



bentley baptist
church

Fellowship and Membership in our Church Family

Bentley Baptist Church Inc.

Introduction

Membership and Fellowship in Churches is a subject that can cause confusion and mixed feelings amongst Christians.

This booklet aims to help clarify what is meant by local Church fellowship and membership in the Bentley Baptist Church. It is hoped that this explanation will be of help to those attending our Church who are considering becoming members, as well as serving as a guide for those who already are.

The scriptural background to Church membership

In Scripture we are told that at conversion all Christians are automatically included in the body of Christ, or as some call it - the Universal Church. When we personally accept Jesus Christ as our Saviour, the Holy Spirit comes to live in us and incorporates us into the Church. The 'Church' in this context is not just a local fellowship, it is the sum total of all believers around the world (1 Corinthians 12:12-13).

As well as the concept of the Universal Church, the New Testament also talks about the visible Church, which is expressed in local assemblies of believers. When he established his Church, Jesus did so on the foundation of the Apostles and Prophets, (Ephesians 2:19-22).

The concept of local Church membership is simply assumed in the New Testament where it was the expected norm for each Christian to identify with a local Church as their spiritual home. For example, throughout the New Testament we read of both believers and the local Church they belonged to (Philippians 1:1-2; Romans Chapter 16). The clear principle is that leaders and other members knew who belonged to their local Church family.

Organisation and structure is important for a Church to function properly and this was evident even in the New Testament Church. This included the need for some way of recognising who was a member of each local Church. For example, in 1 Timothy 5:9 a list was made of widows from the Church who met the requirements for receiving welfare.

Therefore, while we acknowledge that there are many Christians around the world who are part of the Universal Church, our local fellowship has a group of people who have committed themselves to membership of our Church. They have publicly done this as a means of serving God through our local body of believers and being cared for by God through our Church family.

The legal background to Church membership

Bentley Baptist Church is an incorporated association under the Western Australian Associations Incorporation Act 1987. This means that our Church is recognised as a distinct legal entity under the law rather than just a collection of individuals.

As an incorporated association, the Bentley Baptist Church has the powers of a body corporate with perpetual succession and a common seal; it can enter into contracts and acquire, hold and dispose of property; and members of the Church

are not personally liable to contribute towards the payment of debts or liabilities of the Church.¹

To comply with the requirements of the Incorporation Act, our Church is required to have a constitution that defines our aims and objectives, sets out our organisational structure, and defines some procedures for the smooth running of the Church.² We also have to keep adequate financial records and submit them to the members at an annual general meeting, and we have to maintain a register of members. So formal membership means becoming a part of the legal identity of the Bentley Baptist Church, and it is important that the membership roll should be an accurate reflection of the breadth and diversity of our fellowship.

What are the criteria for local Church membership?

When it comes to local Church membership, God has given us a basic set of principles in the Bible, but he has also left a degree of freedom for their application according to the needs and circumstances of each local Church. While respecting the fact that other local Churches may have different ways of determining who their members are, our Church family at Bentley believes that membership shall be open to all those who:

- (a) Profess repentance towards God and faith in our Lord Jesus Christ.
- (b) Have been baptised.
- (c) Accept our “Statement of Principles and Faith” as outlined in the constitution.

In Acts Chapter 2:37-47 the above pattern is clearly seen in the New Testament Church. The first criterion for local Church membership is that a member must profess to be a Christian. While God alone knows where a person really stands with Christ, we start with a person’s profession of faith. The fruit of their life will demonstrate the reality of that claim.

The second criterion is that believers are baptised after accepting the Lord Jesus Christ as Saviour. Whilst baptism doesn’t make us a Christian, it’s a scriptural command and an important step of obedience that all disciples are expected to take. This can be seen in that new believers were firstly baptised, after which they were recognised as members of the local Church in Jerusalem.

Just as Acts chapter 2:42 tells us that the disciples continued in the apostles’ teaching, the third criterion for Church membership is a willingness to abide by the statement of principles and faith that covers those fundamental teachings of the Christian faith. With doctrines that are not essential to salvation, to abide by the statement of faith and practice means to respect the doctrinal position of our Church and not to create disunity by actively promoting teachings to the contrary.

To follow Christ means a willingness to grow in our personal walk with the Lord in obedience to God’s Word. One of the many ways in which this is demonstrated, is in our commitment to our brothers and sisters as part of a local Church.

¹ More information about the meaning of being an incorporated association can be found at this website: http://www.ourcommunity.com.au/management/management_article.jsp?articleId=16

² The Pastor or the Church Council will give you a copy of the constitution if you don’t already have one.

Why should I become a member of a local Church?

The first reason is simply because this is the New Testament pattern which needs to be obeyed. Those who have not become a member of a local Church after a reasonable amount of time, should honestly come before the Lord and examine the reason why they haven't done so. For practical reasons, our membership should be in the Church we are currently attending.

As we identify with a local Church in this way, it helps the stability of our Christian life and is a safeguard to keep us balanced as we receive the pastoral support and guidance of the leaders and other members. This way we remain accountable to one another as we fulfil Ephesians 5:21 which says, "*Submit to one another out of reverence for Christ.*"

Becoming a Church member is a way of showing that we can be counted on as part of the Church family. It also enables us to use our spiritual gifts and talents, as well as enabling us to join in giving valuable input and the benefit of our experience in the direction and decisions of the Church.

Another way of describing Church membership is to call it a *partnership*, in which we not only receive the benefits and blessings of the Church, but we in turn seek to be a blessing to others through our commitment to the Church community. When people come into Church membership it is an encouragement to any Church and its leadership.

What are the responsibilities of members of our Church?

The following is a list of some of the responsibilities of a Church member:

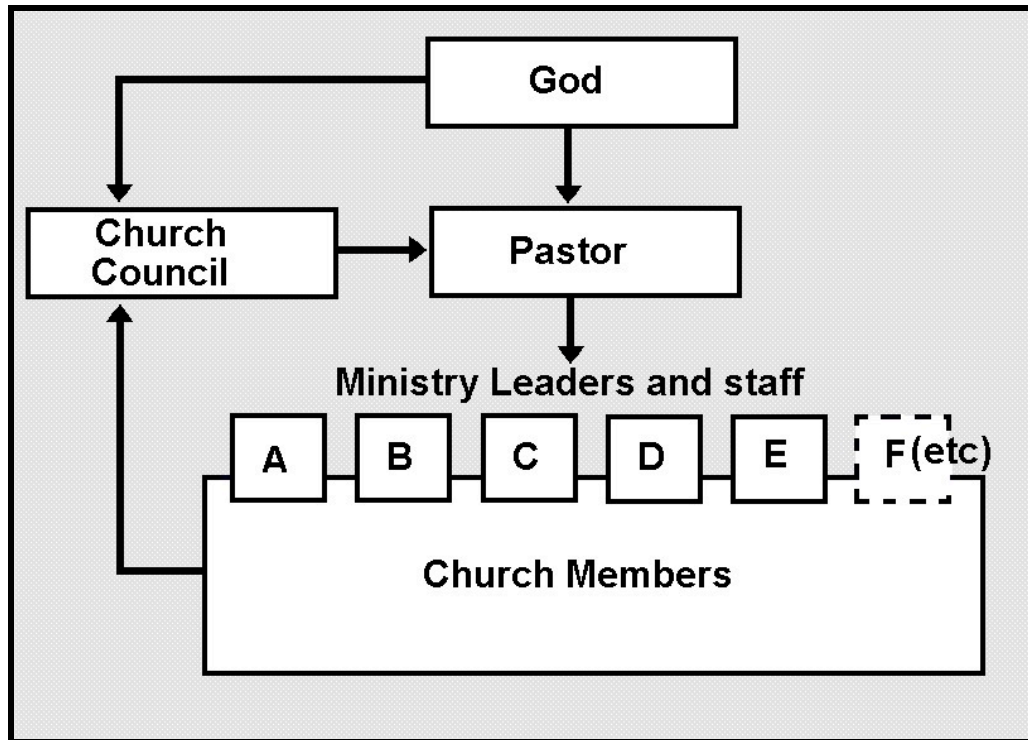
- **To participate in the worship of the Church** - where each member should seek to grow as a Christian and live a Holy life (See 1 Peter 2:1-2; Hebrews 5:11-6:3; 1 Peter 1:13-15).
- **To attend Church meetings** - Members should seek to support the various meetings and activities of the Church by their attendance and participation. This includes prayerful input into members meetings (See Acts 2:42-47; Hebrews 10:23-25).
- **To participate in the ministry of the Church** - All members should discover and develop their spiritual gifts and talents and use them to edify others in their local Church as well as the wider Church and in the community (See Romans 12:3-8; 1 Peter 4:10-11; 1 Corinthians 12:4-7).
- **To participate in the fellowship of the Church** - By meeting with others for prayer, bible study and mutual support. Members should obey Christ's command to love one another, forgive one another and seek to preserve the unity of the Church (See John 13:34-35; Ephesians 4:3, 32)
- **Financial Support** - Members are responsible for supporting the material and financial needs of the Church, its workers, and those who are in need. This support includes financial offerings, but also the giving of our time and energy to God's work (See 1 Corinthians 16:1-2; 1 Timothy 5:17-18; 1 John 3:17).

Our Church family recognises that the outworking of these Scriptural responsibilities will vary depending on the spiritual maturity and changing circumstances of individuals and their families. For this reason these factors are

taken into account and allowances are made. In some cases, however, it may become necessary for a Church leader to prayerfully come alongside and counsel those who are neglecting their responsibility as a Church member.

The organisational structure of Bentley Baptist Church

The structure and procedures for the management of our Church and its ministries are outlined in detail in our constitution, but the following diagram provides a simpler visual summary of how we are organised.



Leadership of the Church lies with the Pastor, who is appointed by the members to provide spiritual guidance and leadership for the Church. The Pastor is given authority to make day-to-day decisions on the running of the Church, as well as to appoint or dismiss Ministry Leaders and paid staff. However, the Pastor's authority to act on behalf of the Church comes ultimately from God, and it is through prayer and the counsel of the fellowship itself that the Pastor and Ministry Leaders act to advance the collective goals of the Church community.

The Church Council is a small group of leaders elected by the members to oversee the actions of the Pastor, and to support the Pastor in making important decisions in leadership of the Church. In practice, the Pastor and Church Council operate as a team to ensure that the Church operates responsibly and in accordance with the needs of the members. While the Pastor and, to some extent the Church Council, can make decisions about routine expenditure and day-to-day Church governance, significant issues such as the Church's overall direction; its areas of ministry focus; its membership register and matters of major financial expenditure are decisions that are made at meetings of the members. Members meetings are typically held three or four times a year and the most important of these is the Annual General Meeting which is held in August.

How do I become a Church member?

All those who attend our Church, whether newcomers or those who have attended for some time, are encouraged to earnestly pray and discuss the issue with others to see if this is the local Church God wants them to settle in.

When someone has indicated a desire to consider membership with us, our usual approach is to then offer them a copy of the Church constitution. This includes our statement of faith and details of how we operate. After allowing a reasonable period of time, the Pastor, or a representative of the Church Council will meet with them and discuss the issue of Church membership.

If a person believes that God is leading them to make Bentley Baptist Church their spiritual home and wishes to proceed toward membership the matter simply requires approval in a members meeting, provided that the criteria for membership have been met. It is also a custom in our Church to welcome new members of the Church at a Sunday morning service as an encouragement to all.

As to involvement in the various ministries of the Church, members are encouraged to seek the Lord as to where he would have them serve. Membership is not an essential requirement for serving in ministry - people may serve in a ministry area before they are received into membership, providing they have approval of the Church Council. Nor is membership an essential requirement for attendance at meetings, anyone in the fellowship is most welcome to attend and contribute to discussion at our various meetings, although only members can vote. A member is free to resign their membership at any time in writing to the Church Council. If the time comes for them to leave our Church, they are encouraged to become members of another Church.

It is hoped that this handout has been helpful and if you have any further questions on Church membership or any other matter, the Pastor or Church Council would be pleased to discuss them with you.
