

RELATIONSHIP COMMITMENTS

LOVING ONE ANOTHER

Introduction

These Relationship Commitments are designed to help the people who attend The Cove Church or participate in Cove Church activities relate to one another in a loving way that honors God. They are part of our Bylaws and are intended to help us build a strong community of faith.

True community isn't easy to achieve. God has brought a wonderful variety of people to the Cove. While this is one of our greatest strengths, it can also lead to conflict. At times, no matter how hard we try to build a close community of faith, our desires and expectations still clash. That's where these Commitments come in. They pull together key principles from the Bible to accomplish several important purposes:

- They express our commitment to care for and share with each other and in so doing, to serve Jesus.
- They remind us that we are to accept and love one another regardless of color, culture, or background just as God has loved and accepted us.
- They remind us of our commitment to pursue unity, maintain friendships, preserve marriages, protect our children and build relationships that reflect the love of Christ.
- They help to prevent disappointment, confusion and conflict by describing how we expect to relate to one another within the church.
- They affirm our commitment to resolve conflict biblically, provide a clear path for us to follow when conflict threatens to divide us, and remind us how to move quickly toward reconciliation.
- They establish guidelines for how our leaders will provide counsel and handle confidential information shared with them.
- They explain our process for accountability, correction and restoration to guide our leaders and to insure that all are treated fairly.

We encourage you to expressly embrace these commitments and formally join The Cove Church by acknowledging your faith in Christ, being baptized, going through our New Members Class, and signing our Membership Covenant. If you are not yet ready to become a member, you and your family are certainly welcome to attend our weekend services, find fellowship in a Life Group, serve on a ministry or mission team and seek assistance from our leaders. If you choose to do so, we will assume that you have consented to these Commitments, even if you have not yet formally joined the church.

Mike Madding
Senior Pastor
The Cove Church

Commitment to Community

And let us consider how we may spur one another on toward love and good deeds. Let us not give up meeting together, as some are in the habit of doing, but let us encourage one another-- (Hebrews. 10:24,25).

God created us to live in community. By *community*, we mean a group of people who have voluntarily joined together to encourage, support and love one another as we introduce our friends to Jesus, learn to follow Him and celebrate His presence in our lives. At The Cove Church, we do things together.

We worship and praise God together. All are encouraged to regularly attend weekend services.

We work together. There are many parts in the body of Christ, and each has a purpose. We want everyone to find a place where they serve others and make a difference in our church and the community around us.

We care for each other. At the Cove, we stay connected and meet each others needs primarily through our Life Groups. Life Groups are small groups of people who gather together to share life. Life Group members experience the ups and downs of life together and explore how the Bible makes sense in their lives. All who attend the Cove are encouraged and expected to join a Life Group where they have the opportunity to know others and be known, to care and be cared for, and to love and be loved.

Commitment to Peacemaking and Reconciliation

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

Here there is no Greek or Jew, circumcised or uncircumcised, barbarian, Scythian slave or free but Christ is all, and is in all. Therefore, as God's chosen people, holy and dearly loved, clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness and patience. Bear with each other and forgive whatever grievances you may have against one another. Forgive as the Lord forgave you. And over all these virtues put on love, which binds them all together in perfect unity. (Colossians 3:11-14)

God's desire is that we live together in complete unity. Our differences must not separate and divide us as they do those in the world around us.

We are committed to pursuing peace in our relationships and the unity of the Spirit that reflects God's peace and the power of the gospel of Christ in our lives. Bitterness, unforgiveness and broken relationships are not appropriate for people whom God has reconciled to himself through the sacrifice of his only Son (John 13:34-35; Eph. 4:29-32; Col. 3:12-14). The Bible Scriptures and the Holy Spirit to guide us to respond to conflict in a way that will honor God, promote justice, reconcile relationships, and preserve our witness for Christ. We are committed to actively teaching and encouraging one another to live out the following principles of peacemaking and reconciliation:

Personal Peacemaking

- Whenever we are faced with conflict, our primary goal will be to glorify God with our thoughts, words and actions (1 Cor. 10:31).
- We will try to get the “logs” out of our own eyes before focusing on what others may have done wrong (Matt. 7:3-5).
- We will seek to overlook minor offenses (Prov. 19:11).
- We will refrain from all gossip, backbiting and slander (Eph. 4:29). If we have a problem with others, we will talk to them, not about them.
- We will believe the best about each other until we have facts that prove otherwise (1 Cor. 13:7).
- If an offense is too serious to overlook, or if we think someone may have something against us, we will go promptly to seek reconciliation (Matt. 5:23-24; 18:15).
- When we must confront or correct another, we will do so graciously and gently, with the goal of serving and restoring them (Prov. 12:18; Eph. 4:29; Gal. 6:1).
- When someone confronts or corrects us, we will ask God to help us resist prideful defensiveness and to accept correction with humility (Ps. 141:5; Prov. 15:32).
- When others repent, we will ask God to give us grace to forgive them as he has forgiven us (Eph. 4:32).
- When we discuss or negotiate substantive issues, we will look out for others’ interests as well as our own (Phil. 2:3-4).

Assisted Peacemaking

- When a conflict cannot be resolved privately, we will seek the mediation of wise people in our church and listen humbly to their counsel (Matt. 18:16; Phil. 4:2-3). If our dispute is with a church leader, we will look to other leaders for assistance.
- When informal mediation does not resolve a dispute, we will seek formal assistance from our church leaders or people they appoint, and we will submit to their counsel and correction (Matt. 18:17-20).
- When we have a dispute with another Christian, we will obey God’s command not to go into the civil court (1 Cor. 6:1-8). Instead, we will make every reasonable effort to resolve the matter through Biblical mediation and, if necessary, legally binding arbitration, in accordance with the Rules of Procedure for Christian Conciliation of the Institute for Christian

Conciliation, a division of Peacemaker Ministries. If the other party attends another church, our leaders will offer to cooperate with the leaders of that church to resolve the matter.

- If a person coming to our church has an unresolved conflict with someone in his former church, we will require and assist him to make every reasonable effort to be reconciled to the other person before joining our church (Matt. 5:23-24; Rom. 12:18).
- When a conflict involves matters of doctrine or church accountability, we will submit to the procedures set forth in our Commitment to Accountability, Correction and Restoration.

Commitment to Preserving Marriages

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

God intends marriage to be a life-long, exclusive relationship between one man and one woman (Matt. 19:4-6). He also designed it to provide mutual companionship through life's joys and difficulties, to create stability for raising and nurturing children, and to give strength and cohesiveness to society in general. Strong marriages produce stable and healthy families.

In our society, marriages fail for many reasons. Some people have gone through a divorce before having a relationship with Christ. Others have experienced divorce through no desire or decision of their own. Still others divorced because of their own wrongful choices, but have since repented and experienced forgiveness through Jesus. Regardless, all are welcome at The Cove.

Because we recognize God's design for marriage and the devastating effects of divorce, we are deeply committed to preserving marriages and preventing divorce. To this end, we devote a significant portion of our time and resources to strengthening marriages and families. We require and provide thorough premarital counseling to ensure that couples enter into marriage advisedly and are well prepared for its many challenges.

We also encourage couples to strengthen their marriages by participating in enrichment opportunities provided by marriage ministry at The Cove (Heb. 10:24-25). Our leaders are committed to providing guidance and support to couples who face marital difficulties. We discourage divorce and instead encourage couples to pursue reconciliation through Spirit-guided counseling and Biblically based peacemaking.

We recognize, however, that there are times when God permits a believer to seek a divorce. We believe divorce is permissible when the other spouse has been sexually involved with a person outside the marriage (Matt. 5:31-32), or when an unbelieving spouse abandons a marriage (1 Cor. 7:12-16). Even when divorce is permissible, it is not required. An offended spouse may choose to imitate God's love by offering a straying spouse the same grace and mercy God has extended to us (Eph. 5:1-2). This may involve patiently bearing neglect or lovingly confronting serious sin (Col. 3:12-14; Gal. 6:1). Sometimes, love may require asking the church to initiate formal accountability, correction, and restoration to rescue a spouse and a marriage from the devastating effects of unrepentant sin (Matt. 18:12-20). When someone is considering divorce, he or she is expected to bring the situation to our

leaders and cooperate with them as they determine whether grounds exist, promote repentance and reconciliation, and exhaust redemptive accountability, correction, and restoration, if appropriate.

If spouses separate, they should consider themselves married until the day a civil court issues a divorce decree and should refrain from dating or any other activity that is inconsistent with being married.

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

Commitment to Protecting Our Children

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

The Cove church is a safe and secure place for children. Since sin affects every person and organization in the world, however, it is possible that children could be harmed even during church activities. While we cannot guarantee that such things will never happen within our fellowship, we take every reasonable precaution to protect our children from foreseeable harm. These precautions include our "Working with Minors Policy," as well as video surveillance and monitored check-in of Cove Kids. If a child is harmed at the Cove, we will take immediate steps to inform the parents, to accept responsibility for our role in the situation, and to hold offending persons fully responsible for their actions. We will also evaluate our practices and procedures, considering changes that might reduce the likelihood of such harm to children in the future.

Commitment to Biblical Counseling

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

Everyone struggles with sin. Whenever we are unable to overcome sinful attitudes or behaviors, God calls us to seek assistance from other believers, and when needed, from church leaders who have the responsibility of providing pastoral counseling and oversight (see Rom. 15:14; Gal. 6:1-2; 2 Tim. 4:1-2; Heb. 13:17; James 5:16). Therefore, we encourage and expect our people to seek counsel from and confess sins to each other and to our leaders. We believe that the Bible provides thorough guidance and instruction for faith and life (2 Tim. 3:16-17). Therefore, our counseling is based on Biblical principles rather than secular psychology or psychiatry (Colossians 2:8) Unless they specifically state otherwise, none of those who provide guidance or counsel at the Cove are trained or licensed as psychotherapists, professional counselors or mental health professionals, nor should they be expected to follow the methods of such professionals or specialists.

God calls our leaders to set an example for us "in speech, in life, in love, and in faith and purity" (1 Tim. 4:12). Therefore, we expect them to treat counselees with every respect and courtesy, and to avoid even the appearance of impropriety or impurity during counseling (Eph. 5:3). We also expect counselees to promptly report to the leadership team any conduct that fails to meet this standard.

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

There are occasions when our leaders do not have sufficient time to meet with every person who asks for counseling. At such times we expect our leaders to give first priority to Cove members (Gal. 6:10), and to serve those who only attend The Cove Church by referring them to another source outside The Cove Church who can provide counsel and guidance.

Commitment to Confidentiality

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

The Bible teaches that Christians should carefully guard any personal and private information that others share to them. The Bible also discourages gossip (Prov. 26:20), invites confession (Prov. 11:13), and thus encourages people to seek needed counseling. Since these goals are essential to the ministry of the gospel and the work of the local church, all members and attendees are expected to refrain from gossip and to respect the confidences of others, including things shared in Life Groups.

Cove leaders are careful to protect all information that they receive through counseling. There are times, however, when it is appropriate for our leaders to reveal certain information to others, and our leaders, in their discretion and as they deem appropriate, may disclose confidential information to appropriate people in the following circumstances:

- When a leader needs to seek advice, perspective or information from other leaders at The Cove, or, if the person attends another church, from the leaders of that church (Prov. 11:14);
- When the person who disclosed the information, or any other person, is in imminent danger of serious harm unless others intervene (Prov. 24:11-12);
- When a person refuses to repent of sin and it becomes necessary to promote repentance through accountability, correction, and restoration (Matt. 18:15-20); or,
- When leaders are required by law to report suspected abuse or are otherwise legally obligated to disclose information they possess (Rom. 13:1).

Commitment to Accountability, Correction and Restoration

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

Like all of our Relationship Commitments, the principles and practices described below apply to all persons who attend our church whether or not they are members.

A. Accountability and Correction Are Signs of God's Love

The Cove Church is not a building but the group of people God has brought together to worship and serve Him. The Cove Church is part of the larger "church" which is made up of all Jesus followers. God has established the church to reflect his character, wisdom and glory in the midst of a fallen world (Eph. 3:10-11). For this reason, God is working to purify the church and bring her to maturity (Eph. 5:25-27). Because we continue to wrestle daily with remaining sin (1 John 1:8; Phil. 3:12), we cannot expect Cove members and attendees to live perfectly. We can, however, spur one another on toward maturity by encouraging and holding each other accountable to love, seek after, and obey God with all of our hearts, souls, minds and strength, and to love others as we love ourselves (Mark 12:30-31; Heb. 10:24-25). We refer to this process of accountability, correction, and restoration as "ACR." The Bible sometimes refers to the process as "discipline."

The Bible never presents church discipline as being negative, legalistic or harsh, as modern society does. True discipline originates from God himself and is always presented as a sign of genuine love. (Heb. 12:6; Ps. 94:12; Rev. 3:19).

God's discipline in the church, like the discipline in a good family, is intended to be instructive and encouraging. Preaching, teaching, prayer, personal Bible study, and Life Group fellowship are activities that fall into this category. On occasions God's discipline, like the discipline in a family with growing children, also may have a corrective purpose. When we forget or disobey what God has taught us, he corrects us. One way he does this is to call the church to seek after us and lead us back onto the right track. This corrective process is likened in the Bible to a shepherd seeking after a lost sheep. (Matt. 18:12-13). Corrective discipline is never to be done in a harsh, vengeful or self-righteous manner. It is always to be carried out in humility and love, with the goals of restoring someone to a close walk with Christ (Matt. 18:15; Gal. 6:1), protecting others from harm (1 Cor. 5:6), and showing respect for the honor and glory of God's name (1 Pet. 2:12).

B. Most ACR Is Private, Personal and Informal

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

But sometimes we are blind to our sins or so tangled in them that we cannot get free on our own. This is why the Bible says, “Brothers, if someone is caught in a sin, you who are spiritual should restore him gently” (Gal. 6:1). In obedience to this command, we are committed to giving and receiving loving correction within our church whenever a sin (whether in word, behavior or doctrine) seems too serious to overlook (Prov. 19:11). Our purpose is always bring about “repentance,” that is, a genuine acknowledgment of the wrong done and a sincere commitment to change.

If repeated private conversations do not lead another person to repentance, Jesus commands that we ask other Jesus followers to get involved. “If he will not listen, take one or two others along” (Matt. 18:16). If informal conversations with the person fail to resolve the matter, then we may seek the involvement of other people, such as a Life Group leader, a teacher or church leader. If the person still refuses to repent, and if the issue is too serious to overlook, we will move into “formal ACR.”

C. Formal ACR May Involve the Entire Church

If an individual persistently refuses to listen to personal and informal correction to turn from speech or behavior that the Bible defines as sin, Jesus commands us to “tell it to the church” (Matt. 18:17a). This first involves informing one or more church leaders about the situation. If the offense is not likely to cause harm to others, our leaders may approach the individual privately to personally inquire into the facts and to encourage repentance of any sin they discover. The individual will be given every reasonable opportunity to explain and defend his or her actions. If the individual recognizes his sin and repents, the matter usually ends there, unless a confession to additional people is needed. If an offense may harm others or lead them into sin, or cause division or disruption, our leaders may accelerate the ACR process and move promptly to protect the church (Rom. 16:17; 1 Cor. 5:1-13; Titus 3:10-11).

As the ACR process progresses, our leaders may take any action they deem necessary to encourage repentance, including but not limited to private and public admonition, withholding of communion, removal from office, withdrawal of normal fellowship, and, as a last resort, removal from membership (Matt. 5:23-24; 2 Thess. 3:6-15; Matt. 18:17).

If the straying individual does not repent in response to private appeals from our leaders, they may inform others in the church who may they believe be able to influence that individual or may be willing to pray for him or her, or people who might be harmed or affected by that person’s behavior. This step may include close friends, a Life Group, ministry team members, or a teacher (Matt. 18:17, 1 Tim. 5:20).

If, after a reasonable period of time, the individual still refuses to change, then our leaders may formally remove him or her from membership and normal fellowship. They also may inform the church membership of their decision and instruct the congregation that the individual should be treated “as an unbeliever.” This just means that instead of having casual, relaxed fellowship with the individual, we will look for opportunities to lovingly bring the gospel to him, remind him of God’s holiness and mercy, and call him to repent and put his faith in Christ (Matt. 18:17; 1 Cor. 5:5; 1 Tim. 1:20). If our leaders inform our entire congregation about a situation, they have discretion whether to divulge the individual’s name. This decision usually will depend on a variety of factors, such as: how widely known the situation already is; whether there might be people in the congregation who could persuade the individual to repent; or whether the congregation needs to be on guard against potential harm he might cause. Even if our leaders decide it is not necessary to identify an individual

specifically, they may still inform the congregation of the general situation and the ACR steps they have followed.

The natural human response to correction often is to hide or run away from accountability (Gen. 3:8-10). To strengthen our church's ability to rescue us if we are caught in sin, we agree not to run away from this church to avoid the ACR process. Therefore, we, both members and attendees, waive our right to withdraw from membership or accountability once the ACR process has begun. That ACR process begins at the time a church leader first contacts a member or attendee regarding an issue or concern. Although we are free to stop attending the church at any time, we agree that a withdrawal during the ACR process will not be given effect until the church has fulfilled its God-given responsibilities to inquire into the facts and circumstances, to encourage our repentance and restoration, and to bring the ACR process to an orderly conclusion, as described in these Commitments (Matt. 18:12-14; Gal. 6:1; Heb. 13:17). If an individual leaves the church while the ACR process is in effect or is being considered, and our leaders learn that he or she is attending another church, they may inform that church of the situation and ask its leaders to encourage the individual to repent and be reconciled to the Lord and to any people he or she has offended. This action is intended both to help the individual find freedom from his sin and to warn the other church about the harm that he or she might do to their members (see Matt. 18:12-14; Rom. 16:17; 1 Cor. 5:1-13; 3 John 1:9-10).

Loving restoration always stands at the heart of the disciplinary process. If an individual repents, and our leaders confirm his or her sincerity, we will rejoice together and gladly imitate God's forgiveness by restoring the person to fellowship within the body (see Matt. 18:13; Luke 15:3-7, 11-32; 2 Cor. 2:5-11; Col. 3:12-14). People who have been excluded from another church will not be allowed to become members, or to participate in the regular fellowship or activities of our church, until they have repented of their sins and made a reasonable effort to be reconciled, or our leaders have determined that the action of the former church was not biblically appropriate.

The specific steps in the formal ACR process will be established by our church leaders and may be changed by our church leadership from time to time. At a minimum, those procedures will establish the process for the appointment and authorization of the members who will make inquiry, communicate with those involved, evaluate the information obtained, and make final recommendations regarding corrective action as may be appropriate. The final decision regarding any action to be taken with respect to a particular case will be made by the directors of The Cove Church. Those who are the subject of any inquiry or action will be afforded an opportunity to appear and be heard and to present any information they feel is important for consideration. They will also receive notice of any final decision rendered.