in a legal proceeding related to a counselee. Statutory requirements for this privilege vary from state to state, so RW360 recommends that you have this language reviewed and refined by an attorney in your community. Please delete this note after you’ve clarifying the language for your state.

## E. COMMITMENT TO CONFIDENTIALITY

*A gossip betrays a confidence,  
but a trustworthy man keeps a secret (Prov. 11:13).*

The Bible teaches that Christians should carefully guard any personal and private information that others reveal to them. Protecting confidences is a sign of Christian love and respect (Matt. 7:12). It also discourages harmful gossip (Prov. 26:20), invites confession (Prov. 11:13) and thus encourages people to seek needed counseling. Since these goals are essential to the ministry of the gospel and the work of the local church, all members and attenders are expected to refrain from gossip and to respect the confidences of others. Our leaders will carefully protect all information that they receive through pastoral counseling, subject to the following guidelines.

Although confidentiality is to be respected as much as possible, there are times when it is appropriate to reveal certain information to others. When our leaders believe it is biblically necessary, they may disclose confidential information to appropriate people in the following circumstances:

- 1) When a leader is uncertain of how to counsel a person about a particular problem and needs to seek advice from other leaders in our church, from an appropriate professional, or, if the person attends another church, from the leaders of that church (Prov. 11:14);
- 2) When the person who disclosed the information, or any other person, is in imminent danger of serious harm unless others intervene (Prov. 24:11-12);
- 3) When a person refuses to repent of sin and it becomes necessary to promote repentance through accountability and redemptive church discipline (Matt. 18:15-20); or,
- 4) When leaders are required by law to report suspected abuse (Rom. 13:1).

Please be assured that our counselors strongly prefer not to disclose personal information to others, and they will make every effort to help you find ways to resolve a problem as privately as possible.

## F. COMMITMENT TO MUTUAL ACCOUNTABILITY AND CHURCH DISCIPLINE

*And let us consider how we may spur one another on toward love and good deeds (Heb. 10:24).*

### 1) Accountability and Discipline Are Signs of God's Love

God has established the church to reflect his character, wisdom and glory in the midst of a fallen world (Eph. 3:10-11). He loves his church so much that he sent his Son to die for her (Eph. 5:25). His ultimate purpose for his church is to present her as a spotless and blameless gift to his Son; thus Scripture refers to the church as the "bride" of Christ (Rev. 19:7). For this reason, the Father, Son and Holy Spirit are continually working to purify the church and bring her to maturity (Eph. 5:25-27).

This does not mean that God expects the church to be made up of perfectly pure people. He knows that the best of churches are still companies of sinners who wrestle daily with remaining sin (1 John 1:8; Phil. 3:12). Therefore, it would be unbiblical for us to expect church members to live perfectly. What we can do, however, is confess our common struggle with sin and our mutual need for God's mercy and grace. We also can spur one another on toward maturity by encouraging and holding each other accountable to love, seek after, and obey God with all of our hearts, souls, minds and strength, and to love others as we love ourselves (Mark 12:30-31; Heb. 10:24-25).

The Bible sometimes refers to this process of mutual encouragement and accountability as "discipline." The Bible never presents church discipline as being negative, legalistic or harsh, as modern society does. True discipline originates from God himself and is always presented as a sign of genuine love. "The Lord disciplines those he loves" (Heb. 12:6). "Blessed is the man you discipline, O LORD, the man you teach from your law" (Ps. 94:12). "Those whom I love I rebuke and discipline" (Rev. 3:19).

God's discipline in the church, like the discipline in a good family, is intended to be primarily positive, instructive and encouraging. This process, which is sometimes referred to as "formative discipline," involves preaching, teaching, prayer, personal Bible study, small group fellowship and countless other enjoyable activities that challenge and encourage us to love and serve God and one another more wholeheartedly.

On rare occasions God's discipline, like the discipline in a family with growing children, also may have a corrective purpose. When we forget or disobey what God has taught us, he corrects us. One way he does this is to call the church to seek after us and lead us back onto the right track. This process, which is sometimes called "corrective" or "restorative" discipline, is likened in Scripture to a shepherd seeking after a lost sheep.

*If a man has a hundred sheep, and one of them wanders away, will he not leave the ninety-nine on the hills and go to look for the one that wandered off? And if he finds it, I tell you the truth, he is happier about that one sheep than about the ninety-nine that did not wander off (Matt. 18:12-13).*

Thus, restorative or corrective discipline is never to be done in a harsh, vengeful or self-righteous manner. It is always to be carried out in humility and love, with the goals of restoring someone to a close walk with Christ (Matt. 18:15; Gal. 6:1), protecting others from harm (1 Cor. 5:6) and showing respect for the honor and glory of God's name (1 Pet. 2:12).

Biblical discipline is similar to the discipline we value in other aspects of life. We admire parents who consistently teach their children how to behave properly and lovingly discipline them when they disobey. We value music teachers who bring out the best in their students by teaching them proper technique and consistently pointing out their errors so they can play a piece properly. And we applaud athletic coaches who diligently teach their players to do what is right and correct them when they fumble, so that the team works well together and can compete for the championship.

The same principles apply to the family of God. We, too, need to be taught what is right and to be lovingly corrected when we do something contrary to what God teaches us in his Word. Therefore, we as a church are committed to help one another obey God's command to be "self-controlled, upright, holy and disciplined" (Titus 1:8).

## **2) Accountability and Discipline of Church Leaders**

The leaders of our church recognize that God has called them to an even higher level of accountability regarding their faith and conduct (James 3:1; 1 Tim. 5:19-20). Our leaders also recognize that God strictly commands them to never use their spiritual positions or authority for selfish ends or to oppress any member of our body (Ezek. 34:1-10).

Therefore, our leaders are committed to listening humbly to correction from one another or from any member in our church, and, if necessary, to submitting themselves to the corrective discipline of our leadership team and church body.\*

Therefore, all the disciplinary principles described in this section are especially relevant and applicable to our church leaders.

## **3) Most Corrective Discipline Is Private, Personal and Informal**

God gives every believer grace to be self-disciplined. "For God did not give us a spirit of timidity, but a spirit of power, of love and of self-discipline" (2 Tim. 1:7). Thus, discipline always begins as a personal matter and usually remains that way, as each of us studies God's Word, seeks Him in prayer, and draws on his grace to identify and change sinful habits and grow in godliness.

But sometimes we are blind to our sins or so tangled in them that we cannot get free on our own. This is why the Bible says, "Brothers, if someone is caught in a sin, you who are spiritual should restore him gently" (Gal. 6:1). In obedience to this command, we are

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\* To improve your leadership team's ability to live up to this commitment, RW360 recommends that you periodically review and discuss the concepts set forth in these two articles: [rw360.org/approachability](http://rw360.org/approachability) and [rw360.org/accountability](http://rw360.org/accountability). You could also have your leaders complete RW Shepherd training (see [rw360.org/rw-training](http://rw360.org/rw-training)). Please delete this note after accessing these articles.

committed to giving and receiving loving correction within our church whenever a sin (whether in word, behavior or doctrine) seems too serious to overlook (Prov. 19:11).

If repeated private conversations do not lead another person to repentance, Jesus commands that we ask other brothers or sisters to get involved. "If he will not listen, take one or two others along" (Matt. 18:16). If informal conversations with these people fail to resolve the matter, then we may seek the involvement of more influential people, such as a small group leader, Sunday school teacher or church leader. If these informal efforts fail to bring a brother or sister to repentance, and if the issue is too serious to overlook, we will move into what may be called "formal discipline."

#### **4) Formal Discipline May Involve More People**

If an individual persistently refuses to listen to personal and informal correction to turn from speech, behavior or doctrine that the Bible defines as sin, Jesus commands us to "tell it to the church" (Matt. 18:17a). This first involves informing one or more church leaders about the situation. If the offense is not likely to cause imminent harm to others, our leaders may approach the individual privately to personally establish the facts and encourage repentance of any sin they discover. The individual will be given every reasonable opportunity to explain and defend his or her actions. If the individual recognizes his sin and repents, the matter usually ends there, unless a confession to additional people is needed.

If an offense is likely to harm others or lead them into sin, or cause division or disruption, our leaders may accelerate the entire disciplinary process and move promptly to protect the church (Rom. 16:17; 1 Cor. 5:1-13; Titus 3:10-11).

As the disciplinary process progresses, our leaders may impose a variety of sanctions to encourage repentance, including but not limited to private and public admonition, withholding of the Lord's Supper, removal from ministry or office, withdrawal of normal fellowship, and, as a last resort, removal from membership (Matt. 5:23-24; 2 Thess. 3:6-15; Matt. 18:17).

If the straying individual does not repent in response to private appeals from our leaders, they may inform others in the church who may be able to influence that individual. Leaders may also inform people who might be harmed or affected by the person's behavior.<sup>1</sup> This step may include close friends, a small group, a Sunday school

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<sup>1</sup> For example, it is not uncommon for a person to attend a church, develop relationships of trust, persuade people to give him money to invest, and then fail to return the money as promised. Senior citizens are particularly vulnerable to these schemes, and many people have lost much of what they had saved for retirement. When such sinful men are discovered, they usually leave a church but continue to prey on members who have not heard about their schemes. They also tend to move on to other churches where they continue to harm other unsuspecting victims. If our leaders found such a person in our church, they would call him to repent. If he refused, they would bring him under formal discipline and also warn the congregation not to trust him with their money. If we learn that he moved on to another church where he might harm other unsuspecting people, we may contact the leaders of that church to encourage them to engage the man and call him to repentance.

class, or the entire congregation if our leaders deem it to be appropriate (Matt. 18:17, 1 Tim. 5:20).<sup>2</sup>

If, after a reasonable period, the individual still refuses to change, then our leaders may formally remove him or her from membership and normal fellowship. They also may inform the church body of their decision and instruct the congregation to treat the individual as an unbeliever.\* This means that we will no longer treat him as a fellow Christian. Instead of having casual, relaxed fellowship with the individual, we will look for opportunities to lovingly bring the gospel to him, remind him of God's holiness and mercy, and call him to repent and put his faith in Christ (Matt. 18:17; 1 Cor. 5:5; 1 Tim. 1:20).

We realize that our natural human response to correction often is to hide or run away from accountability (Gen. 3:8-10). To avoid falling into this age-old trap and to strengthen our church's ability to rescue us if we are caught in sin, we agree not to run away from this church to avoid corrective discipline. Therefore, we waive our right to resign from membership or accountability while discipline is pending against us. Although we are free at any time to hand in a resignation, stop attending the church and to decline to engage with the leaders, we agree that a resignation while discipline is pending will not be given final effect until the church has fulfilled its responsibilities to encourage our repentance and restoration, and to bring the disciplinary process to an orderly conclusion, as described in these Commitments (Matt. 18:12-14; Gal. 6:1; Heb. 13:17).

If an individual leaves the church while discipline is in effect or is being considered, and our leaders learn that he or she is attending another church, they may inform that church of the situation and ask its leaders to encourage the individual to repent and be reconciled to the Lord and to any people he or she has offended. This action is intended both to help the individual find freedom from his sin and to warn the other church about the harm that he or she might do to their members<sup>3</sup> (see Matt. 18:12-14; Rom. 16:17; 1 Cor. 5:1-13; 3 John 1:9-10).

Loving restoration always stands at the heart of the disciplinary process. If an individual repents, and our leaders confirm his or her sincerity, we will rejoice together

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<sup>2</sup> If our leaders inform others about a disciplinary situation, they have discretion whether to divulge the individual's name or details of the situation. This decision will depend on a variety of factors, such as how widely known the situation already is; whether there might be people in the congregation who could persuade the individual to repent; or whether the congregation needs to be on guard against potential harm he might cause (see previous footnote).

\* For a congregational church, the first part of this paragraph could be changed to read, "If, after a reasonable period of time, the individual still refuses to change, then our leaders may bring the situation before the congregation, with the recommendation that the individual be removed from membership and normal fellowship. If the congregation supports that recommendation, we will treat the individual as an unbeliever."

<sup>3</sup> For example, if we confronted a man in our church for acting inappropriately around little children, defrauding older people, seducing young women or sowing gossip and division, and he left and started attending another church, we would consider it our duty to urge the leaders of that church to counsel with him and to protect their people from his harmful behavior.

and gladly imitate God's forgiveness by restoring the person to fellowship within the body (see Matt. 18:13; Luke 15:3-7, 11-32; 2 Cor. 2:5-11; Col. 3:12-14).

People who have been formally excluded from another church will not be allowed to partake of the sacraments in our church, to become members or to participate in the regular fellowship of our church until they have made a reasonable effort to be reconciled, or our leaders have determined that the discipline of the former church was not biblically appropriate.

If an individual disagrees with the way discipline has been carried out by our church, he or she may appeal the church's decisions through the process set forth in section A.16 in the Peacemaking and Reconciliation section of these Commitments\*\*

As we pursue the blessings of accountability and church discipline, we will hold fast to the promise of Scripture: "God disciplines us for our good, that we may share in his holiness. No discipline seems pleasant at the time, but painful. Later on, however, it produces a harvest of righteousness and peace for those who have been trained by it" (Heb. 12:10-11).

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To see four real life examples of how we hope to carry out the ministry of redemptive and restorative discipline in our church, please see [rw360.org/four-cases](http://rw360.org/four-cases).

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\*\* Denominational churches may revise this provision to match their denomination's disciplinary process, possibly with language like this: "If an individual disagrees with the way discipline has been carried out, he or she may appeal the church's decisions according to the established disciplinary procedures of our denomination."

## WE INVITE YOU TO BECOME A MEMBER OF OUR CHURCH

We believe that God wants every Christian to become a member of a local church. This is one of the most significant decisions you can ever make, however, so it should be done with prayer and careful consideration.

The preaching, teaching, fellowship, opportunities to use your gifts and mutual accountability that you experience in a church can dramatically change your relationship with the Lord and with the people he places in your life. Therefore, we want you to take time to get to know our church, learn how we are fulfilling God's command to build his kingdom, and see how we love and relate to one another in daily life.

If you like what you see in our church, we invite you to attend our membership class. During that class you can learn more about our church's doctrines and vision for ministry, and about the privileges and responsibilities of formal membership. Attending the class will not obligate you to become a member.

If attending the membership class convinces you that joining our church will help to you grow in your ability to love and serve God, we would be delighted to have you become a member of our body. By joining our church, you will demonstrate in a concrete way your desire to unite with us to advance Christ's kingdom. Membership also will allow you to enjoy ministry opportunities and privileges that are not available to people who only attend our church, including the following:

- 1) You may *participate and vote in congregational meetings*, where we seek to discern and plan how to follow God's vision for our church.
- 2) You will be eligible to *minister to the children and youth* in our church (after completing our standard screening process).
- 3) You can seek *more opportunities to use your spiritual gifts*, including those of teaching, serving and leading within the body.
- 4) If you need counseling or support from our leaders when their time is limited, *your request for assistance will take precedence* over requests from people who have not joined the church.

If you would like to learn more about the importance of church membership, please read the third chapter of Donald Whitney's book, *Spiritual Disciplines Within the Church: Participating Fully in the Body of Christ*, copies of which are available in our church office. You may also meet with our leaders, who would be happy to discuss any questions or concerns you may have about membership.

# CHURCH COVENANT (SAMPLE A)\*

By the Members of [Our Church Name]

## Our Commitments to One Another in the Sight of God

Having been led, as we believe, by the Spirit of God to receive the Lord Jesus Christ as our Savior, and, on the profession of our faith, having been baptized in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, we do now, in the presence of God, angels and this assembly, most solemnly and joyfully enter into covenant with one another as one body in Christ.

1. We commit, therefore, by the aid of the Holy Spirit, to walk together in Christian love, to strive for the advancement of this church in knowledge, holiness, and comfort; to promote its prosperity and spirituality; to sustain its worship, ordinances, discipline, and doctrines; and to contribute cheerfully and regularly to the support of the ministry, the expenses of the church, the relief of the poor, and the spread of the Gospel through all nations.
2. We also commit to maintain family and secret devotions; to educate our children in the Christian faith; to seek the salvation of our kindred and acquaintances; to walk circumspectly in the world; to be just in our dealings, faithful in our engagements, and exemplary in our deportment; to avoid all gossiping, backbiting, and excessive anger; and to seek God's help in abstaining from all drugs, food, drink, and practices that bring unwarranted harm to the body or jeopardize our own or another's faith.
3. We further commit to watch over one another in brotherly love; to remember one another in prayer; to aid one another in sickness and distress; to cultivate Christian sympathy in feeling and courtesy in speech; and to be slow to take offense, but always ready for reconciliation and mindful of the rules of our Savior to secure it without delay.
4. We further commit that when we remove from this place we will, if possible, unite with a church where we can carry out the articles of this church's confession and the spirit of this covenant.
5. Finally, we acknowledge that we have received and read the Bylaws and Relational Commitments of this church, and we hereby covenant and agree to support and submit to them.

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*Print Name*

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*Signature*

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*Date*

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*Pastor's Signature*

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*Date*

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\* This is a traditional Baptist covenant that has been in use for many decades. A church may modify the text in either this or the following model covenant or replace them entirely with language it has traditionally used, provided there is no conflict between the substituted language and any of the provisions in the Relational Commitments. It is important, however, to retain the last provision in these covenants, which indicates that a person has received and agreed to submit to the Relational Covenants.

# CHURCH COVENANT (SAMPLE B)\*

By the Members of [Our Church Name]

## Our Commitments to One Another in the Sight of God

Having been chosen by God and drawn by the Spirit to receive the Lord Jesus Christ as my Savior, I now, with a view to my baptism in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit, do joyfully enter into this covenant with the members of this church as one body in Christ, according to the following affirmations and commitments.

1. I believe the Bible, consisting of the Old and New Testaments, to be the Word of God, and its doctrine of salvation to be the perfect and only true doctrine of salvation.<sup>4</sup>
2. I acknowledge myself to be a sinner in the sight of God, justly deserving his wrath, and without hope except in God's sovereign love and mercy to save me.<sup>5</sup>
3. I believe in the Lord Jesus Christ as the Son of God, the only Savior of sinners, and receive and rest upon Him alone for salvation as he is offered to me in the Gospel.<sup>6</sup>
4. I resolve and promise, in humble reliance upon the grace of the Holy Spirit, that I will endeavor to put to death the misdeeds of my sinful nature and to live my life as is fitting a true follower of Jesus Christ.<sup>7</sup>
5. I promise to support the church in its worship and work to the best of my ability.<sup>8</sup>
6. I submit myself to the government and discipline of the church and promise to pursue its purity and peace.<sup>9</sup>
7. Finally, I acknowledge that I have received and read the Bylaws and Relational Commitments of this church, and I hereby covenant and agree to support and submit to them.

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*Print Name*

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*Signature*

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*Date*

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*Pastor's Signature*

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*Date*

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\* This covenant is based on the membership vows used by the Presbyterian Church in America.

<sup>4</sup> 2 Tim. 3:14-17; 2 Pet. 1:19-21; Matt. 4:4

<sup>5</sup> Rom. 3:9-18, 23; 6:23; Eph. 1:3-14; 2:1-10; Tit. 3:3-7; 1 Pet. 1:2-9; Rom. 8:29-30

<sup>6</sup> John 14:6; Acts 4:12; Rom. 1:16-17; 3:9-26; 10:9; Phil. 2:5-11; 3:5-9; Tit. 3:3-5; 1 Tim. 1:15

<sup>7</sup> Eph. 4:17-6:4; Col. 3:1-4:6; 1 Pet. 1:13-15; 2:18-5:11; 2 Pet. 1:3-9; Rom. 8:29; 12:1-15:14

<sup>8</sup> Rom. 12:3-8; 1 Cor. 12:9-15; Eph. 4:1-16; Heb. 10:24-25; 12:24-25; 1 Pet. 4:7-11

<sup>9</sup> Matt. 16:18; 18:15-20; 1 Thess. 5:12-13; 1 Tim. 3:15; 5:17-20; Heb. 13:17; Col. 3:15; Rom. 12:18-21