

What is a Sample Constitution?

A sample constitution is just that - a sample - prepared for and offered by the Executive Council as a guide for member churches of the Baptist Union of Victoria to provide a sound reference point when they are seeking to write or revise a constitution. Churches will usually find it easier to start with a sample than start from scratch. It is not compulsory for any church to adopt the Sample Constitution.

While the Sample Constitution seeks to represent distinctively Baptist approaches to the governance of a church, it is also recognized that the use of constitutions is a relatively recent innovation in Baptist life. Some may argue that the very existence of constitutions already represents a compromise of Baptist ideals in which covenant relationships, rather than constitutions and rules, guide our life together.

Why does the BUV have a Sample Constitution?

There are three main reasons for the BUV providing a Sample Constitution.

The first is that churches requested it. The Union frequently receives requests for assistance in the process of writing or revising constitutions. Usually the request is for a good representative example or for a suggested way of wording a particular practice (in recent times many such requests have related to the subject of "open membership").

The second reason is that a Sample Constitution can serve a valuable educational role. Some of our churches, and especially newly planted churches, have many people who have little understanding of what is distinctive about Baptist traditions and practices. The Sample Constitution can be a useful tool in the formation process of groups seeking to grow into a truly Baptist identity. It can help them to understand both the breadth and the unity of Baptist ways of being the church.

The third reason is to encourage and assist the maintenance of genuinely Baptist distinctives in the life and ministry of our churches.

Who can use the Sample Constitution?

The short answer is anyone. The two most frequent contexts in which the Sample Constitution will be used are where a new church is forming and is seeking to prepare a first constitution, and where an existing church is seeking to revise its constitution. In either case the church is encouraged to seek the assistance of its Regional Minister or another Union Advisor.

How may the Sample Constitution be used by new churches?

New Baptist churches start in a number of ways: planted by existing churches, as new groups forming around Baptist mission workers, or as existing fellowships taking on a Baptist identity. Regardless of how a new church is formed, if it seeks membership of the BUV, its constitution must be approved by Executive Council. In such situations the Sample Constitution can be used by them both as an educational tool in forming their Baptist understandings and identity, and as a guide to the preparation of their Constitutions. Especially where it lacks a strong link to an existing church, it is wise for a new church to undertake these processes in consultation with Union representatives.

A new church choosing to adopt the Sample Constitution without amendment is unlikely to face constitutional questions from Executive Council. Variations from the Sample would be considered on their merits with the main criteria being their affinity with essential Baptist distinctives.

How may the Sample Constitution be used by existing churches?

A church which has been a member of the BUV for more than five years can revise or replace its constitution without needing the Union's authorisation. The Union would not raise objections unless the changes violate Baptist distinctives to such an extent that they would call into question the church's continuing membership of the Union.

While an existing church may simply adopt the Sample Constitution, churches are encouraged to use it as a guide, either for opening up topics for congregational discussion or for finding appropriate wording for sections of their own constitutions.

Why does the Sample Constitution contain options?

While our common heritage ensures that there are some features of church life that will be shared by all Baptists, there will also be areas in which we differ for practical or other reasons. Some areas of difference are now quite widespread and it is wise therefore to provide guidelines - in the form of sample wordings - for those churches wishing to follow these practices.

These optional sections are **highlighted** in the Sample Constitution. Churches may choose to include some of these options, or delete them all, without compromising the likely acceptance of their constitution by Executive Council.

What are the options and what do they mean?

Mission Statement:

Item 2.5 is a provision for those churches who wish to include a Mission Statement in their constitution. It is not essential to have a Mission Statement or to include it in the constitution, however many churches now do this and so provision is made for it.

If choosing to include a Mission Statement, the inclusion of a "review clause" such as Item 8.2 is imperative. This is one way in which a church can encourage itself to undertake regular reviews of the way it structures and governs its life.

The more local distinctives a church includes in its constitution, the more likely it is that the constitution will "date" and the more important such a "review clause" becomes.

Churches which are experiencing times of rapid change and churches with many local distinctives in their constitution may wish to recommend shorter review intervals. Churches experiencing great stability or with a more generic constitution may wish to have longer review intervals.

Open Membership:

Item 3.2.4 offers two alternative provisions for those churches wishing to accept into membership people who are unable in good conscience to be baptised after previously being initiated into the life of a church with a different baptismal practice. These provisions are offered for those churches that have decided on one of these practices and are looking for guidance on how to word it in a constitution.

3.2.4 Option 1 is for churches who wish to recognise the "baptised" status of such people as full members. Although not provided for in previous sample documents, this practice has persisted in Baptist churches for centuries. It is one of the diversities within our heritage.

3.2.4 Option 2 is for churches who wish to grant such people "associate membership", extending to them the privileges of membership but placing some restrictions on their participation in major decision making so as to emphasise the normative nature of our baptismal practice. The adoption of this option then requires Item 5.6.1 in order to clarify the nature of a quorum for a church meeting.

If you choose to not include either option, you are considered to have a "Closed Membership", where only those who have been baptised by full immersion can be members.

The Leadership Team:

4.3 simply indicates that where former sample documents spoke of "the Diaconate", there is now a wide range of terms in use to name church leadership teams.

Church Meetings:

5.6.1 is only relevant to churches that have included the optional paragraph 3.2.4 Option 2. It makes clear that the quorum for any church meeting dealing with matters affecting the doctrinal position of the church or its relationship to the Baptist Union or any of its constituents shall be one quarter of those members eligible to vote on such business, i.e. the presence of Associate Members do not count towards the quorum required.

Alterations to the Constitution:

8.2 is a clause recommending a review of the constitution after some period of time. This is a recognition that constitutions have tended to become more complex, assuming into themselves the roles formerly played by church rules and church covenants. The more complex and locally specific a constitution is, such as the inclusion of a Mission Statement in 2.5, the more valuable it becomes to suggest regular reviews of its ongoing applicability.

If you would like any assistance with writing or reviewing your Church Constitution, please contact the Administration Department of the Baptist Union of Victoria on 03 9880 6111.