

# Our Rule of Life

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**H**ow do I join *All Souls*? That's a great question, one we believe to be more important than we might think. Here's our dilemma: we are a Christian community not a club. We are a community formed in and made possible by the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ which means that [1] Jesus' hospitality is far more radical than any social clique, cutting across the barriers we construct, [2] belonging to Jesus' community, in the most profound sense, is something Jesus does to us in our baptism, transforming us in our deepest being, and [3] Jesus calls his Church into the world as a visible community enacting a new way of life. In other words, everyone's welcome to walk together (from whatever place we may find ourselves) into our shared life in Jesus. We want more than structural minimalism (i.e. what's the very least we can ask of one another and still stick around together?) or static rational systems (just say you believe this or just sign that – and you're in). We long to pursue a meaningful life together, a life of friendship and shared mission as we grow up together in God.<sup>1</sup>

*With the first question, you are wondering if there is space for you. There is. No strings attached. We are committed to you – and we are committed to you having a place at the table with us.*

So, when you ask, *can I be a member of All Souls?*, you are probably asking one of two questions. You may simply be wondering: *can I be part of the life and community of All Souls?* The answer to this is always, unequivocally, yes! Absolutely. You are welcome here. Come be part of us. We invite you into friendship. You don't need to do anything other than take the plunge. If you want in, you're in.

However, you may be asking something more. You may sense a stirring for something deeper, to be more than one who belongs to the community but also one who shares the community's identity and mission, to be responsible, with us, for what we sense God calling us to be and do. In other words, *how can I offer my heart and life to this particular community, into All Souls' shared life and purpose before God?*

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<sup>1</sup> Acts 2:42-47 describes the experience of the early church community this way: "...all the believers lived in a wonderful harmony, holding everything in common. They sold whatever they owned and pooled their resources so that each person's need was met. They followed a daily discipline of worship in the Temple followed by meals at home, every meal a celebration, exuberant and joyful, as they praised God. People in general liked what they saw. Every day their number grew as God added those who were saved. (*The Message*)

*Practicing a Rule of Life with others moves us against the grain of our individualistic culture. A Rule of Life should be a response to being loved by God in the first place, and feeling moved to become what God calls us to be in this world.*

*- a Friar*

With the second question, however, you are wondering how you can commit yourself to us, how you can plant your feet firmly in this community, roll up your sleeves and live together in the way of Jesus. This question speaks of your desire for a way of life lived with particular people. Our best guess is that if we want to live a particular kind of life – and if we want to do it together, then we need to create a relational way for all of us to affirm and encourage our shared commitments to the sort of life we sense God calling us toward.

In older Christian communities (particularly among the monastics), community members would first be initiated into the community via baptism and then would subscribe to a rule of life. This practice was made most famous by *The Rule of St. Benedict* around 529 A.D. Obviously, All Souls is not a monastery or a convent, but we do think there is something to this idea of a community committing themselves to a certain way of living (together) in a place.

## THE PATH

If you want to commit to this community, then, it means following a path (and any meaningful relationship takes a little time, right?) that leads to taking on a shared rule of life. This path begins with receiving the Kingdom of God by embracing Jesus' life and story as your own – and receiving baptism, the initial rite of passage into union with Jesus and Jesus' Church. If you have already placed your faith in Jesus for forgiveness and life and been baptized (no matter the mode or the order), we welcome you. If you need to discuss your personal faith story or be baptized, we are happy to walk with you in that journey, no matter how long it takes.

Once you are ready to dive more fully into our community, you will take on All Souls' rule of life encompassing both personal questions of obedience to Jesus (particularly naming Jesus as Lord over our money, our sexuality and our power – the three realms



Christians have long identified as prime places of temptation<sup>2</sup>) and communal questions (around our core hopes of hospitality, restoration and shalom).

Our rule of life emphasizes our communal practices and way of life, they are undergirded by the essential elements of: [1] faith in Jesus, [2] allegiance to Jesus' authority which he has revealed to us in his life and in his words, Scripture [3] communion with Jesus' Church, sharing "one faith, one baptism, one Lord" as God's people have long affirmed in our shared creeds (Apostle's Creed, Nicene Creed).

So, committing to All Souls would look like a progression of relationships, something like this:

- Hang around us a bit, get to know us – and see if who we are resonates with you.
- Participate in a Welcome to All Souls lunch, hearing more of our community's story.
- Enjoy a round of meals and stories with other folks already part of the All Souls' community
- Join an orienting experience (a friendship, a small community, a pastoral conversation, etc.) to understand All Souls' core hopes (hospitality, restoration and shalom)
- Affirm your own submission to God's Kingdom and faith in Jesus
- Receive baptism (if not already baptized) allowing God to drown you in mercy and welcome you into God's Kingdom of light and love
- Connect with a pastor, small community leader or friend to process your journey
- Take on the rule of life together with the All Souls community

*At any point in this process, a pastor or elder is available for a spiritual direction conversation, to help you listen to God and pay attention to how God is at work in your story.*

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<sup>2</sup> Older Christian communities spoke of these three common places where God's Kingdom contradicts our kingdom – and where all of us need the gospel to heal and renew us: simplicity, chastity and obedience. We use the language of money (simplicity: *who controls our money and our stuff?*), sexuality (chastity: *how will we live an embodied faith?*) and power (obedience: *to whom and to what do I surrender my power/for whom or for what do I use my power?*)

## ALL SOULS COMMUNAL RULE OF LIFE

Those who desire to join our community's rule of life will affirm it along with the rest of the All Souls community on the last Sunday of the church year, before Advent begins (and it will be re-affirmed each year).

### First Affirmations (for everyone, taking rule or not)

Do you stand here, won over by Jesus' love and in submission to the apostles' faith delivered to the saints? Are you ready for joyous obedience to the calling of your baptism, remembering you're your old life has been buried in Christ and that Christ has raised you to new life? And are you eager to follow God's two commands: to love God and to love your neighbor?

**Yes, by God's mercy.**

Do you desire to participate in community with All Souls Charlottesville, to yield your life to Jesus' authority and Jesus' Scriptures – and to freely give your heart, your joy and your resources to a shared way of living in this world?

**Yes, by God's mercy.**



Do you recognize that you are loved by God with or without this rule of life – and will you receive God's grace in however it comes to you this year, whether this rule of life experience is how you expect it to be or not? And will you believe with your whole heart that it is not your own strength, commitment or devotion that will yield fruit but all will be from "God who works in you to will and to act according to his good purpose"?

**Yes, by God's mercy.**

Do you humbly embrace the responsibility that comes with taking on this rule of life, before God and alongside your Christian community, knowing that we will depend on one another to live together in the Jesus-way? And if you are not taking on this rule of life, do you stand here in solidarity with others in your community – and will you give them your support and prayers?

**Yes, by God's mercy.**



## THE RULE OF LIFE

- + Because we are a community in the way of Jesus and because God has first loved us, we commit to love God by our obedience, submitting to Jesus as Lord over our life, including our money, our sexuality and our power.
- + Because the Trinity<sup>3</sup> forms us as a people designed for relationship, we commit ourselves to generous hospitality by living with one another in tangible expressions of community.
- + Because the Gospel<sup>4</sup> renews everything, beginning by awakening our heart to true life, we will open ourselves to see and hear God, allowing God to restore our mind, body and soul.
- + Because the Kingdom of God<sup>5</sup> rules over everything, we will join God's work of bringing shalom to our home, Charlottesville and to the world.

### A PRAYER FROM OUR RULE

As a community ruled by God the Father, redeemed by God the Son and led by God the Spirit, we affirm the apostles' faith and the calling of our baptism. We humbly affirm our calling to live together as a community obedient to Jesus in every area of life, including our money, our sexuality and our power. And we affirm our calling to receive and then give away God's hospitality, God's restoration and God's shalom. In the name of Jesus, who is Lord over the church. Amen.

### BACK TO THE CENTER

Even with all this, we couldn't agree more with Flannery O'Connor: "Most people come to the church by a means the church does not allow." We are a messy tribe, and the gospel instigates a certain kind of holy free-for-all. However you find your way into friendship with God and us – we are ecstatic. This path is simply our attempt to be messy *together*. To love Jesus together. To serve Charlottesville and the surrounding counties together.

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<sup>3</sup> The Trinity, where God the Father, God the Son and God the Spirit live in perfect community serves as our model for communal life. We are made in the image of the Trinity (God), and as such, we are created with a longing to deeply know others – and to be deeply known by others.

<sup>4</sup> The Gospel has many dimensions. However, at the gospel's core is the good news that God has come to us in Jesus, restoring and renewing all things, everything scarred by sin. This restoration begins with our individual stories and moves out from there into every sphere. We have hope in Jesus – we can be made new.

<sup>5</sup> To speak of the Kingdom of God is to declare the truth that God is lord over the whole earth. God reigns over all, even though we have rebelled against God's just rule. Jesus' redemptive work – and the redemptive work of Jesus' community (the church) – works toward the good end when all of creation has been restored to wholeness and life.

## ADDENDUM 1: ALL SOULS RULE OF LIFE FAQ

### what exactly is a rule of life?

*Following the example of many older Christian communities, a rule of life is a set of shared affirmations and concrete practices that give tangible shape to the kind of life we will live together.*

### why a rule of life instead of “membership”?

*From our experience, our ideas of “membership” are often weak and more like joining the YMCA than giving yourself to know and be known, to love and serve among a community of people. We hope to broaden our imagination around what it means to be part of a Christian community, and we think that this language and these practices may help us do this. We desire to be a Jesus- people, actually living together, with all our mess and all our hope. We have a hunch that something like a rule of life has a better chance at helping us form a living community rather than merely a ossified organization. But this is a kind of membership, a way of belonging, a way of being welcomed and a way of committing yourself to Jesus and to one expression of Jesus’ people. We’re simply trying to enrich what membership, at its best, truly means.*

*Are you tired? Worn out?  
Burned out on religion?  
Come to me. Get away with  
me and you'll recover your  
life. I'll show you how to  
take a real rest. Walk with  
me and work with me—  
watch how I do it. Learn the  
unforced rhythms of grace. I  
won't lay anything heavy or  
ill-fitting on you. Keep  
company with me and you'll  
learn to live freely and  
lightly.*

*Jesus, Matthew 11:30*

### **Doesn't a rule of life actually make us less hospitable to those who choose not to take on our rule of life?**

*It shouldn't; and if it does, we've made a major misstep. Since one of our core hopes – and one of our first stated intents – is to offer generous hospitality, anything less would mean we are not fulfilling what we have committed to. Also, it is vital to remember (though hard, because it is counter-cultural) that we are not establishing a guide for*

*who is in and who is out – but rather a practical means for people to commit themselves to one another and pursue shared hopes (because, as we know, the things we leave entirely to good intentions rarely actually happen). Taking on this rule of life doesn't gain you power (it calls you to be a servant) or a place at the table (because everyone has that), and it certainly doesn't make you more spiritual. Rather, it is a way of practicing humility and submitting yourself to the shared life of the broader community.*

*A shared identity (what we hope will come with a shared rule of life) ought increase our ability to be hospitable and generous. All we have to give away is who we are in Jesus. The richer and deeper our sense of who we are, the more depth and vigor we have to give away. We hope to invite anyone and everyone into our family – and every family needs to know who they are.*

### **What about the word rule – it sounds rigid and legalistic?**

*It can, you're right. But we like to renew old words that have (for some) been misused and breathe new life into them. A rule is an ordered practice. It says we want to live this way. It is not intended to be a legislative code, but a way of taking theories and putting them into action in the way we live and love. A rule of life is something like a solemn oath, like ones we take at our wedding or, in the Bible, the promise that friends (like David and Jonathan) would make to one another – or that communities or individuals would make to God. A rule of life is our way of saying that the Gospel's notions of hospitality, restoration and shalom are to rearrange our life, not merely stay as theoretical ideas.*

### **What if this sounds heavy, and I'm not sure I can add a single more thing "to do"?**

*Maybe you don't need to take on this rule – or maybe wait for another time. Or maybe dig into why it feels burdensome – and talk it out with someone else to see if there couldn't be a way that this might be freeing and rich for you. If this whole thing strikes you as just more work or some added moralistic duty to add to your already overtaxed life, then don't do it. That's not the spirit or intention, and we applaud you for refusing to load yourself up with guilt or life-draining duty.*

*In all this, we've struggled with the tension – having this process seem burdensome or impossibly complex or (in reaction) acting as though joining a community that seeks to follow Jesus really doesn't ask much of us. We think the Gospel calls us out of ourselves and past our comfort zones. At the same time, God invites us to the "unforced rhythms of grace."*

### **Aren't you asking me to take on a weighty thing, a commitment to and a responsibility for our community?**

*Yes.*

### **Wow. It just seems like a lot.**

*In a way, sure. However, at the core, we are asking you to commit to (1) surrender your life to Jesus' authority (2) live in community (3) allow God to speak into your life (4) give yourself away for the good of your neighbors. These are core ideas to what it means to be a disciple of Jesus.*

**Do I need to take on this rule of life to be a part of All Souls?**

*No. If you want to be a part, you are a part. Our shared rule of life is for those who feel called to take a deeper level of commitment to our shared hopes and to putting these hopes to concrete practice alongside others in our community.*

**Will we be creating some kind of spiritual caste system, where some are “better” or where there is a lot of emphasis on who is in and who is out?**

*There is no caste system, no “in” or “out.” This is the opportunity for those who desire it to make promises – and to ask to be held to those promises – to live in a particular kind of Gospel-way within the context of Christian community.*

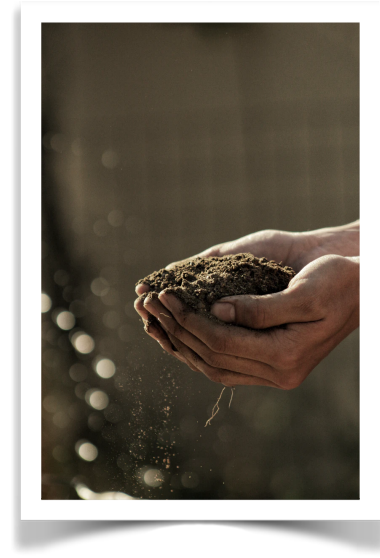
**What if I’m not ready to take on this rule right now?**

*No problem. Come be part of us. Roll up your sleeves and join in, wherever you want. Also, please participate in the public moment when we affirm our rule of life. There will be things you can affirm (if you wish) even without taking on the rule that will show your solidarity with our community and your support for those who feel called to take this step.*



## ADDENDUM 2: INDIVIDUAL RULE OF LIFE

As you work through this process of taking on our shared hopes for the kind of community we want to be, you may discover a desire to form an individual rule of life that will guide you for the following year. This will be your personal way of living out the call to bring our whole life under the authority of Jesus - and your unique way of living out our shared hopes of hospitality, restoration and shalom. Essentially, it is a way to be attentive to the particular story God is writing in you. For some, it will mean doing some new things. For some, it will mean stop doing certain things. For all of us, it will mean seeing Jesus present in our everyday life.



Even an individual rule of life should be formed within community. Process this with your small community, a close spiritual friend or a pastor.

**To help you form your individual rule, these questions may be helpful:**

1. How is God's Spirit inviting me to deepen my commitment to be obedient to Jesus in these central areas of my life: money, sexuality and power?
2. Hospitality: how is the Trinity calling me to live in communal relationship with another this year, and how do I prioritize that calling into my routine of life?
3. Restoration: how do I sense the Gospel awakening my heart to life this year, and what spiritual practice should I pursue to respond to this awakening?
4. Shalom: how does the Kingdom of God invite me to God's work of making Charlottesville new, and how am I to use my God-given desires and resources this year to join this work?

Please share your rule of life with a pastor, elder, small community leader or spiritual friend so we can encourage the work God is doing in you.

*If you do not find these questions helpful, our pastors or elders would love to have a conversation with you and help you consider what a rule of life might look like for you*