

# Talking about Church membership?

We pick up a conversation somewhere near the beginning. The small talk is over, and the question of 'joining the Church' has been raised. The person responding to the questions would probably be a minister, but it might be an elder or a thoughtful Church member. The person asking the questions might, perhaps be you!

## **Do I need to 'join' the Church and 'become a member' of it?**

Yes! The Church is more than a place you go to for worship or friendship. The Church is made up of people who are committed to following Jesus Christ. Everyone who is a Christian belongs in a special sense. Because they each belong to Christ they all belong to one another. Not only do you need to join the Church, the Church needs you.

## **What do you mean by the Church?**

The Church is the 'people of God', linked not by family relationships, but by relationship with Jesus Christ as 'one body in him'. Some belong to Christ's new community from birth because they are brought up within it. Some come into the community at a later age by deliberate choice. All remain within the community of the people of God because they acknowledge Jesus Christ as their Saviour and Lord.

## **What do you mean by membership?**

Members of the Church have made a public commitment to accept Jesus Christ as their Lord and Saviour and serve within his Church. They have made promises to God and to each other. Together they are open to the demands Jesus will make on them through other people. Together they receive and share forgiveness and power.

## **Do I need to be baptised?**

Baptism is a sign of being in Christ, part of 'the body', 'built into' the Church. It sets out for a particular person at a particular time all that God accomplishes in Christ for all people and all time. In baptism we are buried and raised with Christ; giving up the old and beginning the new life. So baptism is not just about formal membership but also about your relationship with Jesus Christ. In the United Reformed Church we have two alternative forms of baptism, of infants and of believers. We expect Christians to be baptised only once.

## **What do you mean by infant baptism?**

When an infant is baptised, usually by sprinkling or pouring with water, the parents promise to bring up their children within the Christian community and faith. Later, when the children can take personal responsibility, and if they so decide they will make their own promises in a solemn act of commitment to Jesus Christ and his Church.

## **What do you mean by believer's baptism?**

When a believer is baptised, usually by immersion in water, the individual makes a personal commitment to Jesus Christ and his Church. Some people come to this point having grown up in the fellowship of the Church without being baptised as infants, because their parents believed it right to associate baptism with personal commitment. Other people will come to this point without having experienced the church or infant baptism, but now hearing the call of Christ.

## **What if I am already a member of another church?**

Your local church can arrange to receive you by transfer if you are baptised and a communicant member of another church, whether URC or not. Should you move to another area similar arrangements can be made with a local church there.

## **What difference does 'being a member' make?**

The Christian life is all about receiving to give. The Church is the community which celebrates the Lord's Supper in remembrance of his death for us, as a sign of his coming Kingdom and as an expression of solidarity with Christ and with all believers. The members of the church have the privilege and duty to share in that act. They also share a commitment to witness to the Gospel and serve in the community where the church is set. Not to join with fellow members for these purposes is to hold something back in your commitment to Christ and to receive less from him.

## **Do I have to go to church meeting?**

All the most important issues in the life of the local church are brought to the church meeting for consideration and decision. Some will be about worship, or mission, or buildings; some a matter of purely local interest, some where the opinion of the local church is sought in shaping a national policy of the United Reformed Church. It is not so much a question of democratic procedures as bringing together as many members as possible to seek the mind of Christ in the decisions that need to be taken. Members should be there to assist in shaping the pattern of the church's work and witness.

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### **What responsibilities would I take on?**

You cannot hold an office in the church unless you become a member. But this does not mean that all church members must hold office. You may be asked to take on a special responsibility because of your gifts, but for most church members their Christian responsibilities are much more beyond the church walls and meetings than they are within them. Our relationship with other people, our service to the community, our voice in shaping opinion and public policy, our employment or our leisure – these are all places where our Christian responsibility lies. Our service within the church may be limited.

### **I don't think my faith is strong enough.**

That hesitation must be taken seriously. But don't think that all church members are strong believers, untroubled by doubt.

Look around you during worship next Sunday; you will see others who are sharing your anxiety about the quality of their personal faith, however confident they may seem. The Church is there to help us all grow in our faith. Willingness to learn, and to admit the weakness of our faith at some points, is to be welcomed in church members, so long as we believe that with Christ all things will eventually become clear to us. Remember, faith has been compared with a pilgrimage, a journey which every Christian must make.

### **I don't think I'm good enough**

None of us are, that's why we are Christians. The Gospel is good news for those who know they are sinners. The Church seeks to follow the high standards set by Christ, but all of us know how far our best efforts to please him fall short. We are not made Christians by our merits, but by our faith in Jesus.

### **I'm afraid 'time' is a problem for me.**

It is for all of us. We have to balance the claims on our time and interest. Commitment to the Church can seem to be one more demand; but in reality all uses of our time fall within our Christian discipleship – we have to be Church members in everything we do. We shall need to give priority to sharing in the Church's worship and life, but spending hours in church buildings is not necessarily a better reflection of our discipleship than being a reliable friend and colleague elsewhere. Not having time may be an excuse!

### **What about money?**

We believe that the Church's work is Christ's work. We need to provide money for that both locally and in the wider fellowship, just as we provide time and energy and imagination. Our giving is regular and generous if we are indeed committed to follow Christ. All kinds of practical schemes using envelopes or bankers orders can be arranged to make giving regular. Tax payers can sign a covenant form at no extra cost to themselves to enable the local church to recover the tax paid on their giving. But in the end, you must decide how generous you can be.

### **Do I really have to choose one denomination?**

Well, you cannot join the great Church without belonging to some part of it so that means being part of a local church, and denomination, though there are more and more special situations (Local Ecumenical Projects) where new members can belong to several denominations. The United Reformed Church is committed to seeking visible unity with all Christ's people and is a union which has brought together different denominations. We recognise the richness of the varied traditions within the United Reformed Church and look for further unity so that the world may believe. It is no answer to disunity to refuse to join a church. Belonging to a particular church is a first step towards discovering the unity Christ wills.

### **What must I do to become a Church Member?**

Talk to your minister, an elder or a friend who is already a member. If you want to go further, your local church will prepare you for membership by arranging a deeper discussion of some of the things we have talked about here, and other matters as well. Perhaps there will be a group of people preparing together to make their public commitment to Christ and to the Church. The elders and the church meeting will be told of your wish to belong and asked to approve, so that they can offer you their friendship and support. They are receiving you into membership rather than allowing you to join. It is good to have new members because they bring new gifts and new opportunities.

### **Well, I needn't decide straightaway...**

... But why not? The invitation is from Christ, and if by joining, you are confessing your faith in Jesus Christ, sharing it with others, and helping the Church to be more effective in bringing the Good News of Christ to the world, why delay? Certainly pray about it, then we hope, your prayer will lead to decision and action.

### **Why not now?**

We hope that you have been able to feel that you were part of this conversation. However long we might have made it, there would still have been points to clarify and claims that need considering. So do take the matter further. Your own minister, or an elder of the Church, will be pleased to help you.

For further help in the matter of Church Membership ask your minister for suggested reading or see the URC catalogue.

This leaflet is a general introduction to questions about membership. The nature, faith and order of the United Reformed Church is set out officially in the Basis of Union, as amended in 1981. Policy guidelines on questions such as Baptism and Church membership are published by the Doctrine and Worship Committee.

*Produced by:*  
Life and Witness, The United Reformed Church

*Printed copies are available from:*

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