Membership – time for a change?

towards a covenantal understanding of belonging in the local church

Introduction

"So let me get this straight;", Lyndsay, who had recently come to faith, repeated back to me what she thought she'd heard me say when I had attempted to answer her question about how she could become more involved in the life of the church,

> *"…*you send a couple of your leaders to my house to interview me, write a report *about me and then present it to 'the others' at that secret meeting I'm not allowed to go to. Then 'they all' vote on whether I'm allowed to join or not and if it's a 'Yes',* you give me some *'special'* handshake at that service where we pretend to drink *blood… I'm sure I've heard of this sort of thing somewhere before!"*

It turned out that Lyndsay's Mum had been a Catholic and her Dad, a Grand Master of the Freemasons lodge. Lyndsay's comment was simply on process rather than on the theological understanding of belonging to a local church but it added to my growing concerns as a Baptist Minister that our inherited systems of church membership might at least need to be reviewed.

It had started with the recognition that membership lists were often badly kept in the churches to which I had belonged, both as a member and as a Minister. I had observed that many baptised disciples of Jesus had become actively involved in the life of Baptist churches only to discover months or years later that they were not actually church 'members', whilst others who were apparently 'voting' members were no longer an active part of the church community at all. Still others had been left wondering what difference 'becoming a member' of a church would make to them or to others when they were already actively serving God and the local church. Frankly, the incentive of being able to attend Member's Meetings to spiritually discern the colour of the next sanctuary carpet or whether the bold step should be taken to phase in the use of fresh milk instead of UHT for after-service refreshments over the next six months, with a 'half way review', was apparently not enough to persuade many who had become a part of the church community to consider committing themselves to the life of the church in this way.

After considering whether I was a Baptist at all to have had such thoughts(!), I became aware that the source on my unease about our inherited system of church membership was that it had become so sufficiently detached from its theological and ecclesial roots as to make it unfit for purpose. I became convinced, even before Lyndsay's insight, that process-change was required but it was much more than that. There was a need to re-discover what it looks like to belong to a gathered community of believers and to build this, first and foremost, on relationship and discipleship rather than viewing membership as merely as an institutional 'means-to-an-end' for congregational church government.

As I began to read again the story of how Baptists related to each other originally, I found that I was feeling more and more baptistic with the turn of every page. I became increasingly convinced that at the core of our heritage is a conviction about belonging that speaks as radically to us in today's church as it did to our seventeenth century forebears… if only we would listen. I am not an 'angry man' on this issue - I remain unconvinced that a change of membership system will unlock the gates of Glory and bring revival to our land – but I do think it is our duty in every generation to ask questions of that which we have

inherited and to engage afresh with the issues that arise, recognising that together we have "liberty, under the guidance of the Holy Spirit, to interpret and administer [Christ's] laws."[1] In that light, I offer the following to you for your prayerful consideration, debate and insight.

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.[2] 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 community[3] – 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] The Baptist Union of Great Britain's 'Declaration of Principle' is considered in the booklet 'Something to Declare', available to download here, http://www.baptist.org.uk/Articles/366068/Something_to_Declare.aspx
[2] Wright, N.G., *Baptist Basics: Church Membership* (Didcot: BUGB, 2009)
[3] 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.[4] 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.

[4] 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 – a proposal

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 communities. 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 our churches 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.[5] 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;

[5] I would envisage that this course will be overseen directly by the Minister or Elders and would include elements of basic doctrine, Baptist history, the specific ways in which Baptist churches operate, the 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, worship and life 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 this community**
  (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.[6]

- ***I commit to God's mission in the world***
  (Spoken prayerfully to God)
  Recognising your generous blessing in my life,
  I commit to blessing those beyond this local community
  as they seek to share Your love with others.
  Within this family of churches and beyond,

  I will support Your mission in the world.

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

This is a discussion document. The above proposal is designed to provoke a conversation about the nature of belonging to the Church of Christ within a baptistic setting. As such, I would very much welcome your thoughts, analysis and suggests as we seek together to discover ways of belonging that encourage the ongoing discipleship of those in our churches.

Carl Smethurst (Regional Minister – Mission, SWBA)

Spring 2017

carl@swbaptists.org.uk

[6] Based on the covenant liturgy first produced by 'Church from Scratch'.