

Introducing Covenantal Membership

A Part or Apart?

The meaning of Baptist Church membership

Two people were trudging along a road one day when a stranger joined them. The stranger could see they were in animated conversation and asked what it was all about. When they told him, he joined in—but within a very short time they discovered that he knew a lot more about what they were talking about than they did. He explained a lot of things to them, till eventually they came to see that in fact he had not joined them, but they were joining him. When they broke bread together, their eyes were opened: it was Jesus himself, risen from death, and they had become part of his movement, a new life with God. (Luke 24. 13 - 35)

What is 'membership' of a Baptist church? What does it mean? Why would anyone become a member?

1. It's all about being a Christian

If we start with talking about church membership, we've started in the wrong place. The New Testament tells us about the life and mission of Jesus and his movement. Jesus came alongside people and invited them to become followers. The key word used in the Gospels is disciples. They were followers of Jesus.

At the beginning of the Jesus stories, he announces the Good News: The Kingdom of God is here, right now: Turn around, think again, and trust yourself to this whole new reality. Let yourself be drawn into God's way and God's purpose, not just for your own life but for the whole world. (Mark 1:15, Matthew 4.18 - 22)

Being a Christian is not first of all about what we are doing: it's a response to what God is doing. Through Jesus, God invites people to become part of a new movement of love, justice, peace, healing and hope. Joining the Jesus movement brings forgiveness, healing in relationships and new direction for us all. Being a Christian means becoming part of what God is doing in the world, right now.

The two disciples who thought they were bringing Jesus into the conversation soon discovered that in fact he was gathering them into the community of the resurrection. Their lives were transformed by faith in the risen Jesus. There is a vital dynamic here: when we come to faith in Jesus, we discover that the real initiative is not with us. We are responding to what God has already done for us. We receive an invitation. We enter into the movement God started long before we even knew about it. That is why Jesus once said to his disciples, 'You did not choose me, but I chose you.' (John 15: 12 - 17) He went on to say that these disciples were to be his friends. He did not want them to be servants or slaves, but mature adults who act out of freedom and love: loving one another because he has loved them. This again is the character of the Jesus movement into which we are invited: maturity as human beings, loving and caring for one another.

All this comes about through our relationship with Jesus. When the Gospels tell the stories of Jesus calling the first disciples, two things are very clear. First, disciples are called to follow Jesus and to be with Jesus. Being a Christian is first and foremost a response to the call of Jesus and therefore a life with Jesus.

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But then it is also clear that there are no solo disciples. Everyone who is called to go with Jesus also goes with his mob: being a disciple is a shared experience, with other disciples. When various important or wealthy people invited Jesus to dinner at their homes, he didn't go alone. If you invite Jesus, you also invite the mob with him (whether you like them or not!).

Being a Christian is about following Jesus, because of his invitation and call. It means to join in his movement and to follow his way of love and care, for each other.

2. It's about being part of the body of Christ today

Another central New Testament idea is the Apostle Paul's metaphor of 'the body of Christ'. This idea is used to speak about the life of Christians. The image came from a society where a 'body' of people meant a group of people who came together for some purpose. But Paul adapted this idea by adding the word 'of Christ'. The key point here is that this body belongs to Jesus Christ. It is his body.

So what does this mean? First of all, the idea of a body means something in the real world, in space and time. It's not immaterial: it is real people, like you and me.

But this body has a unique quality: it belongs to and is created by Jesus. He is its source and those who are part of it belong to it because they have been 'incorporated' into it, Paul said. We do not do this for ourselves: this joining into the body is the work of the Holy Spirit, and Paul suggested it happens through baptism. We are made part of the body of Christ because his Spirit wants us to be. We become part of his life in the world: and that means for us a new life, 'a new creation'. (Romans 6:3- 1; 2 Corinthians 5:16&17).

Paul went on in several places to describe this body in terms of its many parts (Romans 12: 3-8; 1 Corinthians 12: 2-31). He used the metaphor of our bodies, with many parts each having valuable functions. Some parts we might think are more important than others, but actually we need all the parts, and there is no use pretending that we don't need them. So it is in the body of Christ. We are parts of the body and we need the other parts of the body, so that together we can live the way Jesus calls us to live and serve his mission and purpose to bring hope and salvation to the world.

The body life has the capacity to grow towards maturity in Christ (Ephesians 4: 7-16). This, too, is something for the whole body, Paul explains. But that only happens as each part of the body is responsive to the Spirit, the life of Jesus with us and among us.

So once again the basic idea is that Jesus has created a community of people, called to be part of his life, journeying with him and participating in his mission in the world.

3. The community of disciples is the body of Christ, and that's what it means to be 'the church'

A church is made up of disciples, people who have heard the invitation of Jesus to become part of his community and to journey with him. The church is part of the mission and life of God in the world. To become part of the church is to become part of this life with God, through Jesus and his Spirit.

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Membership in a church is about being a Christian. It is about being a part of the Jesus community. It is about partnership in this life with Jesus, because of his call and invitation. It is a response of faith: trusting ourselves to him, believing his good news and obeying his word. It is about loving and caring for one another in his community, using the gifts and capacities we have. It is about participating in the life of God, within us and among us. What better thing could we be doing with our lives?

In Baptist Churches there are three basic ways that people 'become' members. These are all forms of response to the call and invitation of Jesus:

- Many churches have constitutional forms of membership, often based on a requirement of baptism. This is based on the New Testament idea that believers in Jesus become immersed in his life, and incorporated into his body by the power of the Spirit—the same Spirit who raised Jesus from death also brings us into a new body, to be part of the body of Christ. In this model, the church meeting affirms that God has done this in a person's life, and welcomes the new part of the body.

For some people, the danger of this model is that it seems to emphasize the formal or constitutional aspects of the local church organization rather than personal discipleship. Membership may be reduced to complying with a list of requirements in order to obtain constitutional rights. As a result, the relational and participatory dynamics are diminished.

- A second model involves the leadership or eldership of a local church discerning who among the people attending should be affirmed as truly committed disciples or partners in the mission of the church. Usually people who wish to be recognized in this way will apply to the leadership for this affirmation.

One danger in this approach is that the whole body of members does not have a direct role in discerning and receiving new members, reducing the sense of Membership entailing relationship with one another.

- Some Baptist churches have adopted an old practice of 'covenant membership'. This involves a form of promise, made together, and usually renewed each year. The covenant is a commitment to active discipleship, and will often specify particular responsibilities for those who make this pledge to God and each other. Here, membership has a strong focus on discipleship.

One danger in this model is that it can place the stress on what we are doing for God and our activities, as if we 'create' the church and its mission by our own efforts and commitment. Such covenants should include celebration of God's primary role in forming the church.

What is common to all these models is the idea of partnership. Each of them is based on the idea that to be a Christian is to be a part of the community of faith, itself a part of God's life and mission in the world. Without dismissing the first two models, we believe that Covenantal Membership best expresses the partnership and participation that are central to the Church in the New Testament.

Is Covenantal Membership “Baptist”?

While Covenantal Membership may appear to be novel to those Baptists who are more familiar with constitutional forms, it is actually a return to the roots of the Baptist movement. For example, in 1607 the Baptist pioneer, John Smyth¹, defined ‘a visible community of saints’ as “two, three or more saints joined together by covenant with God and themselves...for their mutual edification and for God’s glory”. The idea of church membership as entering into a covenant with other believers and with God was very common among Baptists across many of our formative years.

Covenants and Constitutions

All churches within the Baptist Union of Victoria have constitutions, but they are much more than constituted legal entities. They are communities of faith, fellowship and mission, consisting of people living out relationship with God, one another and their neighbours. Constitutions are simply formal statements of how these communities have agreed to function. Even perhaps the most formal Baptist Union of Victoria document, *The Baptist Union Incorporation Act 1930*, in its Principles and Ideals of the Baptist Faith (“Schedule A”), recognises the primacy of relationship with God and one another:

- “Baptists hold that the Church, as established by the Lord Jesus Christ, should consist of persons who have personally and intelligently accepted Him as Saviour and Lord, and pledged themselves in discipleship and service in the Kingdom of God.”
- “In adopting the Congregational Principles of Church government, with no formal creed, with no external authority, and no defined ecclesiastical polity, and each member having equal rights and responsibilities the Baptist Church is largely dependent on the reality and vigour of the spiritual life of its individual members.”
- “To Baptists the Church is not so much an organization as a fellowship, effective only as there is spiritual association with the Head of the Church.”
- “Baptists recognize their responsibility to strive for the establishment of the Kingdom of God in the world, and teach that membership in the Church implies service and sacrifice. This involves a stewardship of time, talents, and money, worthy of the Son of God who loved and served mankind, even unto death.”

The inclusion of such expressions of relationship, commitment and covenant in our BUV’s incorporating document demonstrates that it is possible to give Covenantal Membership constitutional form. To give effect to this in a local church, the following could be added as an option to Section 4 of the BUV’s Sample Constitution:

- 4.1 The membership of the church consists of those who have signed the Members’ Covenant within the past twelve months.
 - 4.1.1 Signing the Covenant constitutes profession of personal faith in Jesus Christ as Saviour and Lord and is a pledge to discipleship and service in the Kingdom of God as part of (insert name of church).
- 4.2. A person who signs the Members’ Covenant for the first time must participate in appropriate membership preparation, as determined by the church, and be acknowledged at a public gathering of the church.

¹John Smyth, *Principles and Inferences Concerning the Visible Church*, 1607.

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4.3 Commitment to the Covenant must be reaffirmed by signing annually or membership will lapse.

4.4 A list will be kept of the members of the church.

4.4.1 In addition to 4.3, a name may be removed from this list if the member:

- * becomes a member of another church;
- * requests removal from the list;
- * dies; or
- * has their membership revoked by a decision of a church meeting in response to a serious breach of the Covenant. Two weeks' notice of the date and purpose of that meeting must be given to the member concerned.

Forming a Members' Covenant

A Covenant is more than compliance with an externally determined set of rules or responsibilities. Covenants are expressions of relationship, commitment to one another. Therefore it is preferable for each church to decide together the commitments members will make to God and one another. Participation in developing the Covenant will strengthen the sense of ownership, mutuality and commitment among the covenantors. To ensure that the Covenant remains a living document, relevant to the church's missional context and reflecting its current beliefs and values, it is recommended that it be reviewed at least every three years. This could be done in conjunction with a review of the church's vision and mission.

While each church should draft its own Covenant, the theological reflection above would encourage the inclusion of commitments to:

- Jesus Christ expressed through faith and baptism (1Cor.12:13); *(Note: Churches may reflect their position on "open" vs "closed" membership in their covenant.)*
- ongoing growth in discipleship (Phil.3:12-14);
- private and corporate prayer and worship (Heb. 10:25);
- Christlike love and holiness (Jn.13:34-35; Col.3:1-17);
- one another as "fellow body" in Christ (Eph.3:6; Rom.12:10);
- participation in discerning together the mind of Christ (1Cor.2:16);
- using spiritual gifts to build up the body of Christ (Eph.4:16; 1Cor.12:7);
- participation in the mission of God (2Cor 5:20);
- sharing material resources to support the life and mission of the church (Acts 2:44-45; 2Cor. 9:10-14).

Members should renew their covenantal commitment annually to ensure it remains current through the changing seasons and circumstances of life. This reinforces the understanding that Membership is not primarily a right to vote, but a responsible vocation to be lived out and developed on an ongoing basis.

Covenant renewal could take a significant place in the church's calendar. A single worship service or series of services could be devoted to highlighting the church's vision, values and mission.

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People would then be invited to commit to participating in this over the coming year by signing the Covenant. The Covenant could be discussed within small groups. It could be framed as a corporate prayer or responsive reading and included in worship services from time to time. This strengthens Members' experience of the Covenant as something they share and participate in rather than just a document they have signed as a formality.

Members should hold one another accountable for living out the covenant, helping one another to go on growing in faith and love (Heb 10:24; Gal.6:1). This includes providing accountability for breaches of the Covenant. Such accountability should occur in a spirit of Christian love, with an emphasis on grace and justice, providing opportunities for people to find a godly and appropriate pathway to see their issues and concerns addressed.

To assist churches in drafting their covenant, a selection of sample covenants is provided. (APPENDIX)

Our BUV's Church Health and Capacity Building Team is available to support churches wishing to explore and/or introduce covenantal Membership.

Rev. Dr Frank Rees
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COVENANT

As followers of Jesus Christ, we join ourselves to Seymour Baptist for
2017

We commit ourselves to these church practices:

1. Gather regularly as a church to worship together and encourage each other
2. Be engaged in support of the church with our time, money and cheerful, dependable service
3. Listen and pray together to discern God's leading for our church, and support our leaders as we seek to move forward
4. Embrace all people, showing unconditional welcome and generous hospitality
5. Look out for one another, with care and courage

I also commit myself personally to:

1. Grow in maturity, wisdom and holiness
2. Practise justice and kindness in all my daily relationships
3. Let truth, peace and love always guide my speaking
4. Share in Christ's mission. This means I will:
 - Share the good news of God's love for the world in Jesus and my journey of faith,
 - Seek to build the communities in which I live by my life, my involvement and my prayers
 - Grow as a disciple and encourage others, by baptism and maturing in the journey of faith, to become wholehearted disciples

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Partnership and our Covenant

New Community Covenant

By partnering with God's Church New Community, I agree and commit to the following:

That as a Christian and follower of Jesus:

I desire to live a life that honours God by modelling myself after his son Jesus through reliance upon the Spirit's empowering, and embracing a way of life that seeks to make him known

I desire to live a life that reveals the kingdom of heaven here on earth, and in so doing be part of a growing community of vibrant Jesus followers who are visibly impacting their spheres, shaping their city and serving their world.

I desire to build for God's kingdom in the everyday activity of my life through:

- Prayerfully pledging allegiance to him above all other kingdoms and powers
- Visible expression of my faith in daily life
- Humbling myself by serving others
- Mourning over that which is wrong in our world and seeking to put it right
- Hungering for what is right and good and choosing to walk that path
- Mercy giving without strings attached
- Peacemaking rather than repaying evil with evil
- Filling myself up with things that make for a pure mind

I embrace the value of **Relationship** and commit to reaching out to those who do not know Jesus

- By intentionally developing friendships with those who don't know Jesus
- By fostering a deepening love relationship with God

I embrace the value of **Belonging** and commit to drawing others in to my life and New Community

- By sharing meals and making people a priority
- By regular participation at Sunday@10 and other community events like baptisms, Sun@6 etc.
- By upholding the unity amongst our community at all times

I embrace the value of **Empowering** and commit to building up others

- By practically serving at Sunday@10 and NCR ministries
- By using my Spirit given gifts to encourage and grow God's church