

FALKIRK BAPTIST CHURCH (FBC)

A GUIDE TO CHURCH MEMBERSHIP

FBC bases its faith and doctrine on the scriptures contained in the Christian Bible which it holds to be the inspired word of God. It commits itself to believe in its contents and to regulate its life in accordance with the truth expressed in 2 Tim. 3:16-17.

Welcome to Church Membership

We're delighted you are entering into church membership with us here at Falkirk Baptist Church (FBC). This membership guide seeks to introduce you both to the life and ethos of the church and to reflect on why we consider local church membership to be of vital importance. The church is congregational in its form of church government and is in membership with the Baptist Union of Scotland (BUS).

Some Church History

What is distinctive about a Baptist Church?

The first Baptist Church in the UK was planted in 1609. Baptist churches began to be planted in Scotland through the witness of some of Cromwell's soldiers in the 1650's but then disappeared again until the middle of the 18th century. Falkirk Baptist Church was founded in 1807/8.

Many people think that a Baptist Church is distinctive simply by its mode of baptism: believer's baptism, usually by full water immersion. But there is much more to it than that. At the heart of our Baptist identity are some critical and shaping *values*. There are five which are central. None are unique to Baptists; it is rather the convergence of all five that leaves us distinctive.

Distinctive Baptist Values Shared by all Baptists

- 1. The value of a community where all are committed to sharing a journey to Jesus and with Jesus.** This is the vision of a truly *believers' church*, a visible community of those who genuinely seek to know Jesus Christ and follow Him.
- 2. The value of every member of the congregation being regarded as spiritually equal.** Baptist church doctrine is radically and rigorously *congregational*. Every member of the congregation matters. They do have elders, deacons, pastors but at the very heart of church life is a common bond and a profound *mutuality* and so any hint of a clergy/laity divide is shunned.
- 3. The value of Jesus as our Example as well as Saviour.** At the very heart of Baptist spirituality is a passionate commitment not only to trust in Christ's death and resurrection for our salvation but also to imitate *Christ's life* for our direction. It's the call to a discipleship.
- 4. The value of being free from the dictates of the state and the lure of power.** Baptist vision is to take seriously the New Testament declaration, 'Jesus is Lord.' It is a profoundly political and subversive statement and in it Baptists are declaring our allegiance to a different King.

5. The value of an openness to, and interdependence with, other congregations. The New Testament points unmistakably to the ability of each congregation to discern the mind of Christ but *never concludes* from that reality that each local church is therefore totally self-sufficient. Thus baptist churches operate with an openness of each congregation to receiving support, encouragement and accountability from other churches.

Distinctive Vision and Values of FBC¹

F: Following Jesus: A disciple-making church where all people of all ages come to know Jesus Christ, grow in that knowledge through the different aspects of discipleship: prayer, study of God's Word, Worship, good stewardship, and letting the Spirit lead.

B: Being Family: To be a nurturing community that cares for and protects new believers and helps them grow in their faith; to be an authentic community that demonstrates God's love in abundance; and a lively, welcoming and inviting church community where sinners saved by grace know they are part of God's wider family.

C: Community Reaching: Partnering with others to develop opportunities to reach out and share the gospel in local, national and international parts of the world.

Why Church Membership is Important

Some people wonder 'Where do we find local church membership in the New Testament?' A supplementary question is 'why does it need to be something formal'?

The answers to these questions are three-fold:

1. The Biblical Concept of Covenant: Throughout the Bible God has graciously made a number of covenants with humanity, especially with his people. In all covenants with God's people there is both the primary *vertical* dimension (God takes the initiative to invite us into a relationship with him by his grace and requiring our response of faith and obedience) and also a *horizontal* dimension which means that God's New Covenant People are called to reflect the love and justice of God in all relationships and the same is true for today. This is shown in the New Testament by the 'one another' passages ('love one another', 'forgive one another', 'bear one another's burdens'...) all with a strong sense of communicating our commitment to each other as part of our covenant commitment. We believe a public commitment to church membership expresses this strong covenantal nature of being the people of God.

2. Discerning the Mind of Christ Together as a Whole Congregation: As stated above we are committed to congregational government. For us, this happens as we gather for church meetings at least twice per year. To safeguard such communal discernment, we invite active members of the congregation to commit themselves to membership as a sign that they are willing to *share the responsibility for the future of the church*. Non-members can attend & observe church meetings but only members can participate and vote.

3. Church Membership Signifies Permission for Loving Support and Accountability. In a culture that is characterised by radical individualism, publicly committing to the church is

¹ See the enclosed vision statement for a fuller description.

a way of expressing a counter-cultural desire to submit to the watchfulness of God's people. This needs to be done with great care and with a recognition that we are all broken people (Gal 6:1).

What Does Church Membership Involve?

Like any committed relationship there are benefits and responsibilities both ways in church membership.

The church is God's project and has many different facets (1 Cor 12:1-11; Gal 6:10; 2 Cor 2:5-8; Eph 2:14-18, 21-22). Membership is the church's way of humbly expressing a commitment to nourish you through God's Word, to encourage you, pastorally support you and pray for you. This is what you should expect.

As there is a mutuality to this commitment by the church there are expectations of a church member including:

1. Living a Life of Christian Discipleship and Growth in the Christian Faith: Applicants for membership should be confessing Christians and should be accepted upon satisfying the church of their faith in the Lord Jesus Christ. If there are any cases of private offence between members it is incumbent to follow the procedure outlined in Matthew 18:15-17. In any cases of open backsliding, doctrinal error, consciously-chosen lifestyle choices (sexual and otherwise) which are inconsistent with biblical parameters, it is the duty of FBC through its leaders to exercise loving and spiritual discipline (2 Thess. 3:6, 14-15; Tit 3:10-11) in the hope of the person returning to a Biblical-Christian life.

2. Active in the Life of the Church: We expect members to be actively involved in the life of the church by attendance on a Sunday, participation in twice-monthly communion and, where possible, attend a growth group. We also look for involvement in the numerous prayer life expressions of the church.

3. Be Committed to the Church Community and its Mission: To maintain the spirit of christian love and unity. To share in the fulfilment of the Lord's Great Commission in Matt 28:19-20.

4. Using Gifts in the Church: We long to see every member using their God-given talents to serve the church and the wider community.

5. Involvement in Church Decision Making: We look to members to play their part in the key decisions of the church by coming to the church meetings. These are important times where together we seek to hear God for our future. It is good practice to send apologies if you are not able to attend.

6. Being Financially Generous: We expect church members to give sacrificially and generously in support of the church's many ministries (2 Corinthians 8:1-7.) One of the characteristics (and strong points) of a Baptist church is that we have no external or denominational financial support. If you are a U.K. taxpayer, we would strongly encourage covenant giving (so there can be tax benefit to the church) and you can talk to the treasurer about this.

Often Asked Questions

Q1. Is it possible to be a church member without believer's baptism? FBC is an *open membership church*, which means that we welcome into full membership those who have been baptised as infants, as well as baptised as believers by full immersion. We do respect that others do not agree with our interpretation of the New Testament and so seek to honour different baptism routes others have taken in their faith journey. Obviously, as a baptist church we only practise believer's baptism and while not holding this to be a pre-requisite to membership, we do believe that it is the appropriate and biblical *expression* of membership and so we will always actively encourage members or non-members to consider believer's baptism. The church would have a significant problem welcoming into membership those who have no form of baptism.

Q2. What happens to my membership if I leave Falkirk or FBC? Your membership will be retained with us until you find a new church and ask for a transfer. If there is a long delay (approx. 6 months) we would write and enquire pastorally about your circumstances. We will remove you from membership if you reply and give permission for us to do this. Due to new data protection legislation we will have to remove you from membership if we do not receive any reply to our correspondence.

Q3: What happens if I slowly decrease my commitment and obligations as a member of FBC over a period of time? Should members fail to fulfil their obligations over an extended period of time they shall, where reasonably practicable, be visited by appointees of the church leadership with a view to reviewing and hopefully re-engaging their membership. If unsuccessful, new data protection legislation means that the leaders will recommend to the church meeting the removal of such persons from the church's membership.

Official Technicalities Regarding Church Membership

1. All matters private to the church shall be treated by members as strictly confidential.
2. A copy of the constitution shall be given to every member and all accepted applicants for membership will be expected to familiarize themselves with its terms.
3. *Liability of Members:* The members of the church have no liability to pay any sums to help meet the debts (or other liabilities) of the church if it is wound up accordingly. If the church is unable to meet its debts, the members will not be held responsible.

How to Proceed with Church Membership

Step One: Indicate Your Interest in Becoming a Member of FBC

As indicated in the weekly diary, please approach either the pastor, the elders, or church secretary and indicate your willingness to explore possible membership of FBC.

Step Two: Receive a Membership Guide and Read it

Either the pastor or church secretary will give you a copy of the membership guide. Read it and ask the pastor, elders or church secretary if you have questions that need answered.

If you are happy with the above (and we hope you are) then indicate to us that you're willing to become an applicant for membership. Applicants will be interviewed by two church leaders (any combination of the pastor, elders or deacons) as formed under the direction of the church leadership.

Step Three: Interview.

The aim of the interview is primarily to get to know you and to allow you to ask any questions about the life, leadership and vision of the church. During the course of the conversation you will be asked about:

- How you came to faith in Christ as Saviour and Lord.
- Whether you have been baptised as a believer (and if not, what is your view on believer's baptism?).
- What your previous church experience has been.
- What church ministry you feel drawn to.

If there are any issues that occur this is the time they can be talked through.

Step Four: Leadership and Church Meeting

Following the interview your application will be reported back to the church leadership and, if positive, then brought to the church members (as part of a church meeting). A brief report of the conversation will be given (around those five bullet points above) and a recommendation for church membership will be voted on. If you are at the meeting, then it is good practice for you not to be in the meeting at this point.

Step Five: Public Welcome into the Church

This will happen at the nearest possible church service, where you will be invited to the front. Three questions will be asked and then you will receive the 'right hand of fellowship' and be prayed for.

The *three questions* are:

1. Do you believe in One God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit and do you confess your faith in Jesus Christ as Saviour and Lord.
2. Do you commit yourself to worship and to serve within this church and do you believe God has brought you here to grow in Christ, to help others grow and to witness for Him
3. The congregation will then be asked "Do you welcome (full name) into this local family of God and do you promise to support, encourage and pray for (first name) as partners together in the Gospel and in this church?"

We look forward to your joining us in what God is doing!