

Membership - Time for a Change?

Introduction

This paper seeks to briefly consider church membership under three headings; our *past* heritage, our *present* position and the *future* of membership for us as a community of Jesus' disciples.

Our Past

The history of the Christian church tells the story of followers of Jesus joining together in groups since the very beginning – Jesus himself drew around him a group of disciples. Those that believed in Jesus and were baptised on the day of Pentecost quickly devoted themselves to a community of fellow disciples (Acts 2:41-47). Through history, these communities of disciples – Christian churches – have continued to thrive and multiply and grow. They have always had two primary functions;

- To share the Good News about Jesus, in both word & deed, with those who have yet to hear it.
- To encourage each other to grow as disciples of Jesus, becoming more and more like him.

Jesus' Great Commission (Matthew 28: 18-20) requires his followers to engage in the *ongoing* process of making disciples rather than the one-off process of making converts. This ongoing commitment to 'making disciples' has been at the heart of the Baptist system of church membership from the outset. From their first steps of faith in Jesus and their baptism, new believers would be welcomed into the warmth of a community of fellow disciples who together would seek to share the Good News and encourage each other to grow more and more like Jesus. 'Members' of these Baptist groups of disciples were committed first to Jesus, but they were also really committed to each other; journeying through life together, praying with each other and seeking to help each other as best they could. Individually, they belonged to God but they also had a strong sense of belonging to each other within the community of the church.

The word Christians use to describe the kind of relationship involved in belonging to the church is 'covenant'. A covenant is a two-way commitment which is open-ended and unconditional.¹ A covenant relationship is therefore a deep bond between two parties which does not anticipate an end and is not dependent upon love being 'earned'. This is the amazing relationship that we can have with God because of the redeeming work of Jesus and it also describes the kind of 'covenant' relationship between an individual and the rest of the church community. Each church, therefore, is in itself a covenant community² – a group of disciples of Jesus who are deeply committed to God and also to each other.

As today, our Baptist predecessors did their best to prayerfully discern God's will together. But membership wasn't so much about the power, privilege or responsibility to make decisions regarding the future of the church as it was about a covenant commitment to God and to each other in a local community of believers who were actively involved in encouraging each other to become more like Jesus and to sharing the Good News of the gospel.

¹ Wright, N.G., *Baptist Basics: Church Membership* (Didcot: BUGB, 2009)

² *ibid.*

Our Present

For many people in today's world the word 'membership' conveys very different ideas and concepts to the 'covenant relationships' of those first Baptist churches. Today, 'membership' might suggest an association with a club or organisation to which there may be little active participation or sense of relationship with other members - such as being a 'member' of the AA or RAC. Alternatively 'membership', especially of a religious group, might cause some to think of cults whose 'members' appear trapped and brain-washed making them wary and suspicious about becoming a 'member' of a church.³ For still others, 'membership' of a Baptist church might be something of mystery – many baptised disciples of Jesus have become actively involved in the life of Baptist churches only to discover months or years later that they are not actually church 'members', whilst some have wondered what difference 'becoming a member' of a church would make to them or to others when they are already actively serving God and the local church community.

Yet 'membership' of a local church community remains as important today as it was for those first Baptist believers. In a world where true 'covenant relationships' are increasingly under attack and where 'individualism' is given greater value than genuine 'community', the original Baptist understanding of what it means to belong to a church community has much to offer. It means being a part of a community that is committed to walking through life's ups and downs together, to encouraging each other to become more and more like Jesus, and to sharing the Good News of the gospel, through word and deed, with those in the wider communities in which we live. The focus is on encouraging alive, healthy relationships with God and with each other in the church community.

Instead, the system of 'membership' that today's Baptist church has inherited has become increasingly focussed on church government – the way we make decisions in the life of the church. Although Baptist churches have always had leaders, the way that decisions are made regarding what God wants for the church's future is by the church 'members' meeting together to pray and discuss issues and coming to a decision together. This is different to many other church groups that have some decisions made for them by a leader, or a group of leaders, who may or may not be a part of that local church community i.e. a Bishop making a decision that affects all the churches in his Diocese, or the Pope making a decision that affects all Catholic churches worldwide.

The shared responsibility for decision-making in the life of Baptist churches is fundamental to our Baptist identity and it is important that this system continues to be the way that we make decisions both now and in the future. Often decisions can be reached by consensus after everyone has had an opportunity to contribute to a discussion – in other words, there seems to be broad agreement within the group about the way God is leading on the issues being discussed. Sometimes a vote will be taken in order to make a decision. Voting will always take place on certain big issues such as calling a new minister, appointing deacons, changing the church's constitution (rules), and major financial decisions.

However, the resulting situation means that most Baptist churches have some people who are actively involved in the life of the church community, are committed to God and to others in that community but are not church 'members' and as such are excluded from the process of decision-making within the church, whilst there are others who are 'voting' members but who are no longer an active part of the church community at all.

³ Our very formal system of interviewing potential church members, voting them in and offering them the 'right hand of fellowship' in a religious ceremony certainly does little to help calm these fears and is more likely to give the impression that we are a closed, secretive 'society' with the power to initiate only those whom we choose.

Our Future

We could just continue with the old system of church membership that we have inherited – there is nothing fundamentally wrong with it but it might not serve today's (or tomorrow's) church and the contemporary context in which we live as well as it did for previous generations of Baptist believers. Or we could take this opportunity to re-consider what 'membership' is essentially about; to think about what its purpose is and to recognise the difficulties that the present system presents. And, whilst we must stay true to our Baptist heritage, we could endeavour to reinterpret 'membership' in a way that better fits our church community, both today and into the future.

I am therefore proposing the following;

1. Instead of using the term 'Membership' we use the term 'Partnership' for those who are committed to our church community. No word or term is without its problems, but the word 'Partner' (as in a 'Partner' of a law firm or Dr's surgery) implies more of an active involvement and concern for the organisation compared to the more passive and distant 'association' implied by today's use of the term 'Member'. The term 'Partner' also suggests some kind of active relationship between the individual and others in the group whereas a 'Member' is more normally thought of today merely as someone who keeps an organisation's set of rules as part of a contractual agreement (i.e. a member of a gym signs a contract agreeing to certain things, such as paying a regular subscription, but has no need to enter into any kind of relationship with any of the other members of the gym).
2. In the life of Watchet Baptist Church we emphasise that becoming a 'Partner' of the church community is primarily about discipleship – the commitment of each individual to become more and more like Jesus, to encourage others in the church community to grow in their faith and to share the Good News of the gospel with those in the wider community. This removes the central focus of 'Partnership' from the church's system of decision-making and puts it instead on the development of active, 'covenant relationships' with God, with each other and with the wider communities in which we live.
3. Instead of the system of interviewing prospective 'Partners', a short course will be offered to those who are interested in becoming more committed to the church community that will outline the beliefs, values and vision of our church and provide an opportunity for questions to be asked.⁴ Instead of extending the right hand of fellowship to new 'Partners', an annual 'Covenant Service' will be included in the church's calendar. This service will allow new Partners to be officially welcomed into the church community but will also allow existing Partners to renew their covenant with God, with the others in the church community, and commitment to share the Good News of the gospel with those in the wider community. Central to this 'Covenant Service' will be a short, simple but meaningful liturgy. I suggest the following be spoken together by those who want to become Partners or renew their covenant of Partnership;

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⁴ I would envisage that this course will be overseen directly by the Minister and would include elements of basic doctrine, Baptist history, the specific ways in which Baptist churches operate, our church community's values and vision and, especially for those who are new to faith, the challenge to be baptised. The course will strongly emphasise ongoing discipleship with relation to becoming and remaining a 'Partner' of the church community.

- ***I commit to Jesus***
(Spoken to God)
*Responding to Your love for me,
I commit my life to You.
You are my Lord. You are my Saviour. You are my example.
Please help me to become more like You.*
- ***I commit to the people in this church community***
(Spoken to each other in the church community)
*Recognising that God wants us to live out our faith together
and to encourage each other to become more like Jesus,
I commit to serving this church community.
Please disciple me as I open my life to you.
You are my community for discipleship, mission and worship in this coming
year.
I will live out the vision and values of this church in partnership with you.*
- ***I commit to my neighbours in the world***
(Spoken symbolically to those in our wider community)
*Joining in with God's loving mission and going,
I commit to sharing God's love with you
in my attitudes, in my actions and in my words.
I will be good news in relationship with you.⁵*

This form of words is not set in stone and can be modified but the three different elements are significant in terms of what it means to be a Partner of our church community.

Additionally, the vision of the church might be written or drawn on a large piece of card and those who are becoming Partners or reaffirming their Partnership to the church community could sign the picture. Below is an example of a Baptist church whose vision for the next year was to 'Encounter God', 'Create Community' and 'Break Out & Bless'. This vision was explained to the church and those who were committed to it signed the picture as a declaration that they believed God wanted them to serve Him by carrying out this vision as part of that local church community over the coming year.



⁵ Wording adapted from Covenant Liturgy developed by Church From Scratch see, www.churchfromscratch.org

⁶ Photo taken at Walsgrave Baptist Church, see www.walsgravebaptists.org.uk

Changes to the wording of our church constitution

To make the above changes would require us to change the wording of our church constitution in the section headed 'Membership'.

The present wording is as follows;

Membership

- *Will be open to all who profess faith in Jesus Christ as Saviour and Lord and whose lives bear evidence of their Christian profession.*
- *Will be visited by 2 members appointed by the church meeting. They will report back to the church as to their profession of faith. If the church agree the applicant will be received into membership as soon as possible (usually at the next communion service)*
- *If the applicant has not already been baptised they shall be asked to prayerfully consider the New Testament teaching on baptism and the summary of the church's basic doctrines.*
- *Membership rules are to be applied with compassion, common sense and an awareness of the applicant's profession of faith.*

I propose the following wording in accordance with the above discussion;

Partnership

- *'Partnership' is an annually renewable covenant and commitment to Jesus, each other and our local community. It is primarily focussed on what it means to be a disciple of Jesus – someone who wants to become more like Jesus and follow his teachings and example.*
- *Those who want to become 'Partners' will be invited to attend an Introductory Course which will include elements of Christian doctrine; Baptist history, principles and practice; the values and vision of this church community; and, for those who have yet to be baptised, the challenge to prayerfully consider baptism as a significant step in their ongoing journey of discipleship.*
- *An annual Covenant Service will be included in the church's calendar that will allow new Partners to be officially welcomed into the church community. By way of a simple responsive liturgy, both new and existing Partners will be asked to make or renew their covenant with God and with others in the church community, and to commit to serving those in the wider community. All Partners will also be asked to affirm their commitment to the values and vision of this church at this annual Covenant Service.*
- *Partnership will provide this church community with a mechanism for making decisions when required at a Church Meeting after prayerfully seeking the will of God. However, Partnership is not so much about committing to an organisation as it is about participation in a community.*

Ministry Forum Discussion Document for Churches

Is Church Membership an Outdated Phenomenon?

A number of our churches are taking a fresh look at what church membership means today. Increasingly we are seeing people who are very regular in attendance and actively involved in local church life, but who are very hesitant to 'join' the church as members.

This may be merely a reflection of society in general where 'membership' numbers of structured organisations are declining, but for others it is a resistance to what they see as the exclusivity of the church- ie.definitions of who is 'in' and who is not! There have been endless discussions about what members can and what non-members cannot do. It has given the impression of extra 'hoops' that have to be jumped through in order to be fully accepted as a part of the body of Christ. Often the unwritten, if not unspoken, sense is that the one real 'privilege' of being a church member is that someone is able to attend the church members meeting!

Having looked at this, the Ministry Forum would like to encourage your church to look at the following issues:

1. Is it possible to explore a better way of expressing commitment to the local church than membership? For example 'a fellowship covenant'.
2. Is there a better name than membership? For example –'partnership'? 'affiliation'?
3. Are our procedures for interviewing new members still appropriate? Does the appointing of visitors give an unhelpful sense of 'vetting' new members with the attendant possibility of rejection?
4. If we abolish the idea of membership, how do we protect the life and integrity of the local church? Who makes the decisions? Is it possible to not have a membership and still be a Baptist church?
5. Should only members be allowed to come to church meetings? Is there an argument for non-members attending but not voting?
6. Should baptism be inextricably linked to church membership? What is our theology of church membership? How does it relate to our theology of baptism and communion? How do these issues affect our understanding of the nature of the church?
7. What are the arguments for Associate church membership? Are they valid?
8. Should church membership be renewed annually, given the theological principle of Covenant?
9. Is there a way in which the concept of membership can be refreshed and renewed?

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