

**PARTNERSHIP**



# PARTNERSHIP

Member of One Body | Partners in One Gospel

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## PART 1 | WHAT A PARTNER IS

### WHAT IS PARTNERSHIP?

*I thank my God in all my remembrance of you, always in every prayer of mine for you all making my prayer with joy, because of your partnership in the gospel from the first day until now.*

*- Philippians 1:3-5*

#### Partnering, Not Just Attending

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### WHY DO WE PARTNER?

#### We Partner Because of the Gospel

*For he himself is our peace, who has made us both one and has broken down in his flesh the dividing wall of hostility... that he might create in himself one new man in place of the two, so making peace, and might reconcile us both to God in one body through the cross, thereby killing the hostility.*

*- Ephesians 2:14-16*

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### **We Partner to Worship**

*Be filled with the Spirit, addressing one another in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing and making melody to the Lord with your heart, giving thanks always and for everything to God the Father in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, submitting to one another out of reverence for Christ.*  
- Ephesians 5:18b-21

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### **We Partner in Community**

*And let us consider how to stir up one another to love and good works, not neglecting to meet together, as is the habit of some, but encouraging one another, and all the more as you see the Day drawing near.*  
- Hebrews 10:24-25

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### **We Partner on Mission**

*On this rock I will build my church, and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it.*  
- Matthew 16:18b

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### **WHY PARTNER IN THE LOCAL CHURCH?**

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### **The Church is God's 'Plan A' for Mission**

*So that through the church the manifold wisdom of God might now be made known to the rulers and authorities in the heavenly places. This was according to the eternal purpose that he has realized in Christ Jesus our Lord.*  
- Ephesians 3:10-11

## ‘ONE ANOTHERS’ IN THE NEW TESTAMENT

The New Testament is full of instruction on how the community of the church is to live with one another. Not only does this make life in the church enjoyable and life-giving, but it is valuable for mission because it gives the world a taste of what the kingdom of God is like. In a world of pressure, criticism, and rejection, these ‘one anothers’ will produce a longing in non-believers to participate in this kind of community.

Accept one another (Rom. 15:7)  
Admonish one another (Col. 3:16)  
Bear one another’s burdens (Gal. 6:2)  
Bear with one another (Eph. 4:2)  
Build up one another (Rom. 14:19)  
Care for one another (1 Cor. 12:25)  
Comfort one another (1 Thess. 4:18)  
Confess faults to one another (James 5:16)  
Be devoted to one another (Rom. 12:10a)  
Encourage one another (1 Thess. 5:11)  
Fellowship with one another (1 Jn. 1:7)  
Forgive one another (Eph. 4:32)

Greet one another (Rom. 16:16)  
Be honest with one another (Col. 3:9)  
Honor one another (Rom. 12:10b)  
Be hospitable to one another (1 Pet. 4:9)  
Be kind to one another (Eph. 4:32)  
Love one another (Rom. 13:8)  
Pray for one another (James 5:16)  
Serve one another in love (Gal. 5:13)  
Submit to one another (Eph. 5:21)  
Live in harmony with one another (Rom. 15:5)  
Spur one another on towards love and good works (Heb. 10:24)

### Christians Are Meant To Live In The Church

*If I delay, you may know how one ought to behave in the household of God, which is the church of the living God, a pillar and buttress of the truth.*

*- 1 Timothy 3:15*

## **PARTNERSHIP IS NOT ULTIMATELY ABOUT US**

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**PART 2 | WHO WE ARE**

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**OUR HISTORY**

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**Multiplying The Mission**

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**OUR MISSION**

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*The mission of One Harbor Church is to:  
Make disciples and push back darkness,  
all for the sake of the Gospel.*

**Making Disciples | Gospel Proclamation**

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**Pushing Back Darkness | Gospel Demonstration**

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**All for the Sake of the Gospel | Gospel Motivation**

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**OUR VISION**

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*The vision of One Harbor Church is to:  
Fill Eastern North Carolina with Gospel centered,  
Spirit empowered, locally contextualized churches  
that make disciples and push back darkness.*

**Eastern North Carolina**

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## YOUR THING, MY THING, OUR THING

In fulfilling the mission of our church, there are many wonderful causes and ministries that we could devote ourselves to, and we simply aren't able to be involved in all of them. The elders have decided to narrow the focus of the church. Instead of trying to do many things, they have focused on doing a few things, and doing them well.

In the church, we often want the ministries and causes we are personally passionate about to be adopted by the whole church. When this doesn't happen, we become frustrated and hurt. Just because One Harbor does not become corporately involved in a ministry does not mean that you cannot be involved in those good ministries and causes in your own efforts to push back darkness.

The mission of the church has both a corporate and a personal aspect. Although we all have things we feel called to do, some will be shared with the whole church body, and some will be your own act of mission and obedience. In other words, some things will be your thing, some things will be my thing, and some things will be our thing. For example, if I feel called to orphan ministry, that does not mean that the church needs to institute an orphan ministry for everyone. It might simply mean that I should be personally involved in orphan care. That is my thing. You will have your thing too, which might be a totally different thing from my thing, and that is ok.

Our things are the shared corporate ministries of the church that we should all embrace and be involved in, such as Community Groups.

### Gospel Centered

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### Spirit Empowered

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### Locally Contextualized

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### Churches

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## **Pushing Back the Darkness of Addiction**

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## **OUR VALUES**

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## **LIVING A LIFE OF WORSHIP**

### **Putting God First - *Romans 1:20-25***

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### **Enjoying God - *Phillipians 4:4***

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### **Living Sacrificially - *Romans 12:1***

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## **TRANSFORMED BY THE GOSPEL**

### **The Gospel is the good news of what Jesus has done - *Ephesians 2:1-9***

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### **The Gospel transforms who we are - *Colossians 1:21-22***

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### **The Gospel transforms what we do - *Colossians 3:12-13***

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## COMMITTED TO COMMUNITY

**Loving one another - *Acts 2:42-46***

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**Growing together - *Ephesians 4:11-16***

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**Serving in community - *1 Corinthians 12:12-27***

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## PARTNERING ON MISSION

**Mission is for every Christian - *Ephesians 4:11-12***

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**Mission is everywhere - *Acts 1:8***

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**Mission is empowered by the Spirit - *Acts 1:4-5***

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## ADDITIONAL NOTES

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## **OUR DISTINCTIVES**

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## **THEOLOGICAL DISTINCTIVES**

### **The Continued Presence and Power of the Holy Spirit**

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### **God's Sovereignty in Salvation**

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### **Believer's Baptism (Also known as "credo baptism")**

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### **Redeemed Sexuality**

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**Redeemed Gender Roles**

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**MINISTRY DISTINCTIVES**

**Elder Team Leadership**

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**Biblical Preaching**

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**Local and Global Impact**

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**Difficult to Pretend**

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**PART 3 | WHAT A PARTNER DOES**

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**God is so good and His mission is so big**

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**PARTNERS SERVE**

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**A Gifted Body**

*For as in one body we have many members, and the members do not all have the same function, so we, though many, are one body in Christ, and individually members one of another. Having gifts that differ according to the grace given to us, let us use them. - Romans 12:4-6b*

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*Now there are varieties of gifts, but the same Spirit; and there are varieties of service, but the same Lord; and there are varieties of activities, but it is the same God who empowers them all in everyone. To each is given the manifestation of the Spirit for the common good.- 1 Corinthians 12:4-7*

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### **A Loving Family**

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## **PARTNERS SUPPORT**

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**God is faithful, generous and sacrificial**

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**Our giving should be faithful**

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### **Our giving should be generous**

*And they devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and the fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers. And awe came upon every soul, and many wonders and signs were being done through the apostles. And all who believed were together and had all things in common. And they were selling their possessions and belongings and distributing the proceeds to all, as any had need. - Acts 2:42-45*

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### **Our giving should be sacrificial**

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### **Financial accountability**

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## WHAT IF I CAN'T AFFORD TO TITHE?

This is not a disqualification for partnership. Jesus never rejected the poor, but embraced them. We want to do the same. As a church, we want to help those in our community who are genuinely in need. We would humbly ask that you trust us to not dishonor you by making your financial situation public, but allow us to know your needs so we can pray for you and try to help support you where possible.

That being said, many people who believe they cannot afford to give actually have a problem with their priorities, not their income. Many people get into deep debt, spending their money on comforts and entertainment that they cannot afford, because they have bought our culture's lie that these things are essential. If you believe you cannot afford to tithe, the first thing you must do is search your heart and your budget, and see if they reveal that you are loving yourself and your possessions more than you are loving God. This should be done in accountability with a pastor or community group leader who can lovingly lead you in setting up a budget that honors God first.

We would ask that you would commit to give what you can give, in both giving and serving, so that you are faithfully stewarding what you have. Jesus commended a poor widow for giving generously even out of her poverty. As Christians, we do not believe that poverty is an excuse to not be faithful stewards of what God has given us. While we understand that your giving may be on a smaller scale as you work towards a full tithe, we fervently believe that God sees the heart and takes great joy in our giving. Our hope is that God will use us to help you find freedom from the burden of poverty, and to place God first in your priorities.

## PARTNERS SUBMIT

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## Leadership starts with Jesus and his Word

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## **Elders**

*Now from Miletus he sent to Ephesus and called the elders of the church to come to him. - Acts 20:17*

*Pay careful attention to yourselves and to all the flock, in which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers, to care for the church of God, which he obtained with his own blood. - Acts 20:28*

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## **Deacons**

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## Community Group Leaders

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## Division and Gossip

*I know that after my departure fierce wolves will come in among you, not sparing the flock and from among your own selves will arise men speaking twisted things, to draw away the disciples after them. - Acts 20:29-30*

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## Attitude Towards Leaders

*Obey your leaders and submit to them, for they are keeping watch over your souls, as those who will have to give an account. Let them do this with joy and not with groaning, for that would be of no advantage to you. - Hebrews 13:17*

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## PARTNERS SURRENDER

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## Partners make disciples

*And he said to them, "Go into all the world and proclaim the gospel to the whole creation. - Mark 16:15*

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## Partners push back darkness

*You are the light of the world. A city set on a hill cannot be hidden. Nor do people light a lamp and put it under a basket, but on a stand, and it gives light to all in the house. In the same way, let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father who is in heaven.  
- Matthew 5:14-16*

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## Partners do everything for the sake of the Gospel

*I do it all for the sake of the gospel, that I may share with them in its blessings.*  
- 1 Corinthians 9:23

[illegible]



## LEAVING WELL

At some point you may leave One Harbor Church. You may simply be moving from the area, or feel called to another church. Unfortunately, many people also leave churches to get away from difficult relationships, but we believe that all offenses can be worked out without bitterness through the power of the Gospel.

No church is perfect, and you may be offended or disagree with us at some point. We may even be wrong, and we will likely make mistakes. If you do choose to leave, whether over a personal offense or over a disagreement in theology or ministry philosophy, leave well and in a way that does not cause division. Causing division in the church is one of the most terrible things you can do. (Titus 3:10-11)

If you do choose to leave the church, we ask that you make a clean break. Leaving the church but still attending your Community Group or other functions is not really leaving the church, and is a recipe for disaster and division. It is better to find a home church to fully commit to, rather than keeping one foot in each church.

Finally, if you feel you must leave, please speak with an elder first. We would want to help you leave with grace as a fellow brother or sister in Christ, and not as an enemy.

## ADDITIONAL NOTES

[illegible]

## **APPENDIX A | STATEMENT OF FAITH**

### **INTRODUCTION**

The following statement of faith is evangelical in a broad sense. These are beliefs we hope and expect our partners to believe in. Beyond this statement of faith, we also hold to a number of theological and ministry distinctives.

### **THE BIBLE**

We believe that the Bible is the Word of God, fully inspired, and without error in the original manuscripts. It was written under inspiration of the Holy Spirit, and has supreme authority in all matters of faith and conduct (2 Timothy 3:16).

### **GOD**

We believe in the Trinitarian God: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit – one God existing in three persons, together eternal, together equal in power (2 Corinthians 13:14) and of the same nature. We affirm the truth of God's omniscience (He knows everything), His omnipresence (He is everywhere), His omnipotence (He has all power) and His holiness (He is separate from His creation and He is without sin).

### **THE PERSON AND WORK OF JESUS**

We believe Jesus is the Son of God, fully God and fully man. He is proof that God, who is Holy and above creation, wanted to be with His creation to save it. He was conceived by the Holy Spirit, born of the Virgin Mary, lived a sinless life, died a bloody and awful death on the cross, and miraculously rose from the dead. Jesus paid the full penalty for our sin (penal substitutionary atonement), suffering the wrath of God (propitiation), and removing our shame (expiation) according to God's predetermined plan.

He has triumphed over the powers of Satan, sin, and death (Colossians 2:15).

Jesus is the perfect sacrifice for sin (Hebrews 10:10-14)

Jesus is our faithful High Priest who both advocates and intercedes for us (Hebrews 3:1)

Jesus is the Head of the Church (Colossians 1:18)

Jesus is King of Kings who sits at the right hand of the Father and has all authority in heaven and earth (Ephesians 1:20-23, Daniel 7:13-14)

Jesus holds all things together (Colossians 1:17)

Jesus is the Way, The Truth, and The Life (John 14:6)

Jesus is the great warrior who came to destroy the works of the devil and is currently ruling in the midst of His enemies (1 John 3:8, Psalm 110:1-3)

## **THE PERSON AND WORK OF THE HOLY SPIRIT**

We believe the Holy Spirit is the third person of the Trinity and came into the world to convict the world of sin, righteousness, and judgment, and to regenerate, sanctify, and empower all who believe in Jesus Christ. The Holy Spirit works to execute God's mission of redemption.

The Holy Spirit convicts (Acts 2:37)

The Holy Spirit regenerates (Titus 3:5)

The Holy Spirit indwells (1 Corinthians 3:16)

The Holy Spirit gives gifts (1 Corinthians 12:1-11)

The Holy Spirit seals (Ephesians 1:13-14)

The Holy Spirit guides (Galatians 5:18)

The Holy Spirit teaches (John 14:26)

The Holy Spirit helps (John 16:7)

The Holy Spirit empowers for witnessing (Acts 1:8)

## **ESCHATOLOGY (LAST THINGS)**

We believe Jesus will return visibly and bodily on the last day at which time the final judgment of all men will take place, and the Kingdom will be delivered back into the hands of the Father. Jesus' Kingdom has already begun with His first coming and will be fully consummated with His second coming. Those who have put their faith in Jesus will reign with Him in His New Heavens and New Earth and those who reject Jesus will suffer eternal separation from God in Hell.

## **HUMANITY**

We believe God has placed great value on human life as evidenced by the birth, death and resurrection of His only Son, Jesus, so that humanity could be adopted into His family. We believe mankind was created in the image of God distinctly male and female, but through Adam's sin all of mankind fell (became separated from God by sin). As a result, men and women are born sinful, are radically bent towards evil and rebellion, are under the wrath of God and they cannot save themselves. Everyone is in need of salvation that can only be supplied by the grace of God as it is revealed in the gospel. Our view of humanity is shaped by two truths.

First, Imago Dei: Man is made in God's image and because of that all human beings have value and worth.

Second, Total Depravity: All humans are sinners by nature (birth) and choice. This does not mean all people are as wicked as they could be; but it does mean that every part of every human is broken by sin and therefore in need of salvation.

## **SEXUALITY, MARRIAGE, AND SINGLENESS**

We believe marriage between one man and one woman is a picture of the covenantal relationship between Christ and the church (Ephesians 5:22-33). We believe God made humanity in the complementary and biologically distinguishable sexes of male and female. All mankind is meant for loving covenantal relationships, but sexual intimacy is a gift restricted to the permanent marriage union between one man and one woman (Matthew 19:4-6). Additionally, we do not believe that either marriage or singleness holds more value than the other. We believe that both marriage and singleness are gifts from God, and that both are a means to put the glory of God on display (1 Corinthians 7).

## **SALVATION THROUGH THE GOSPEL**

Gospel simply means "good news." We believe Jesus is the Gospel and that this good news is revealed through His birth, life, death, resurrection and ascension. Jesus' crucifixion is at the heart of the gospel. Because of this, we believe that salvation is the gift of God brought to man by grace and received through faith in Jesus Christ whose blood was shed on the cross for the forgiveness of our sins (Ephesians 2:8). Through the death and resurrection of Jesus we can be set free from sin, Satan, and death.

## **THE CHURCH**

We believe the Church is not simply a building, a religious institution or a denomination. Rather, the Church is made up of the people who have been saved by Jesus. We believe in both the Universal Church and the Local Church. The Universal Church is comprised of all believers in the entire world throughout all history. This is why the Bible describes the Universal Church as a chosen race, a holy nation, the body of Christ, the temple of God and the bride of Jesus (1 Peter 2:9, Hebrews 12:22-23, 1 Corinthians 12:12-13, Ephesians 2:21, Revelation 21:2). The Local Church is characterized by:

Regenerated members (Acts 2:41)

Biblical leadership (1 Timothy 3:1-13)

God-given gifts (1 Corinthians 12:1-31)

Gathering for worship, edification and training (Hebrews 10:24-25)

Visible signs of God's grace which are baptism (Acts 2:38, Romans 6:3-4) and communion (1 Corinthians 11:23-29) (also called ordinances or sacraments)

Unity in the Holy Spirit (Ephesians 4:1-4)

Commitment to growing in holiness (1 Timothy 4:6-7)

Discipline for the purity of the church and the protection of the believers  
(1 Corinthians 5:9-13, Matthew 18:15-20)

Sacrificial Love for One Another (Acts 2:42-47, Colossians 3:14)

Making disciples of Jesus (Matthew 28:19)

**MAKE DISCIPLES  
PUSH BACK DARKNESS  
ALL FOR THE SAKE OF THE GOSPEL**

## **NOTES**

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ALL  
FOR THE SAKE  
OF **THE GOSPEL**

# APPENDIX B | ROLES, QUALIFICATIONS, AND EXPECTATIONS

## INTRODUCTION

One Harbor is a family. Within that family, people play many different roles, to include Partner, Community Group Leader, Deacon and Elder. For the family to function properly, it is important that everyone understand the expectations of the role in which they function. Additionally, many of the roles within the church have specific qualifications that have been given to us in the Bible.

The purpose of this document is to define the different levels of involvement at One Harbor and explain the expectations and qualifications that exist for each.

## ATTENDERS

**Definition:** Attenders are those who come to our church, and even participate in our ministries, but have not committed to Partnership.

**Expectations and Qualifications:** There are no qualifications to attend One Harbor, other than the ability to be civil and not divisive. Attenders are welcome to disagree with the Church on any number of positions – indeed, they may not even be Christians at all – but there is a difference between disagreement and divisiveness. A divisive person is one who teaches beliefs contrary to the teachings of the Church or someone who pits people against one another by stirring up controversies. This behavior will not be tolerated, as it is disastrous to the unity of the church and is forbidden by scripture. Attenders who become divisive will be asked to leave the church. Attenders who disagree, however, are welcomed to be in our meetings, ask questions, and dialogue with our leaders.

## PARTNERS

**Definition:** Partners are those who have gone through the One Harbor Partnership Class and have made a covenant with the Church, in which they commit to partnering with our local church to advance the gospel.

**Expectations and Qualifications:** In addition to the expectations of attenders, Partners are expected to:

- **Have a profession of faith as a Christian.** You don't have to be a mature Christian to be a Partner, but you have to have an authentic testimony of being born again through the Gospel of Jesus Christ.
- **Agree with the One Harbor Statement of Faith.** Our statement of faith has been written to represent the whole of evangelical Christianity. It contains the essentials of what we think Christians should believe. Therefore, it would not make sense for someone to partner with us if they cannot agree with the Statement of Faith.

- **Submit to the One Harbor Theological and Ministry Distinctives.** While the Statement of Faith is broadly evangelical, our distinctives explain those things which make our church unique. Partners are not expected to agree with all of them, but they are expected to submit to them. This means they must agree not to teach against, or function outside of, any of the distinctives. For example, a Partner may believe in a different model of church governance than Elder Team Leadership, but agrees to submit to the authority of the Elder Team despite the difference of conviction.

- **Honor and submit to the partnership covenant.** Partners contribute to the health of the church by submitting to the covenant they made with the church. When Partners do not, it creates meaningless membership at best, and division at worst.

- **Have been baptized as a believer.** We understand that some Christians disagree on the mode of baptism, but at One Harbor we believe that baptism happens after conversion as an obedient response to faith in Jesus, and takes place through immersion. It is not required to agree that this method is the best way, but to be a partner, you have to have been baptized as a believer.

## **COMMUNITY GROUP LEADERS, MINISTRY LEADERS AND STAFF/DEACONS**

**Definition:** Community Group Leaders are those who have been appointed by the eldership to oversee a particular community group. They have been delegated the authority and responsibility of discipling and shepherding those who call One Harbor home. Ministry Leaders, and Staff/Deacons are those who oversee various ministries or functions of the church on behalf of the elders.

**Expectations and Qualifications:** In addition to the expectations of attenders and Partners, Community Group Leaders, Ministry Leaders and Staff/Deacons are expected to:

- **Agree with the One Harbor Theological and Ministry Distinctives.** While Partners are only expected to submit to the distinctives, Community Group Leaders and Staff are expected to agree with them. It would put the church, and the leader, in a compromising situation if leaders were expected to potentially defend these core positions that they do not personally agree with.

- **Model the Partnership Covenant and Distinctives.** Our leaders are expected to not simply be in agreement with those things the Church values, but to model them as well. In other words, if a guest were to be confused on what it looks like to be a Partner, a leader should be an example and model anyone can follow.

- **Prioritize Whole Church Gatherings and Training Opportunities.** When the Church gathers, it is naturally expected that its leaders be present and engaged. Leaders set the bar for those they are leading, and so it cannot be expected that the congregation values something that the leadership does



not also value. Furthermore, when there is training, it is often for the sake of the leaders, and so it is expected that they prioritize the training. This should happen naturally, since good leaders seize the opportunity to grow and learn.

- **Represent One Harbor Well in All of Life.** At the end of the day, we want our leaders to represent One Harbor well, because One Harbor is supposed to represent Jesus well. Whether at a church function, in the workplace, or at home, we expect that our leaders will glorify Jesus with their lives. We don't expect them to be perfect, but we expect them to live lives of repentance, in which they fight their sin and trust their savior.

## **ELDERS**

**Definition:** Elders are synonymous with pastors, overseers, bishops and shepherds. The office of elder is the second Biblical office found in the New Testament, and is the sole governing body of the church. While deacons have the primary responsibility of service and practical ministry, elders have the primary responsibility of governance, teaching, prayer, and ministry of the Word. (See 1 Timothy 3 and Titus 1.)

**Expectations and Qualifications:** In addition to the expectations of attenders, Partners, and Community Group Leaders/Staff, Elders are expected to:

- **Meet the character qualifications for Elder found in Scripture.** 1 Timothy 3 and Titus 1 provide the following character qualifications for Elders. According to 1 Timothy 3 he must be above reproach, the husband of one wife, sober-minded, self controlled, respectable, hospitable, able to teach, not a drunkard, not violent but gentle, not quarrelsome, and not a lover of money. Additionally, he must manage his household well, he must keep his children submissive, he must not be a recent convert, and he must be well thought of by outsiders. According to Titus 1, he must also be disciplined, not be arrogant, not greedy for gain, a lover of good, be God's steward, be upright and holy, and his children must be faithful and not insubordinate. Additionally, the office of elder is restricted to men.
- **Be able to teach beliefs and distinctives.** We just saw that one of the requirements of elders is that they must be able to teach. Therefore, at One Harbor Church, every elder should not only submit to and agree with the church beliefs and distinctives, but also be able to explain, teach and defend them. As the ones responsible for protecting church doctrine, the elders must be able to articulate those doctrines. This does not mean that every elder must be able to preach, because that is a specific duty not all elders are gifted for. But the pulpit is not the only place in which elders teach. Therefore, even those elders who do not preach are still expected to be able to teach whenever necessary.

- **Have recognized evidence(s) of distinct grace and calling.** The office of elder is not something a leader or deacon is simply promoted into based on leadership tenure. Elders have a specific calling from God to serve in that

capacity, and so there should be mutual agreement between the individual and the eldership that a man is called to that role, and that God has given the necessary grace for the requirements of the role.

- **Serve One Harbor Church for the foreseeable future.** Elders should not only feel called to their office, they should also feel called to serve in a particular church. Meaning, elders at One Harbor should feel called to serve at One Harbor until God leads them elsewhere. If an individual did not feel called to One Harbor's context, then eldership would not be an appropriate place to serve in that context.

## NOTES

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## APPENDIX C | CHURCH DISCIPLINE

### INTRODUCTION

Church discipline is one of the most controversial and misunderstood aspects of life in a local church. As a result, this process – which God designed to help mature and protect the church – has often been the source of division and mistrust.

Understanding the purpose of church discipline requires understanding the purpose of the church. Ephesians 3:10-11 tells us that God established His church to reflect His character, wisdom, and glory in the midst of a fallen world. He has intended from the beginning of time to present the church as a gift to His Son, Jesus, which is why we often refer to the church as the bride of Christ. To prepare her for the eternity that awaits, the Father, the Son and the Spirit are committed to purifying the church and bringing her to maturity.

Church discipline is part of the church's purification process, whereby the church has been given the authority and responsibility to address sin found among its members. That is the purpose of church discipline in a nutshell. But why is that important? And how does the church practically do this? In detail, we will address the 'why' and the 'how' of church discipline below, but first there are three common misunderstandings that should be addressed.

#### **First Misunderstanding: “How can the church discipline anyone? After all, isn't everyone a sinner?”**

The answer is a resounding yes – and sinners are only saved by God's grace. The church is made up of sinners, and God has no expectation that we are to be perfect. Therefore, it would be unbiblical for any of us to expect that others are to be perfect. But God does expect that we daily wrestle with and repent of our sin<sup>1</sup>, and so we should have the same expectation of one another.

Church discipline is carried out to its greatest extent when someone in the church, a sinner saved by grace, refuses to repent of sin. Repentance means more than being sorry – literally, it means to turn: to turn from sin and toward Jesus. It requires change, which is more than simply feeling remorse or regret for our actions. The most severe form of church discipline, which is to remove an individual from fellowship and put them out of the church, is not reserved for those whose sin is most severe, but for those who are unrepentant.

#### **Second Misunderstanding: “If Jesus was found in the company of lawbreakers and unrepentant sinners all the time, why would the church discipline them?”**

The answer is that the church should never discipline those who are not saved. Church discipline is reserved for those who claim to be followers of Christ and are actually a part of the church.<sup>2</sup> In fact, Jesus is the one who

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<sup>1</sup> 1 John 1:8, Philippians 3:12

<sup>2</sup> 1 Corinthians 5:12

first prescribed church discipline in Matthew 18, which we will discuss below, and He clearly prescribed it for believers in the church. Church discipline was never intended for those who are not saved and who are not disciples of Jesus. This has been one of the grave errors of fundamentalism – Christians treating the unsaved as if they are saved. One of the worst things we can do to unsaved people is to expect them to obey Christ before they have come to know and trust Him as Lord and Savior.

### **Third Misunderstanding: “Does this mean that, as a Christian, the church is out to get me?”**

The answer is no. The church is not an investigative unit like the ones seen on television shows such as CSI or NCIS – meaning that we are not setting out to find out who is living in sin and who is not. Church discipline is only administered when sin is admitted/confessed, or when it is public. Below, we will explain more about what confessed and public sin means. The point to understand here is that we trust the Holy Spirit to bring sin into the light,<sup>3</sup> and we do not start the process of church discipline until that happens.

So, having addressed those questions, what is the purpose of church discipline?

## **PURPOSE OF CHURCH DISCIPLINE**

Contrary to what many seem to believe, church discipline is not about punishment. Above, we said that church discipline is part of the church’s purification process, and this process is actually for the good of the church! Consider why parents discipline their children, or why coaches discipline their athletes. It is always with the hope of seeing them grow and mature. In the context of the church, discipline has three specific purposes.

### **Church discipline is meant for the good of the individual.**

Sin is our mortal enemy, and when we refuse to repent of sin we are effectively choosing to worship an idol – something has become more important to us than God. Idolatry dishonors God, but it also destroys us.<sup>4</sup> Discipline is God’s way of calling us to repentance, not simply so we will feel remorse over our past, but so that we will make changes for the sake of our future, which God cares about even more than we do. The goal of discipline is always restoration for the individual.

### **Church discipline is meant for the good of the corporate body.**

Often, unrepentant Christians think their sin only affects them. But the reality is that sin affects everyone around us. The consequences are not precise, but are often catastrophic and far-reaching. In that way, sin is much more like a bomb than a bullet – there are always casualties. Church discipline is one of the ways that God protects the church. In the Bible, Israel was instructed to remove lepers from the camp so that the entire nation would not succumb to disease.<sup>5</sup> In the same way, unrepentant Christians are removed from the

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<sup>3</sup> James 1:15-16

<sup>4</sup> Ephesians 5:13

<sup>5</sup> Numbers 5:2

church so that the entire body will not succumb to idolatry.<sup>6</sup>

### **Church discipline is meant for the good of the watching world.**

God left his church on earth to be a witness to everything that Jesus taught and did. Matthew 28:16-20 and Acts 1:7-8 make it clear that Jesus gave this mission to the church before he ascended to heaven. The whole point of the Gospel, indeed the grand narrative of the Bible, is that God saves sinners – and the church is the tool through which He has chosen to reach sinners. When the church tolerates unrepentant sin within its ranks, the mission of the church is compromised. How can the church call non-believers to repentance and faith in Jesus if we are not willing to repent ourselves?

How can a non-believer understand what repentance looks like if it is not modeled? As Christians, we are called to walk in a manner worthy of the Gospel<sup>7</sup> – if we don't, then the message we proclaim will be compromised, and the world will suffer for it.

Now that we have an understanding of the Biblical purposes behind church discipline, how is it applied?

## **HOW CHURCH DISCIPLINE WORKS**

Discipline happens in stages. Fortunately for the church, Jesus gave us a clear explanation of what those stages look like in Matthew 18:15-17:

*“If your brother sins against you, go and tell him his fault, between you and him alone. If he listens to you, you have gained your brother. But if he does not listen, take one or two others along with you, that every charge may be established by the evidence of two or three witnesses. If he refuses to listen to them, tell it to the church. And if he refuses to listen even to the church, let him be to you as a Gentile and a tax collector.”*

We see from this passage that the four stages of discipline are:

**Stage One:** Privately confront

**Stage Two:** Bring witnesses

**Stage Three:** Tell it to the church

**Stage Four:** Treat as an unbeliever

We will walk through all four of these stages in detail. At the end, we will address how discipline works for leaders in the church, as the Bible gives us reason to approach them differently. Keep in mind that Jesus' commands are not a description of how discipline might work, but are a prescription for how it should work.

### **Stage One: Privately Confront**

This first stage is where we live all the time. God puts us into community to hold each other accountable, and so accountability is something that each of us gives and receives. We provide each other accountability by holding one

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<sup>6</sup> 1 Corinthians 5:6-13

<sup>7</sup> Phil 1:27



another to the standard of the Gospel. When a brother or sister's conduct is not in line with the Gospel, we approach that person out of love and show them where they have gone wrong. Likewise, we receive accountability by humbly responding with repentance when others point out when we are out of step with the Gospel.

Proverbs 27:17 says, *"Iron sharpens iron, and one man sharpens another."* We sharpen each other by holding each other accountable. When we do this, we help keep each other aligned with the Gospel and useful to God in His mission. As 2 Timothy 2:21 states:

*"Therefore, if anyone cleanses himself from what is dishonorable, he will be a vessel for honorable use, set apart as holy, useful to the master of the house, ready for every good work."*

It is extremely rare for discipline to go beyond Stage One. It happens only when people receive Stage One accountability and are given ample time to repent, but refuse to do so. When this happens, we are commanded to move to the second stage of church discipline.

## **Stage Two: Bring Witnesses**

Why do we bring witnesses? The ultimate reason is that Jesus tells us to in Matthew 18:16. Jesus is actually referring to an Old Testament passage, Deuteronomy 19:15, on how to administrate justice in a legal dispute.

*"A single witness shall not suffice against a person for any crime or for any wrong in connection with any offense that he has committed. Only on the evidence of two witnesses or of three witnesses shall a charge be established."*

There is wisdom in bringing witnesses, and our own justice system testifies to this. In the trial of a criminal, the defendant will likely stand condemned in court if two or more witnesses testify against him with the same account. Without a plurality of witnesses, there is nothing more than a debate of "he said, she said". That is why Christians should not entertain disputes of "he said, she said". Stage Two is only possible if either of the following are true:

- (1) Public sin:** two or more people witnessed the person sin
- (2) Confessed sin:** the sinning person testifies against himself by confessing to another person.

In the cases where the above is true the appropriate action is to go together and confront the person. With two or more witnesses, there is a stronger case that the accusation is not being fabricated or is the subjective opinion of one person. If the accused repents, most often the remaining stages are unnecessary. (Leaders are an exception and will be discussed in further detail below.)

It is recommended that at least one elder be involved in this stage even if they are not one of the witnesses. At the very least an elder must be notified. There are two wise reasons for this. First, it keeps the church from slipping

into a vigilante culture where small groups start executing justice outside the supervision of Biblical leadership. Second, it allows the elder involved to communicate what will happen in the next two stages if the person refuses to repent. At their discretion, elders may either be present in the Stage Two confrontation or send a qualified leader on their behalf.

It is very possible that you may be the only witness to a person's sin and, having confronted them, that person continues to deny it. The best course of action at this point is to prayerfully hand the situation over to God and pray that He will lead your brother or sister to repentance. 1 Timothy 5:24 reminds us that some sins may be hidden for a time, but eventually will come into the light. This keeps us from the temptation to become "sin-investigators".

Rarely does church discipline go beyond Stage Two. It happens only when people receive Stage Two accountability, are given ample time to repent, but still refuse to realign themselves to the Gospel. When this happens, we are commanded to move to the third stage of church discipline.

### **Stage Three: Tell It To The Church**

This is one of the most disputed stages of church discipline. Because of the sudden increase in severity, much of the disagreement is centered around whether or not this is even necessary. Matthew 18:17 makes a clear case for this stage: "If he refuses to listen to them (Stage Two witnesses), tell it to the church." We can conclude from this verse that bringing unrepentant sin before the church is necessary at some point.

At this stage, the nature of church discipline has a lot to do with the person, their faith, and their current relationship to the church. At One Harbor, we administrate Stage Three discipline depending on which of the following three categories a person identifies with:

- Non-believers
- Attenders (Believers but not partners)
- Partners

Additionally, for Attenders and Partners, we will consider how to respond if the person removes themselves from fellowship or if the person chooses to remain in the church.

#### **Non-Believers**

The church must be open to those outside the faith attending services and hearing the Gospel, as it is our hope God will save with them. To demand a non-believer to adhere to the same standards of holiness as a Christian is a slippery slope to legalism and moralism.

Therefore, our doors are always open to non-believers who attend peaceably and are not leading others astray. Our fellowship with them is always motivated by love and a hope to see them come to a saving faith in Jesus. When it comes to non-believers, we are always calling them to repentance and faith in Jesus. Therefore, in the case of a non-believer, we would not tell their sin to the church.

### **Attendees Who Leave**

What do we do when believers attending the church remove themselves from fellowship after Stage Two? When this happens the discipline process will most likely end. There is typically no need to tell their sin to the church.

The purpose of this stage is for the church to show the sinner that sin is serious. The person is forced to conclude either the whole church is wrong and they are right, or they are wrong and the whole church is right. But if the person leaves the church unrepentant they have spoken with their actions, knowing the church stands against them. There is no further action to take beyond calling them to repentance as often as we see them. They have preempted any further church discipline by willingly severing ties with the church.

The exception may be that if the individual is of considerable influence in the church, or the sin is widely known, the elders may find it appropriate to tell it to the church, as they would for a Partner.

It would also be expected that the individual would no longer attend a Community Group or any other church related gathering, as those are extended fellowships of the church.

### **Attendees Who Don't Leave**

What should we do if an individual continues to attend the church but refuses to repent? There is a lot of confusion about this because it is a unique scenario to our times, which means this stage of discipline often gets ignored or misapplied. The New Testament was written in a time where churches were few and far between and confessing believers were deeply committed to staying in fellowship with one another. There was no category of "attender but not member" in the apostle's day like the one we are considering. Much like dating relationships are complicated when people never get married, so also church relationships are complicated when people never commit to the church. The commitment to the relationship is what brings clarity.

What then are we to do when a person is in sin, has never committed to the church as a Partner, and desires to stay in the church rather than leave? In this case, two or more elders would privately meet with the person. Depending on the results of that meeting the elders would together agree on a decision of whether or not to tell it to the church. Considerations would include how much influence the individual had in the church and how public the sin was.

### **Partners Who Leave**

If a Partner decides to leave the church, then that individual has severed the covenant relationship with the church. The discipline would continue in the same manner as described above for the category of Attendees Who Leave.

### **Partners Who Don't Leave**

Because a Partner is recognized as a true believer by the church and its



leaders, and because Partners are in covenant relationship, when a Partner knowingly continues in sin and fellowship past Stage Two, the elders must tell it to the church as Jesus commanded.

This stage of telling the church is meaningful because the church has been affirming this person's faith, supported them in their walk, and has a meaningful relationship with the Partner. The church is to be told about the person's sin not as a matter of gossip or public ridicule, but to enlist the help of the entire congregation in appealing to the sinner.

It is important to note that this is not the stage where the person is removed from church fellowship – that is the final stage.

#### **Stage Four: Treat Them As An Unbeliever**

When Jesus said to treat people as Gentiles or tax-collectors, that meant to treat them as an unbeliever. This is the final stage of church discipline. We only get to this point after exhausting all our attempts of calling the person to repent. It makes sense for this to happen after Stage Three as the church has already confronted the person. This is also why believers involved in Stage One and Two don't skip Stage Three and withhold fellowship on their own. To do so would show a lack of submission to the church leadership and the Partners in the church as well as a misunderstanding of authority in God's kingdom. The church that was united in confronting the sin, stays united in withholding fellowship until there is repentance. The motivation here is to call the individual to repentance, to prevent the sin from spreading through the rest of the corporate body, and to maintain the purity of the church's witness for the sake of the watching world. (See Purpose of Church Discipline on page 36.)

This does not give us license to treat the person with hostility or contempt. Instead, we should reach out to them like Jesus did with the tax collectors and Gentiles in His day, by lovingly calling them to turn from their sin. There is one significant difference: as long as the individual remains unrepentant and continues to claim faith in Jesus, believers must not carry on a relationship with that person as if nothing were wrong. In order to send a clear signal both to the unrepentant individual and the watching world, even fellowship in everyday social settings is to be suspended. Paul wrote in 1 Corinthians 5:9-11:

*"I wrote you in my letter not to associate with immoral people; I did not at all mean with the immoral people of this world, or with the covetous and swindlers, or with idolaters, for then you would have to go out of the world. But actually, I wrote to you not to associate with any so-called brother if he is an immoral person, or covetous, or an idolater, or a reviler, or a drunkard, or a swindler—not even to eat with such a one."*

Even at this point, however, the primary goal with regard to the offender is to win them back. 2 Thessalonians 3:15 says, “Yet do not regard him as an enemy, but admonish him as a brother.” There is a sense in which you never really let them go; though you put them out of the church and out of your sphere of social fellowship, you keep calling them back. This does not mean you cannot speak to them or be cordial, but it means your relationship with them should be characterized by the question, “When will you return to Jesus?”

If the offender at any time demonstrates genuine repentance, they are to be welcomed back into the fellowship as a brother, though the elders may deem it necessary for a season to walk closely with the repentant individual and look for fruit which is in keeping with repentance.<sup>8</sup> At this point, it will be critical for the elders to care for the repentant sinner and protect the individual from those in the church who may wish to continue judging them as if there was no repentance.<sup>9</sup>

### **Leaders**

What does the Bible say about discipline when it comes to leaders?  
1 Timothy 5:19-20 says:

*“Do not admit a charge against an elder except on the evidence of two or three witnesses. As for those who persist in sin, rebuke them in the presence of all, so that the rest may stand in fear.”*

Regarding elders, they must not receive an accusation except when there are two or three witnesses, suggesting that it is appropriate to skip Stage One and start in Stage Two. Then, if they continue in sin past Stage Two, they are to be publicly rebuked before the church by the elders, which is Stage Three. Depending on the nature of the sin, it may be appropriate and necessary to begin with a public rebuke to protect the church from division. Leaders are treated differently, because they will be judged more harshly<sup>10</sup> and God will require them to give an account for the sheep in their care.<sup>11</sup>

Depending on the severity and visibility of the sin, even if the leader repents, it may still require a public rebuke<sup>12</sup> as determined by the church’s eldership team. In addition to a public rebuke, the sin may also expose a character flaw in the heart which needs to be addressed. Therefore, it may be required of the leader to step down from formal ministry for a season as the eldership team sees fit.

### **FINAL CONSIDERATIONS**

There are two final considerations to make. First, though we do not pursue Stage Three discipline for those who are not believers or are not Partners of our church, that does not mean that non-believers or non-Partners are always welcome. Church leadership should guard and refuse fellowship to divisive people. Divisive or dangerous people lure others into false beliefs that contradict the church’s beliefs,<sup>13</sup> or they may be living a life that is

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<sup>8</sup> Matthew 3:8

<sup>11</sup> Ezekiel 43; Hebrews 13:17

<sup>9</sup> 2 Corinthians 2:5-8

<sup>12</sup> Galatians 2:11-14

<sup>10</sup> James 3:1

<sup>13</sup> Galatians 2:9; Titus 3:9-10; 3 John 1:9-10

contrary to the faith they confess.<sup>14</sup> Church leadership will never take a non-believer, and likely not take a believing non-partner, through Stage Three discipline. However, the leadership will remove them from fellowship if they are divisive or dangerous to the health of the church. It is the elders' job as shepherds to protect the church from false teachers, prophets, and wolves whose continued fellowship would only damage others and ruin the churches effectiveness in continuing Jesus' mission.<sup>15</sup>

Second, when someone undergoing church discipline either leaves the church or is removed from the church, the elders may feel it is necessary to notify another church of the discipline if the individual starts attending that church after leaving One Harbor. We do this because we care for the body of Christ, which is larger than our local church.

## **SCENARIO**

Consider a community group leader who learns that a single man in his group, who is a Partner in the church, has a sexual relationship with a woman not in the church. Using the process described above, here is how the discipline process might work.

### **Stage One**

The community group leader pulls the man aside for a private conversation. He lovingly and gently shares with the man his observations and explains why the man's relationship is dishonoring to God and the woman, and why it is toxic to himself. If the man confesses and repents, which would mean making changes and/or ending his relationship, then the church discipline process would end.

### **Stage Two**

If the man does not repent, but justifies his actions, then the community group leader notifies the elder overseeing that community group of the situation. The leader will take at least one other person with him to confront the man, and at the discretion of the leader and the elder, the elder may accompany the witnesses. That group will again lovingly point out to the man the reason his relationship is sinful and call him to repentance. If he repents, which would mean making changes and/or ending his relationship, then the church discipline process would end.

### **Stage Three**

If the man still refuses to repent after ample time has been given, then because he is a Partner living in unrepentant sin, it will become necessary to tell the church. The elders will determine how that is communicated. The church will be called on to prayerfully intercede for the man and to call him to repentance. The church will be forbidden from slandering, gossiping, or attacking the man. If the man repents, which would mean making changes and/or ending his relationship, then the church discipline process would end.

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<sup>14</sup> 1 Corinthians 5:9-11

<sup>15</sup> Acts 20:17, 28-30

## Stage Four

If the man still refuses to repent after the church has been told and ample time has been given, then the elders will notify the man and the church that the man is being put out of the church. This will mean that he will not be allowed to participate in church functions, and the church will be instructed not to continue associating with the man socially. The church will be called on to continue praying for the man as if he were an unbeliever. The church will again be forbidden from slandering, gossiping, or attacking the man. Until the man repents, this will be the nature of the church's relationship with the man. However, if he does repent, he will be welcomed back into the church and restored as a brother.

## SUMMARY

Church discipline is not only about sin, but in equal degree about unrepentance. Church discipline does not escalate according to the severity of the sin, but according to the unrepentance of the offender. Church leadership has the obligation to protect the church from the unrepentant sinner, but also to protect the repentant sinner from the church. The care of the one does not overshadow the care of the other. When applied appropriately, so that the individual and the church are properly cared for and protected, the process of church discipline honors God and edifies the individual, the church, and the watching world.

## NOTES

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