



# MEMBERSHIP PACKET FOR CHURCHES JOINING THE

Welcome!

We give thanks to God for the partnership we share in Christ. It holds much promise as we spur one another on in faith and mission.

This packet includes everything you need to move through the important stages of becoming a member congregation in your regional Conference and the Evangelical Covenant Church. Give yourself plenty of time. To do the process well, and to make it meaningful for your congregation, you will need several months.

Included in this packet are:

1. A summary of the steps and timeline
2. An article on local church governance introducing congregational polity as practiced in the Covenant, and the process for selecting a constitution and bylaws document
3. Model constitutions and bylaws to review and choose from
4. A checklist for submitting a draft of your constitution and bylaws for review
5. A Report on Churches Joining the Covenant form
6. Other forms you will need, including an application for membership and the pension agreement

Contact Conference staff for more information and assistance, or call ElenaClaire Lindholtz in the Start and Strengthen Churches ministry priority in the main denominational offices in Chicago, Illinois. Her office line is 773-299-7261, and her email is [elenaclaire.lindholtz@covchurch.org](mailto:elenaclaire.lindholtz@covchurch.org)

The Covenant and your regional Conference are richer and stronger because of you. We trust that you will sense how you, too, are richer and stronger by the relationship you have with over 700 other congregations in the Conference and Covenant cheering you on to go deeper in Christ and further in mission.

## Becoming a Member Congregation

### *Overview of Steps and Responsibilities*

New churches are received into denominational membership each year at the Covenant Annual Meeting, held in the latter part of June. The following list outlines important steps in the months leading up to that milestone. Please note that all forms and documents must be submitted electronically to the denominational offices in Chicago. All forms and documents must be sent to ElenaClaire Lindholtz, Administrative Coordinator for the Start and Strengthen Churches ministry priority. You may email her at [elenaclaire.lindholtz@covchurch.org](mailto:elenaclaire.lindholtz@covchurch.org), or call her at the denominational offices at 773-784-3000.

1. Determination to proceed, made jointly by the church leadership, regional Conference, and the Start and Strengthen Churches ministry priority team in the denominational offices in Chicago. Point person in this stage: Regional Conference administrative staff. Window: **September 1 – November 30.**
2. Instructions will be forwarded to church and Conference staff will be in touch with pastoral staff to outline what the next steps are, and what documents will be required from the church – no later than **December 1.** Point person in this stage: Regional Conference administrative staff.
3. Either:
  - a. Conference Director of Church Planting will process instructions with church planter
  - b. Regional Conference staff will process instructions with staff from the church body seeking adoption into the ECC
4. The church will create and submit their Constitution and Bylaws, using a model/sample constitution as their template, and will either apply for or acquire a copy of their Articles of Incorporation. Point person at this stage: ElenaClaire Lindholtz, Administrative Coordinator for Start and Strengthen Churches.
  - a. Select one of the Covenant models for the Constitution and Bylaws, and create document. For questions regarding this process, contact ElenaClaire Lindholtz, Administrative Coordinator for Start and Strengthen Churches via email or office phone number. Please see top of this page for her contact information. Deadline to submit draft to the denominational offices for review: **January 15.**
  - b. Denominational Leadership will review the proposed constitution and bylaws, and look over the articles of incorporation. Churches will be notified of approval, or if changes need to be made. Confirmation phone call will be placed to churches by ElenaClaire Lindholtz no later than **March 15.** Churches will be notified in advance of this date if any alterations need to be made to their documents.
  - c. Deadline for final draft of constitution (with any specified changes) is no later than **March 31.**
5. Church will submit their Application for Membership, Pension Agreement form, and Report on Churches Joining the Covenant form no later than **March 31.**
6. Regional Conference staff will be in contact with the church to facilitate establishing Fellowship Status for church plants.
7. The congregation seeking membership will select delegate representatives to the Regional Conference Annual meeting, including the pastor and at least 2 lay leaders, and will contact the Regional Conference office to confirm that these delegates will be present at the meeting **no later than three weeks prior to the date of the meeting.**

8. The congregation seeking membership will select delegate representatives to the Covenant Annual meeting, including the pastor and at least 2 lay leaders, and will contact ElenaClaire Lindholtz to confirm that these delegates will be present at the meeting and to receive detailed instructions. ElenaClaire must be notified **no later than three weeks prior to the date of the meeting.**

Summary of Necessary Steps:

1. Approval to proceed in seeking membership
2. Approved Constitution and Bylaws and Articles of Incorporation
3. Approved
  - a. Application for Membership
  - b. Pension Agreement
  - c. Report on Churches Joining the ECC
4. For new church plants – facilitating Fellowship Status
5. Confirm delegates to Regional Conference Annual Meeting
6. Confirm delegates to Covenant Annual Meeting

If any of these elements are not complete, the process will be delayed until the following year.

For any questions and for assistance at any point in the process, contact ElenaClaire Lindholtz at [elenaclaire.lindholtz@covchurch.org](mailto:elenaclaire.lindholtz@covchurch.org) or by calling 773-784-3000.

## Checklist

Here is a helpful checklist as you prepare to send in your material for review. Please include a copy of this checked-off checklist when you send materials. All materials must be submitted to ElenaClaire Lindholtz, preferably via email (elenaclaire.lindholtz@covchurch.org) or the address listed below.

### **Materials**

- Completed Application for Membership
- Completed Covenant Pension Fund Agreement
- Copy of the church's Articles of Incorporation
- Electronic version of Constitution and Bylaws draft for review  
(email this to elenaclaire.lindholtz@covchurch.org).
- Completed report on Churches Joining the Covenant form

### **Constitution and Bylaws**

(note: each area must be covered appropriately in the document **in order to be approved**)

- This draft substantially conforms to the \_\_\_\_\_ model
- Use of the Covenant Preamble as the preamble for the church document
- Use of the Confession of Faith as the sole doctrinal description in the main body
- The use of "Covenant" or "Evangelical Covenant" in the name of the church
- Congregational action to nominate, call and dismiss pastor
- Congregational action to approve budget
- Congregational action to affirm and dismiss people into or out of membership
- Congregational action to nominate and select lay leaders to officer/board/council/ leadership team positions for defined terms
- Congregational privilege of final voice in any area of its choice
- Congregational action on incurring capital indebtedness
- Ministerial credentialing, care, and discipline areas conform with Covenant Rules for the Ordered Ministry
- Congregational action to amend the Constitution and Bylaws
- Schism dispute resolution occurs through Conference Executive Board
- Asset distribution reversionary clause assigned to Conference and Covenant
- Written in a gender permissive neutral voice

Please send in all materials to Start & Strengthen Churches - Evangelical Covenant Church, 8303 West Higgins Rd, Chicago, IL 60631. Electronic documents **MUST** be sent to elenaclaire.lindholtz@covchurch.org.

# *Application For Membership*

## *The Evangelical Covenant Church*

The congregation of \_\_\_\_\_ Church (legal name of Church) hereby makes application for membership in the Evangelical Covenant Church and its \_\_\_\_\_ Conference. In doing so, we recognize and accept the responsibilities which come from undertaking our common faith, life, and mission in Jesus Christ, including through active involvement and financial support of the purposes, ministries, programs and policies of the Evangelical Covenant Church and our Conference.

Submitted herewith is a fully executed Covenant Pension Fund Agreement, a copy of our Articles of Incorporation, and a copy of our approved Constitution and Bylaws.

Chair: \_\_\_\_\_ Date: \_\_\_\_\_

Pastor: \_\_\_\_\_ Date: \_\_\_\_\_

Mailing Address of Church:

Street: \_\_\_\_\_

City: \_\_\_\_\_ State/Prov: \_\_\_\_\_ Zip: \_\_\_\_\_

This is to certify that the Executive Board of the \_\_\_\_\_ Conference on \_\_\_\_\_ approved the application of the above named church for membership in The Evangelical Covenant Church.

Date: \_\_\_\_\_ Signed: \_\_\_\_\_, Superintendent

# *Covenant Pension Fund Agreement*

## *Covenant Pension Plan*

of

The Evangelical Covenant Church  
8303 West Higgins Rd  
Chicago, Illinois 60631

In gratitude to God, and recognizing our obligation to share in the Covenant Pension Plan to provide for our pastors and missionaries at retirement age, the congregation of the

Church: \_\_\_\_\_

Street: \_\_\_\_\_

City: \_\_\_\_\_ State/Prov: \_\_\_\_\_ Zip: \_\_\_\_\_

voted at its \_\_\_\_\_ meeting on \_\_\_\_\_  
(Annual, Quarterly, Special

20\_\_\_\_ to join the Covenant Pension Plan.

We agree to contribute to the Covenant Pension Fund as stipulated in the rules of the Covenant Pension Plan adopted by the Annual Meeting in June 1973.

We understand that failure of our church to contribute this amount in any calendar year will cause a loss of service credit for our pastor for this period.

Chair: \_\_\_\_\_

Date: \_\_\_\_\_

## REPORT ON CHURCHES JOINING THE COVENANT (NEW)

Name:

Place:

Conference:

Name of pastor:

Number of charter members:

Estimated Average Sunday attendance:

Please consider the following five areas below as you write a brief description of your congregation. This description will be used as a template for the information printed about your church for the Annual Meeting.

- Include a brief history of the church.
- Were you parented or partnered by churches in the Covenant or Conference? (Explain)
- Include a brief description of meeting place.
- How did the Covenant and Conference help this new church get started?
- What are effective ministries the church is currently providing that impact people's lives?

Descriptive Paragraph about your church which includes the information requested above:

Signed by: \_\_\_\_\_  
(Conference Superintendent)

Date: \_\_\_\_\_

## **Organizing for Mission**

### ***Local Church Governance in the Evangelical Covenant Church***

When you enter a new home, you do not see the plumbing and wiring hidden behind the freshly constructed walls. However, that which is unseen is the exact source of making that home comfortable, convenient and efficient. Likewise, the good organization and smooth operation of a church at its best is largely unseen behind more visible aspects such as worship, children's ministries, outreach efforts, and ministries of compassion. Good "behind the scene" organizational and governing processes are indispensable to sustained accomplishment in mission.

This document introduces local church governance in the Evangelical Covenant Church. It will review key purposes for good governance, articulate central principles of congregational polity (polity = governance), identify basic characteristics of congregational polity as practiced in the Evangelical Covenant Church, and introduce the process for new churches gaining approval of their constitution and by-laws.

### ***Key Purposes of Good Governing Documents***

A well-crafted Constitution and By-law document accomplishes four primary functions.

1. Identity. The document is able to instill an enduring sense of identity by articulating key principles and processes that transcend changing circumstances and leadership.
2. Operation and Decision-Making. The document is able to clearly articulate specific processes for decision-making and operation so there is no ambiguity about who is empowered to take what actions under what circumstances. This allows for good operation and protects relationships.
3. Conflict management. By identifying processes for resolution of differences, the document protects a congregation from charges of unfair treatment on the part of any particular individual or group. It creates appropriate forums for the airing of differences and coming together in the spirit of unity.
4. Transition. By identifying processes to be undertaken during times of leadership transition, good documents allow for direction, continuity, and stability.

### ***Central Characteristics to Congregational Polity***

The story of the early Church in the New Testament is the story of a rapidly expanding movement seeking to both catalyze its mission and stabilize its advances. It sought to lengthen its external impact to reach new populations while at the same time strengthening its internal ability to manage itself. As a young, dynamic, unfolding movement, there is no unarguable singular pattern discernable in the New Testament for either local church governance or for how local churches related to one another. Instead, it is a picture of fluid development with varying patterns at varying times and places.

However, out of the Biblical witness, three basic models have emerged, all of which have Biblical and theological underpinnings. Groups have made particular choices for a variety of theological, historical, and practical reasons for why one particular model or another is reflective of their own identity.



The first category is episcopal, taken from the Greek word episkopos, or bishop. This model favors an external positional model of authority, where an office external to the congregation has strong influence or control over the affairs of a local congregation. The Roman Catholic Church and the Episcopal Church are examples of movements from this stream.

The second category is presbyterian, taken from the Greek word presbuteros, or elder. This model favors a specific governing group from within the congregation empowered to make decisions on behalf of the total congregation. The United Presbyterian Church and the Reformed Church of America are two examples from this stream.

The third category is congregational, based on the Pauline teaching that the Church is the Body of Christ. Christ alone is the Head. Each part of the Body is valuable and has a contribution to make toward the functioning of the whole. Likewise, each part has a responsibility to discern the “leading” of the head and to coordinate its actions with the rest of the Body. It therefore looks to the congregation acting as a whole as the center for discerning direction. This is the stream of the Evangelical Covenant Church.

### ***Particular Marks of Congregational Polity in the Evangelical Covenant Church***

The Covenant has a strong and abiding tradition of congregational polity. It is as much a part of our approach to faith and practice as a presbyterian approach is to Presbyterians and an episcopal approach is to Episcopalians. Indeed, our choice of the word “covenant” is deeply rooted in how we relate to one another: we are covenanted, mutually committed, to a spirit of collaboration, unity, and mutual respect in living out faith and ministry.

Here are some of the central ways congregational polity works itself out as practiced by the Covenant:

1. The core principle to congregational operation is this: the congregation retains authority and delegates responsibility. This means that the congregation reserves for itself certain specific actions and always reserves for itself final voice on any matter of its choice. However, for effectiveness and efficiencies, it likewise delegates responsibility to appropriate leadership positions. One of the central purposes, then, of a congregation’s Constitution and Bylaws is to articulate just what is delegated under what circumstances to what leadership. In the Covenant models, you will notice that varying amounts are delegated in varying ways.
2. In practice, the congregation retains for itself the following areas: establishing the nominating committee for the call of a pastor; the calling and dismissal of the pastor; the selection of lay leadership for defined and limited terms, the incurring of capital indebtedness, the approval of the budget, the approval of the reception and dismissal of members, the amending of the Constitution and Bylaws, and the right to final voice in any area it chooses to act.
3. In practice, the congregation delegates significant particular responsibilities to various ministry staff and board or committee structures (although these are called by various names in varying models), who are empowered to work within those areas.

In addition, there are certain marks of Covenant identity and position that are required of Constitution and Bylaws seeking approval:

1. The preamble to the denominational Constitution and Bylaws is also the preamble to the Constitution and Bylaws of local Covenant churches as a way to articulate a consistency of historical and theological context across the diversity of the Covenant.
2. The Covenant has always held that Scripture alone stands above any creedal interpretation or statement of faith. Therefore, the Covenant Confession of Faith regarding Scripture is the sole doctrinal description in the main body.
3. The name “Covenant” or “Evangelical Covenant” MUST be in the name of the church, and the name of the church on both the Consitution and Bylaws must EXACTLY match the name listed on the Articles of Incorporation..
4. In the event of a schism where competing claims to the property and assets of the congregations are under challenge by competing factions within the church, the dispute is resolved by the executive board of the regional conference of which that congregation is a member.
5. In the event of dissolution, the assets of the church revert to the regional conference of that church and to the Covenant. These are most commonly used to help in the planting of new congregations in that region so that out of the conclusion of ministry, the birth of others may result.
6. Areas of ministerial credentialing, care and discipline must conform to the Covenant Rules for the Ordered Ministry.
7. The Covenant believes that any person of appropriate giftedness and character is eligible for any leadership position in the church regardless of gender. Therefore, the document shall be styled in a permissive neutral voice, without references to gender.

### ***Introducing Three Model Constitutions***

The Covenant has developed a range of models that all meet the criteria for congregational polity. In applying the key principle that congregations retain authority and delegate responsibility, the three models differ in how much is delegated and how many are involved. At one end is the Board model. This delegates the least, involves the most people to carry out, and is relatively fixed in its design. At the other end is the Leadership Team model, which delegates the most, involves the least number of people, and has the most flexibility. In the middle is the Council model, which experiences some of the strength and weaknesses of the other two models.

*The Board Model* - Think of the toy series “The Transformers”. Through ingenious engineering, these toys are really two toys in one. What looks and plays like a jeep can with a few twists and turns be transformed into an airplane. Which is it – a jeep or an airplane? It is both. The Board system is like that. On the one hand, there are actually three (sometimes four) different individual boards that carry out specific functions. These are the Diaconate Board (spiritual care), the Trustee Board (property and fiscal matters), and the Christian Education Board (age level discipleship). Each of these individual boards carries out ministries in their respective areas. However, these three boards then combine (along with the officers of the Church), and are collectively transformed into the Church Board, which acts as the chief governing point between congregational meetings in areas assigned to it. This is the model with the longest history.

*The Leadership Team Model* - Think of a set of Tinker Toys. The round tinker toy is the anchor element. From that center are added spokes to other elements. As circumstances warrant, spokes from that hub can be added, replaced, or connected to additional elements. The overall effect is a strong center with flexible configurations. The Leadership Team is like that. The Leadership Team is

the round piece, providing a strong center point of coordination. To it are added ministry teams to carry out and accomplish specific ministries. More can be added as needed. Those no longer necessary can be removed.

*The Council Model* - Think of a mobile. Its rings are constantly moving, but in a fixed and connected orbit around a center point. The Council model is like that. The council provides a center point for coordination and balance. It is comprised of the officers of the church and the chairs of the various commissions. The commissions orbit around the council and carry out specific ministry areas. The “thread” between each commission and the council is the chair of each commission, who is a full participating member of both the church council and that ministry commission. It is in many ways a midpoint between the Board and Leadership Team models. This is the most commonly used model.

Electronic versions of model constitutions can be found on the Covenant website, or by reaching out to ElenaClaire Lindholtz at [elenaclaire.lindholtz@covchurch.org](mailto:elenaclaire.lindholtz@covchurch.org)

### ***The Approval Process***

A congregation must have an approved constitution and by-laws fully consistent with the entirety of this document in order to be accepted into membership in the regional conference and the Evangelical Covenant Church. The following outlines the process for that approval.

1. The congregation researches which of the three model constitutions best fits its circumstances. These may be obtained from Start & Strengthen Churches.
2. The congregation particularizes a draft of one of those models for review. Broad and substantial conformity and patterning to the model is required. All areas must be consistent with the entirety of items delineated in this document. It is very important for the pastor and key leaders to consult with regional conference personnel or the National Team Leader of Church Planting prior to completing the first draft of your constitution. The deadline for submitting the draft is January 15 of each year. Once submitted, the draft will be reviewed by the Administrative Coordinator, who may follow up with the congregation asking for specific edits and to re-submit the draft.
3. The final draft is then reviewed by the Constitutional Review Committee of the Covenant, consisting of the President, the Executive Minister of Start & Strengthen Churches, and for church plants, the Director of Church Planting. It is either approved or returned for changes. Notification generally comes by February 28 of each year.
4. The window for changes and final approval, if needed, is March 1 – March 30.
5. Assuming all other requirements are met, the church then proceeds to join the regional conference and the Covenant as a full member congregation through voting at the Conference annual meeting, followed by a denominational vote at the denomination's Annual Meeting in June.

For more information, contact ElenaClaire Lindholtz, Administrative Coordinator for Start and Strengthen Churches in the Evangelical Covenant Church, at [elenaclaire.lindholtz@covchurch.org](mailto:elenaclaire.lindholtz@covchurch.org), or phone 773-299-7267.