

what's the church and should I join it?



the baptist church
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If you've been coming to our church for a while, you'll know it's a place where we sing songs, pray and listen to talks. As part of our time together we drink tea and coffee so we can talk about what we've been doing. Sometimes we all have lunch together. You might even have been invited to a home group, where a small number from church gather in someone's house to read the Bible and pray together.

But why do we do this? And if I do all this already, in what sense do I still need to 'become a member' of the church?

In the New Testament people generally met and got to know Jesus in groups. So the pictures used to describe church are drawn from this world of relationships. It followed on from Jesus' practice of calling a group of friends together – his disciples – people from all walks of life who travelled with him, ate with him and shared his ministry.

The point of gathering together in groups was so that followers of Jesus could support one another, learn about their faith, share their problems, pray together and remember Jesus as they told and retold the story of his life, death and resurrection. They especially remembered this when they shared bread and wine together.

The apostle Paul's favourite picture of the church is that of a family or household. He got this from Jesus, who said that God is our Father and we are all brothers and sisters.

Jesus expanded this in a particularly interesting way just after he'd had a conversation with a rich man who wanted to join his movement. Jesus told him to sell what he had and share it with the poor. The man went away sad because that wasn't what he was expecting. The disciples were shocked and said they'd left everything to follow Jesus. His reply is a fascinating insight into how he understood church (read it in Mark 10:28-30).

From this Paul understood that the church was a group of people who loved each other as a family should. We see this in his greetings at the end of Romans (read

16:1-16 and note all the words drawn from family life) and his teaching on how we should treat each other in Colossians 3:5-17.

We join this family when we decide to follow Jesus, a decision marked by baptism (Romans 6:1-12; 1 Corinthians 12:12-13). It's what happened on the first Christian Pentecost when those who responded to Peter's message about forgiveness and new life through Jesus were baptised and joined the group of believers meeting in the temple and homes around Jerusalem (Acts 2:37-47).

The picture of church that emerges from all this is that it's a place where people who want to follow Jesus get to-gether to learn about him, pray with and for one another and provide all the practical help and support we need to live as Christians in the world.

So, what does this have to do with membership? Simply this. Membership is the way Baptists have fleshed out this understanding of what church is. By becoming a member, you're saying that you want to be a follower of Jesus in this town and would like this church's help in learning about your faith and living as a Christian in your school or workplace, family and community. You're also saying that you'd like to help others to do this.

In the New Testament there are countless places where the writers say we do things 'for one another'. For example, Jesus says his friends should love one another (John 13:34-35). John fleshes this out in his first letter (1 John 3:11-24). Paul says we should teach one another (Colossians 3:16), forgive one another (Ephesians 4:32) because we are members with one another (4:25), that we should encourage, build up and be kind to one another (1 Thessalonians 5:11-15).

This is best done in a relationship freely entered into where we each commit to travelling together in this journey of faith, helping and supporting one another along the way. That's what membership is. Becoming a member means you are committing yourself to this particular group of Christians. It means that you'll draw support from us and you'll use the gifts God has given you to build up the life of

the church here. It means you'll play your part in organising the activities of the church and helping to provide the resources to ensure the church can fulfil its calling (see the leaflet *giving to the church*).

At Bromley Baptist we express all this through a church covenant that people wanting to join us are asked to agree to (the covenant along with our ethos and values statement is available in the leaflet *covenant & membership*).

The covenant expresses our individual desire to walk as a follower of Jesus in company with others similarly committed to this life at Bromley Baptist Church. It means that by affirming the covenant, we agree to be accountable to one another for the way we live as followers of Jesus. We encourage people to make this part of the conversation we have with each other over refreshments that take place in the middle or at the end of our gatherings.

There is no rule about being baptised to be a member – though we do insist that trustees (our church leaders) are baptised as believers – but our 'ethos and values' statement strongly urges everyone in membership with us to consider baptism as part of being a disciple of Jesus (see the leaflet *considering baptism*).

At least four times a year we get together over lunch for a 'church family meeting' to talk about the life of the church and are keen that everyone travelling with us joins us for that, so that everyone has a voice in what we are doing as a church fellowship.

By becoming a member you're simply saying, count me in to what God's doing here. We'd love to have you. What do you think?



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