



The Episcopal Diocese of Hawai'i

The Right Reverend Robert L. Fitzpatrick
Bishop

Date: December 6, 2015 (*The Feast of St. Nicholas*)

From: The Bishop and Standing Committee of the Diocese of Hawai'i

To: The Clergy, Wardens, Members of Vestries and Bishop's Committees, and Members of Diocesan Council of the Diocese of Hawai'i

Pastoral Memo on Congregational Membership

The Office of the Bishop often receives questions about what needs to happen in order for a person to 'join' the Episcopal Church. The short answer is the person just needs to show up! The congregations of this Diocese welcome anyone and everyone to join us for worship on Sunday mornings or at any of our church activities. First and foremost, membership in the Episcopal Church means being part of a local congregation that helps people draw ever more deeply into a relationship with God through Jesus Christ and in service to others.

There can be more to it than that. As congregations prepare for annual meetings, questions arise about voting membership. For those who are interested in making a formal commitment of membership in the Episcopal Church and becoming part of a local congregation, the Bishop and Standing Committee have put together a brief summary of how the Episcopal Church and the Diocese of Hawai'i define the terms of membership. The Chancellor has reviewed and approved the following for this Diocese. We have consulted with other dioceses, bishops and chancellors (including the Chancellor and Chancellor Emeritus of the Presiding Bishop). We agree that the following reflects the practice and canonical intention for our common life as a Diocese and that it is consistent with the current general practice in the Episcopal Church throughout the United States. If you still have questions after reading the following, please feel free to contact the Bishop (rlfitzpatrick@episcopalhawaii.org) and he will be happy to talk more about it.

Who is a Christian?

In purely practical terms, a Christian is any person who has been baptized in the Episcopal Church or other Christian denomination having been baptized in the name of the Holy Trinity. "The outward and visible sign in Baptism is water, in which the person is baptized in the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit."¹ In addition, of course, there are questions of faith in Jesus Christ, personal behavior and one's way of life.

What is the Sacrament of Holy Baptism?

“Holy Baptism is the sacrament by which God adopts us as his children and makes us members of Christ’s Body, the Church, and inheritors of the kingdom of God.”² The sacrament of Baptism is the full initiation rite into the Christian Church. To be baptized as an infant, child or adult is to become a full member of the Church with access to the Sacraments and ministry of the Episcopal Church.

Who may receive the Sacrament of Holy Eucharist?

“The Holy Eucharist is the sacrament commanded by Christ for the continual remembrance of his life, death, and resurrection, until his coming again.... The Holy Eucharist is called the Lord’s Supper, and Holy Communion; it is also known as the Divine Liturgy, the Mass, and the Great Offering.”³ In the Episcopal Church, any baptized Christian, regardless of age or denomination, is welcome to receive Holy Communion [both the Body and Blood (bread and wine), or just the bread (or just wine) as required by personal need or piety].⁴

Who is a member of the Episcopal Church?

A person is a member of the Episcopal Church if they have been baptized in the name of the Holy Trinity, whether in an Episcopal Church or other Christian denomination, and the Baptism has been recorded in the records (known as church and/or parish registers used to permanently record sacramental and other historical data for the congregation) of a particular Episcopal church. A person is only counted as a member of one local Episcopal congregation at a time.

How do you have your baptism recorded in the records if you weren’t baptized in the church you’re now attending?

If a person is moving from one Episcopal congregation to another one, s/he would contact her/his former church and request that a ‘letter of transfer’ be sent to the new church.⁵ This letter usually includes information about the person’s date of birth, Baptism, Confirmation, etc.

Now, if a person has been baptized in another Christian denomination in the name of the Holy Trinity, one might just present a copy of the certificate of baptism or the page from a family Bible to note the date and place of baptism.

All of this is to ensure that the records of your local church are as accurate as possible.

Pastorally, on occasion, such paperwork just isn’t available. If a person doesn’t have access to her/his record of baptism because of the loss of documents over time (the death of family members who might have had such records, the baptism happened in a denomination that just doesn’t share or keep such records, etc.), then the clergy in charge, or Warden if there is no Priest, can and should just enter the person in the church’s register as a baptized member. The normative practice throughout this Diocese and the Episcopal Church is that the person’s word is accepted as proof of baptism. We do not challenge a person’s statement that s/he has been baptized since family members usually pass on such knowledge to the individual. The word of the person seeking membership in the Church is enough.

If a person just doesn't know if or has some doubt that s/he was ever baptized, the person can be 'conditionally' baptized for pastoral reasons.

All in all, being Baptized with water in the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit makes one a member of a congregation of the Episcopal Church. The intention is that a person is a member of one particular Episcopal congregation in which to live out one's faith. With such membership does come responsibilities as well.

Pastorally, it is important for the Priest to know the background and story of the person coming into the congregation as the person becomes a member of a local church.

What are the responsibilities of a member of the Episcopal Church?

"The ministry of lay persons is to represent Christ and his Church; to bear witness to him wherever they may be; and, according to the gifts given them, to carry on Christ's work of reconciliation in the world; and to take their place in the life, worship, and governance of the Church."⁶ So, a member of the Church must be willing to be involved in the life of her/his local Episcopal congregation.

How can a person be a member of the Church and a Communicant in good standing?

"All members of this Church who have received Holy Communion in this Church at least three times during the preceding year are to be considered communicants of this Church.... All communicants of this Church who for the previous year have been faithful in corporate worship, unless for good cause prevented, and have been faithful in working, praying, and giving for the spread of the Kingdom of God, are to be considered communicants in good standing."⁷ So, the teaching of the Church is not merely a legalistic standard to be a member. The person is called into the practices of faith including worship attendance; prayer; and giving of time, talent and treasure for God's Kingdom. The goal is the transformation of a person's life as a member of the Body of Christ. In practical terms, a baptized person has to have taken Holy Communion at least three times at some point during the past year in the Episcopal Church and has been involved in "working, praying, and giving" in some way during the previous year in order to be considered a Communicant. This is not to suggest that a person has to be in Church for a full year before being considered a Communicant. No, it is the involvement at some point during the past year in ways that show commitment to Jesus Christ and the Church through the local congregation that is key. The Episcopal Church does not require a baptized member to attend church for a year before being counted as a Communicant in good standing. A baptized member is expected to be involved and attending worship (including taking Holy Communion) to be considered a Communicant in good standing. Being away from one's church home for over a year, except for medical or personal necessity, makes being a Communicant in 'good standing' difficult. Pastoral response is most important in the life of the individual baptized Christian and that of the local church. We need one another as the members of the Body of Christ.

A person can also become a recognized member of the Episcopal Church if they are Confirmed or Received by a Bishop.

What is Confirmation?

“Confirmation is the rite in which we express a mature commitment to Christ, and receive strength from the Holy Spirit through prayer and the laying on of hands by a bishop.”⁸ This sacramental rite is an informed profession of faith in Jesus Christ that may be made by teenagers or adults. To be ‘Confirmed’ is to outwardly affirm a mature faith expressed when baptized and to proclaim the decision to live out that faith in the tradition and practices of the Episcopal Church. It involves the laying on of hands upon the head of the individual by the Bishop who offers a special prayer.

What does it mean to be ‘Received’ into the Episcopal Church?

If a person has previously been Confirmed in another liturgical tradition (such as the Roman Catholic Church), one may be ‘Received’ into the Episcopal Church rather than Confirmed. A person is ‘Received’ into the Episcopal Church by the Bishop with these words: “we recognize you as a member of the one holy catholic and apostolic Church, and we receive you into the fellowship of this Communion. God, the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, bless, preserve, and keep you.”⁹

What does it mean to formally ‘Reaffirm’ one’s faith?

At times, someone who has been away from the Church for some time or has experienced faith in an immediate way may desire to affirm her/his connection with the Church or a particular local congregation in a deep and meaningful way. Such persons may well have been Confirmed in the Episcopal Church, another branch of the Anglican Communion or in one of our Full-Communion Partner Churches (like the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America or the Philippine Independent Church). If so, those individuals can reaffirm their Baptism (and Confirmation) before the Bishop who then blesses each person.

When should someone seek Confirmation?

“It is expected that all adults [sixteen years of age and over] of this Church, after appropriate instruction, will have made a mature public affirmation of their faith and commitment to the responsibilities of their Baptism and will have been confirmed or received by the laying on of hands by a Bishop of this Church or by a Bishop of a Church in communion with this Church. Those who have previously made a mature public commitment in another Church may be received by the laying on of hands by a Bishop of this Church, rather than confirmed.”¹⁰

Why officially join the Episcopal Church?

Episcopalians believe that God speaks to people in a variety of ways and that no one particular expression of this faith is ‘right.’ Episcopalians relate to the Divine in a way that seeks to balance scripture, tradition, and reason. The Episcopal Church is a sacramental and liturgical form of Christianity that respects the ancient nature of the Church yet allows room for a prayerful discussion of theology and being open to evolution in practice. Above all, we seek to know God through the birth, life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ by being part of the Church, “the Body of which Jesus Christ is the Head and of which all baptized persons are members. It is called the People of God, the New Israel, a holy nation, a royal priesthood, and the pillar and ground of truth.”¹¹ By taking part in the rite of

Confirmation/Reception/Reaffirmation, it allows a person a public and spiritually meaningful way to reaffirm her/his faith in Jesus Christ and express the desire to live out that faith in the Episcopal Church.

Who is a member of an Episcopal congregation in the Diocese of Hawai'i?

An 'official' member of a congregation is a baptized person (in the name of the Holy Trinity) who requests to be placed on the membership rolls of a congregation. A member may additionally be Confirmed or Received. A person who is a member of another Episcopal church can transfer the membership to her/his current church through a letter of transfer. Once a person's Baptism in another Christian denomination is recorded in the records of a congregation, the person is then a baptized member of the Episcopal Church and in her/his local congregation. After being recognized as a baptized member, if the person takes Holy Communion in this Church at least three times during the preceding year, then s/he can be considered a 'Communicant in good standing.' Pastoral understanding and inclusion is encouraged in this Diocese with regard to membership. There must be as few barriers as possible to becoming members of a local congregation.

It is expected that all adult members in the Diocese of Hawai'i will be Confirmed or Received as soon as possible after 'joining' an Episcopal congregation. The practice of the Diocese is to have regional [island-wide] services with the Bishop for Confirmations/Receptions/Reaffirmations after Easter each year. At other times, the Bishop will make special arrangements for Confirmations/Receptions/Reaffirmations if needed.

Each congregation is expected to provide pastoral support and instructions for all those seeking Baptism (or the parents of children that are to be Baptized) and/or Confirmation/Reception/Reaffirmation.

Who is eligible to vote in the annual meeting of a congregation?

Part of being a 'member' of the Episcopal Church and a local congregation is taking part in the governance of the Church. Our Church has a constitutional system of governance that requires the active participation of its lay members.

"At any meeting of the Parish, qualified voters shall be those persons of fourteen (14) years of age or over who, at the time of such meeting, shall be either communicants on the records of the Parish or baptized persons who have been contributors to the funds of the Parish for six months and whose names as regular contributors shall have been for that period entered or entitled to be entered upon the books of the Treasurer of the Parish, provided, however, that any Parish by its By-Laws may increase the age requirement up to and including eighteen (18) years. Any dispute as to whether an individual is a qualified voter shall be determined by majority vote upon the recommendation of the Rector and Treasurer."¹²

The practical intent of this is to suggest that to be a 'qualified voter' is to be understood in the broadest terms as a 'communicant' or baptized 'member' of a congregation as already explained. There is no time requirement before becoming a baptized member. The only

time requirement to become a Communicant in good standing is taking Holy Communion at least three times within the previous year, and, most importantly, being faithful in corporate worship, unless for good cause prevented, and being faithful in working, praying, and giving for the spread of the Kingdom of God. There is, however, a requirement that the person has contributed financially to the congregation's budget at some time during the previous six months in a way that the Treasurer of the local congregation can confirm such giving. That means giving by check, cash in an envelope (either numbered or with a name) or credit card online. The requirement is always understood in a generous way to include spouses who together make a single donation. Disputes about who is a qualified voter are rare in congregations. As part of our democratic tradition, the majority of those qualified voters gathered at a meeting of the congregation decide who can vote. In the end, it is about being involved and actively part of the congregation.

The Annual Meeting of a local congregation

In the Diocese of Hawai'i, the annual meeting of each congregation must be held in January. The presence of ten percent (10%) of qualified voters of the congregation constitutes a quorum for the transaction of business, and no person is permitted to vote by absentee ballot or by proxy. The main purpose of the meeting is to receive reports from the leadership (Rector/Vicar, Vestry/Bishop's Committee, Treasurer, etc.), to review the budget adopted by the Vestry/Bishop's Committee (note that the budget is not adopted or voted on in any way by the congregation at a congregation's annual meeting), and, most importantly, to elect members of the Vestry/Bishop's Committee, the Junior Warden and Delegates to Diocesan Convention. The date, time and place need to be announced well in advance to encourage attendance (and it's always good to have food!). Soon after January 1st of each year, it is prudent and best practice for the Treasurer and Rector/Vicar, or Senior/Bishop's Warden if there be no Priest, to prepare a list of qualified voters as noted above and share that with the congregation to be sure no one has been missed, and to set the quorum for the meeting early. It is the responsibility of every member to be in attendance at the annual meeting of the congregation. It is particularly important for the lay leadership (members of the Vestry/Bishop's Committee and Wardens) to actively encourage attendance.

Conclusion

The Church carries out its mission through the ministry of all its members. "The mission of the Church is to restore all people to unity with God and each other in Christ.... The Church pursues its mission as it prays and worships, proclaims the Gospel, and promotes justice, peace, and love."¹³ Being a 'member' of the Church is about a way of life and a way of engaging the world with the love of God. As Episcopalians, part of the ministry of 'members' of the Church is to be engaged in the governance and leadership of local congregations, the Diocese and the Episcopal Church. This ministry includes attendance and involvement in the annual meetings of our local congregations. All are welcome on the journey of faith in God through Jesus Christ and in the congregations of the Episcopal Diocese of Hawai'i.

¹ *The Book of Common Prayer*, p. 858.

² *The Book of Common Prayer*, p. 858.

³ *The Book of Common Prayer*, p. 859.

⁴ *Constitution & Canons, 2015* (http://www.episcopalarchives.org/CandC_ToC_2012.html), Canon I.17.7 states: “No unbaptized person shall be eligible to receive Holy Communion in this Church.”

⁵ *Constitution & Canons, 2015* (http://www.episcopalarchives.org/CandC_ToC_2012.html), Canon I.17.4(a).

⁶ *The Book of Common Prayer*, p. 855.

⁷ *Constitution & Canons, 2015* (http://www.episcopalarchives.org/CandC_ToC_2012.html), Canon I.17.2(a) and I.17.3.

⁸ *The Book of Common Prayer*, p. 860.

⁹ *The Book of Common Prayer*, p. 418.

¹⁰ *Constitution & Canons, 2015* (http://www.episcopalarchives.org/CandC_ToC_2012.html), Canon I.17.1(c).

¹¹ *The Book of Common Prayer*, p. 854.

¹² *Canons of the Diocese of Hawai‘i* ([http://www.episcopalhawaii.org/uploads/2/5/4/8/25486559/tech -
_canons_2015_final.pdf](http://www.episcopalhawaii.org/uploads/2/5/4/8/25486559/tech_-_canons_2015_final.pdf)), Canon 29.5. The same requirements for an Organized Mission can be found in Canon 32.1.

¹³ *The Book of Common Prayer*, p. 855.