



Riverview Church Membership Class: Part 1

Welcome to Riverview Church's membership class! We're very excited that you've chosen to take this class and to commit yourself to the local body.

One of the scariest verses in the bible, to us pastors, is in Hebrews 13:17 where it says:

"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."

What is scary for us is that, one day, we as pastors in the church must give an account for our flock. One day we'll stand before God's throne and we will answer to God the Father, Jesus, and the Holy Spirit about how we did in keeping watch over our flock. That's one of the reasons membership is so important. The pastors in any given church need to know who they are watching over.

In this paper, we're looking at who we are as a church. We'll be going over at a little bit of our history, where we are heading, and our core values.

Riverview's History

Our church started way back in 1977 when Steve Sommerlot, Paul DenHerder (both pastors here), and about a dozen other people moved across the country to start a campus church at Michigan State University. The first 12 years or so, we were largely a campus church. We started about a dozen other churches that were largely campus-oriented. We had this excitement and enthusiasm centered around being a young church in a college town on a college campus.

When we got into the 90's, we began to develop a community element to our church – because when you put a bunch of college kids together, they get married and have children. We had kids running around that we had no idea what to do with! So we started a community element, and in a lot of ways the 90's were a time where we became less of a campus church and more of a community-oriented church.

At the end of the 90's, we began to ask "who are we really as a church, and who do we want to be?" We were multi-generational and had lots of young families, but we also wanted to be decidedly young. So, we renewed our commitment to be a church that focuses unapologetically on teens, college students, singles, and young families. That doesn't mean that all generations aren't welcome – we love all people from all generations! But our focus is on the younger generation.

The reason for this is simple – most churches have a slow increase in attendance as their church grows over many years. Eventually, that increase slows down and the church sets into a plateau. That plateau may last decades. Then, as there are more and more funerals, and less and less births and weddings until the church slowly dies. That is why it is so essential for the local church to figure out ways to continually reach young people – so that it doesn't eventually die.

In the late 90's, we renewed our commitment to be a multi-generational church that focuses on reaching young people.

Recently, a newspaper reporter wrote an article about Riverview and he was surprised by two things:

1. That so many young people would be willing to come to church (our Median age is 28).
2. That there were so many people in their 30's, 40's, and 50's and beyond that were willing to stay and reach those younger than themselves.

This reporter couldn't figure out how or why this works – but here's the answer: The Gospel. The Gospel breaks down barriers and brings us together. We are unified in the Gospel and we are doing our best to reach young people to keep our church viable while we reach as many people as we can. Our elders continually sacrifice their preferences in style in order to pass the baton to the next generation.

In 2001, we built our first building after 24 years of existence. We built it 5 miles south of campus in Holt, MI. We started with about 200 people at that time, but immediately grew to 500 people within 3 months, and 6 months later we had 800 people packed into our little building! What was striking to us, though, is that we had more college students than ever before – and we had just moved off campus. Even though the college students were coming in droves, we didn't have freshmen, sophomores, or international students because they tend to be trapped on campus without cars.

To address this issue, we became one church in two locations when we started our MSU Venue on campus at Michigan State in 2008. This has worked really well for us. We have a lot of people involved in the MSU Venue that have never stepped foot in our Holt venue, and vice versa. Yet, following the New Testament model, we are one church in a metro area in a couple locations.

In 2014, we launch our REO Town Venue, which is in downtown Lansing just south of the Capitol and I-496. So now we have a Suburban church, a University church, and an Urban church while still being, together, ONE church. Each expression of our church is a full embodiment of the local church, and we together are a full embodiment of the church right here in the Lansing area.

In the 2000's we also renewed our commitment to church planting. It had been since 1989 that we had planted a church, so we recommitted ourselves to planting more churches. We did this in a few different ways. First, we started a Church Planting Residency program, where we take two guys on per year who are church planters, train them, pay their salary, and send them out to start a new church. We also affiliated ourselves with Acts 29, a church planting network that has a lot of churches across the country and across the world. Since, we've become the "hub" church for Acts 29 in Michigan. Pastor Noel Heikkinen serves as the Director of the Michigan Network of Acts 29. Another one of our pastors, Greg Van Nada, serves as the national director for Collegiate Church Network, which serves and plants churches on college campuses throughout the United States.

Our church is intimately involved in starting other churches. We often say that we want our people to so love Jesus that someday they'd be willing to "go away." This might mean planting a church, going on a church plant, or helping start new venues here in the Lansing Area.

Riverview's Mission

Our focus is on two simple things: Weekend Services and Life Groups. We get this from Acts 2:46-47:

Acts 2:46-47 – "And day by day, attending the temple together and breaking bread in their homes, they received their food with glad and generous hearts, praising God and having favor with all the people. And the Lord added to their number day by day those who were being saved."

It's important to note that, at this point in the book of Acts, there were thousands of people in the Jerusalem church. The very first church was the very first megachurch!

The way the Apostles solved the "megachurch issue" of taking care of, loving, and training all of these people was to be "big" and "small" at the same time. They had their "weekend services" (their temple meetings), and then they had their "life groups" (meeting in each others' homes).

It's important to note that this model isn't mandated in scripture, but we think it is a fantastic model that we chose to emulate.

Here at Riverview, we're culturally fluid but theologically conservative. What "culturally fluid" means is that we will follow culture as far as we can without being sinful. So our music will go with the culture (we have 14-ish bands between our 3 venues), our art will go with culture (we even have graffiti on the side of our REO Town building that we are keeping), and we will engage our people as much as we can in current culture.

Being "theologically conservative" means that we stand on 2000 years of church history (predominantly Reformation history over the last few hundred years), and we hold firm to the truths of scripture. When culture and scripture clash, scripture will always win. When it comes to culture and a freedom area, we are willing to go with culture.

This is how we run our weekend services (our "big meeting"). But Life Groups (our "small meetings") are so important because it's too easy to get lost in a sea of thousands of people at a weekend service. Life Groups are really where the rubber meets the road in your life. We want you to connect. We want the preaching on the weekends to instruct you in the Word, and the music and art to help you respond to God. Then we want you take that to your Life Group and ask "OK - how does this apply to me today, right here, right now?" Obviously, this is impossible to do on a big scale at the weekend services.

So when you are struggling with something or have questions, we want you to take that to your Life Group leaders first. If there are issues that your Life Group leaders can't handle, we have a group of tremendously trained people called Stephen Ministers that can help you with the more difficult seasons in your life. Finally, we have a bunch of pastors that can also help shepherd you.

That means, if you're not in a Life Group, we strongly encourage you to do so! If you want to start one, fantastic! Just tell us you did and we'll give you a whole bunch of resources and training to help you out. You can also go to our website at RivChurch.com to find out how to join an existing group. Please do this! It's far too easy in our culture to hide. It's far too easy in our church to come, listen to the message, listen to the music, and leave without it having any real impact on your life.

One of the commitments you're making by becoming a member of Riverview is to grow in your faith, and the best way to do that is by getting involved in a Life Group.