

## Church Membership Q&A

I recently met up with somebody in Starbuck's to talk about becoming a church member. They came with a written list of questions: -

- What do I get out of it?
- What do I have to give in terms of money, for example, or time?
- What will it cost me?
- Do I have to do something to show I am a member (public flogging that sort of thing!)?
- What if I don't want to be member anymore?
- What if I have a problem with another member – is there a church way to resolve it?
- Does it matter if my partner is not a Christian?
- What sort of commitment is involved?

These are from somebody who has become a Christian fairly recently and hasn't had much contact with church previously. I thought they were refreshingly honest and 'down to earth' questions. I have read (and written) quite a number of church membership documents over the years – but it struck me that few of them are scratching where ordinary people are itching today.

I have asked other people to contribute questions too. And this leaflet is an attempt to answer them. It is at a developing draft stage at the moment – your questions and comments are appreciated and welcomed

### **Introduction**

#### **History of the West Road Church**

West Road Church started around 1847 with people meeting, at first, in private homes. As the fellowship grew, they hired rooms in the Quaker building in St John's Street, then in premises at 15a Garland Street. Numbers increased, and in 1902 the fellowship moved into the old Methodist chapel at 23 Garland Street. The church has always had a strong evangelistic edge – and in 1939 moved to West Road in response to the rapid expansion of the town to the west. International evangelist Harold Wildish spoke at the opening meetings and the Sunday school grew to 150 almost immediately. The site was re-developed, and the present building was opened in 1992.

#### **Back to the Bible**

It is the aim that the answers in this leaflet can be traced back to the Bible. This is a foundational principle of WRC that what we believe and the way we are organised should follow the pattern and principles of the Bible.

#### **The word 'church'**

An example of why we need to constantly refer back to the Bible is the word 'church'. Ask most people to explain the word 'church' and they will start talking about an old building with a spire and no toilets. But in the Bible, the word 'church'

never refers to a building. The church is people. The New Testament word is 'ekklesia' and it means a gathering or assembly.

### **Membership of anything**

Membership of the Labour Party was 405,000 in 1997. Ten years on it had halved, to 198,000. This isn't a party political comment. A similar fall is apparent across the board. It is a fact of modern life that people are increasingly reluctant to join almost anything. I look in my wallet and find that I am a member of Moreton Hall Squash Club, Bury Library and The Lark Valley Fishing Association. I think that is it. I'm only a member of these organisations because I have to be. If I don't join – I can't play, borrow or fish.

### **What do I get out of it?**

I have to join Bury Library or else I'm not allowed to borrow books. It is not the same with church. The doors are open. The services are public. Nobody is forced to join the church and the main motivation is not what we obviously gain from joining. We join, because by doing so, we are embracing the purpose of Jesus for our lives.

### **Why should I join the church?**

It was never God's intention that Christians should be alone. In the New Testament, the church is most commonly pictured as a body or a building. These are communal metaphors. A brick on its own is just a brick – but as part of a grand design it can be part of something magnificent. A hand alone is grotesque – but as part of a body, it can change the world.

### **Why should I join the church? (2)**

Even a quick reading of the New Testament shows that Christians are expected to 'belong' to their church - not merely attend it. The mechanisms of membership are not all that clear in the N.T. (I think this is because the mechanics need to be flexible in different times and in different cultures) but the principle of membership is evident. In 1 Corinthians 5v2 a clear distinction is made between being 'in' and 'out' of the fellowship.

### **Why shouldn't I join the church?**

The Ethiopian Eunuch said to Philip why shouldn't I be baptised? (Acts 8v36) I like the question framed this way around. Why shouldn't I join the church? Are you are a Christian and WRC is the church that you mostly attend – what reasons have you got for not joining? We would be pleased to discuss them further with you.

### **Is the church important? (1)**

To answer this question we need only to look at Jesus attitude to the church. Jesus is passionate about the church. He was willing to give his life for the church (Ephesians 5v25) Jesus continuing work is to build the church (Matthew 16v18) Jesus is the head of the church (Ephesians 5v23) The church is Jesus' body (Colossians 1v18) The church carries Jesus personal guarantee of success and ultimate victory (Matthew 16v18) Through the church, God's glory is displayed to the whole universe. (Ephesians 3v10) The church is central to God's purposes in history and eternity (Ephesians 5v27)

### **Is the church important? (2)**

The church is God's main school of discipleship. The church is God's base for world evangelism. It is his model community. It is his hospital for the hurting: his provision for the hungry: his champion for the oppressed, his beacon of justice and hope, his light for the world and his workshop for heaven.

### **What do I have to give in terms of money, for example?**

There is no church membership fee. Finance is an issue, of course. Everything that WRC does is paid for by the giving of the members and congregation. The running costs of the building, rates, electric, heating, the upkeep of the building, the general expenses of ministry, photocopier, computers, phones, the wages of Simon, Emma and Ian – and on top of all that we give away around £20,000 to charity and missions each year. The Bible principle is that we should give generously (Deuteronomy 15v10), joyfully (2 Corinthians 9v7) regularly (1 Corinthians 16v2) and proportionally (1 Corinthians 16v2)

### **Tax Efficient Giving**

If you are a tax-payer, WRC can claim back the tax on any contributions (one off or regular) This makes a lot of difference – boosting WRC's income by around 20%. For more information, or to set up a standing order please contact church treasurers, Shaun & Sharon Pettit, 7 Troon Court, Fornham St Martin. IP28 6TJ. (01284) 704201. all information on giving is kept entirely private and confidential.

### **Making WRC a beneficiary of your will**

The church has been enormously blessed over the years by the receipt of legacies. Some important projects and developments simply could not have been started without these gifts. Perhaps you could consider making WRC a beneficiary of your will. Again our treasurers Shaun & Sharon Pettit, 7 Troon Court, Fornham St Martin. IP28 6TJ. (01284) 704201 – are probably the best people to talk to.

### **What will it cost me?**

It's a bit like asking what does it cost to raise a child? You can do a financial calculation (according to the Times Newspaper – the cost of raising a child to the age of 21 is £180,000) but it doesn't really mean very much. The real cost is time, commitment and love.

### **What sort of commitment is involved? (1)**

It is a commitment to God and to each other; to love, nurture, encourage and build each other up (1 Thessalonians 5v11)

### **What sort of commitment is involved? (2)**

To give some very practical answers -

- Make attending church a priority
- Join a Homegroup (if possible)
- Be part of the prayer life of the church – (All Church Prayer on the third Sunday evening of each month)
- Maintain good relations with other Christians
- Respect the leadership
- Look for ways to discover, develop and use the gifts God has given me for the good of the church

- Evangelism, social action, social justice, salt and light - how can you be involved?
- Support the church financially

**Do I have to do something to show I am a member (public flogging that sort of thing!)?**

No. The normal practise is to welcome you in a normal church service, just by getting you to stand up (so people can see who you are) and then praying for you. We did hear of somebody who put off joining the church for years because they were so daunted by the thought of standing up in a service. If this, or anything else like it, is holding you back – please say.

**What if I don't want to be member anymore?**

There are four ways to get out of church membership of WRC. Dying is the most extreme – but it doesn't really count because the church universal is the only organisation that never loses a member. You can resign, you can be transferred to another church, or you can be expelled for heresy or conduct unbecoming. If you are resigning, we would like to talk with you to see if there are issues that can be resolved and failing that, lessons that we can learn.

**What if I have a problem with another member – is there a church way to resolve it?**

Good question. Yes there is. The first principle is that we should be forgiving (Ephesians 4v32) Beyond that, Matthew 18v15-18 details how we should respond to grievances. Gossiping, behind the scenes complaining, grudge nursing and faction building are not legitimate ways for Christians to deal with disputes and upset.

**Does it matter if my partner is not a Christian?**

Yes it does. God wants everybody to be saved. (1 Timothy 2v4) But in terms of becoming a church member it shouldn't hold you back.

**Why doesn't WRC have church members meetings and voting? (1)**

Some churches do organise themselves that way. And some have Popes, Archbishops and Canons. But going back to the Bible what is the pattern there? In the New Testament we find that Elders and Deacons are appointed to direct and facilitate the work of the church. [\*] (Acts 14v23, Titus 1v5, 1 Timothy 3) The Elders lead the church, and to keep their focus on its spiritual ministry, delegate some of the practical responsibilities to the Deacons. (Acts 6v2)

[\*] God has also given to the church prophets, apostles, teachers, healers and administrators (1 Corinthians 12v28) but that is to open another discussion!

**Why don't you have church members meetings and voting? (2)**

If important decisions are being taken, we commonly have a members meeting, where the issues are aired and then discussed in smaller groups. (We did this, for example, before we appointed Ian as a Youth Worker.) In this way, we are gauging opinion and following the pattern of, for example, Acts 5v5 'this proposal pleased the whole church...'

### **Who do I speak to if I'm not happy about something at WRC?**

Please speak. It is much better to speak up than be unhappy or grumble behind the scenes. You can talk to any of the elders at any time informally. If you would like it to be a bit more formal you can ask an elder to mention a particular issue at our monthly meeting. You can send a letter to the elders – which will be responded to either by letter or by arranging a meeting. You can ask for a meeting with the elders or some of the elders. If that sounds a bit daunting (it shouldn't do – the elders are just the guys who are doing their best to run the church) you could start by talking to your Homegroup leader.

### **Homegroups**

We encourage church members to be part of a Homegroup. This helps people to feel part of the church, develop friendships, study the Bible, pray and discuss real life issues. Homegroups are a strategic part of the pastoral care network of the church, and should be your first-line support network.

### **Houseparty at Sizewell**

Every year there is a church houseparty at Sizewell. Joining in with this is a very good way to get to know people – but you'll have to be quick it is normally fully booked very quickly.

### **All-Church Prayer Meeting**

On the third Sunday evening of each month we have an All-Church Prayer Meeting. Church Members are urged to make this a priority in their diaries. There is promised blessing when we pray together. Also, at each meeting we ask a one or two of the church activities / ministries to give us a brief update on their activity and prayer. (Last month it was Summer Camps, and the Men's Fellowship. That evening is occasionally also used to discuss possible new ventures and, in the Autumn, becomes our 'Direction Evening'.)

### **Yes – I'm interested in taking this membership thing further – what should I do?**

Please speak to one of the elders. A meeting will be arranged with a couple of people; at least one of them will be an elder. You will have an opportunity to share how you became a Christian. We will discuss this document, including the 'what we believe' and the 'my commitment' parts. We will also ask you if you have been baptised (it is not a membership requirement but we will encourage you in this direction) and we will ask if you have been a member of other churches previously. If you are a member of another church, the normal practice is for us to write to them requesting a transfer of membership – but we understand that this can sometimes be complicated.

### **Feedback on this document**

This document has endured several revisions – but we are always looking to make it better. Any comments, feedback or suggestions are very much welcomed.

### **Outline of meeting**

If you go on to arrange a meeting with one or two of the elders this will be the general pattern of the evening.

- 2 Ask you what stage you are at, questions you may have (in other words it won't be automatically assumed that you want to join)
- 3 Discuss any issues arising from this document – or further questions
- 4 Discuss the Basis of Faith
- 5 Invite you to share your story of becoming a Christian
- 6 Find out if you are / have been a member of other churches previously
- 7 Ask if you have been baptised (it is not a membership condition – but we will encourage you in this direction)
- 8 Invite you to share your testimony with the wider church family (this could be written and printed in the churches monthly Link Magazine, or you could be interviewed or give a testimony in a service – it's up to you) – and set a date for you to be welcomed into at a church service.
- 9 Ask you to write a short biographical profile for our Directory
- 10 Ask you to sign that you give permission (Data Protection) for WRC to keep your details.
- 11 Ask you for a photograph
- 12 Leave you with the membership form to fill in and send back to church office

### **6 months check-up**

After you have been a member for six months we would like to meet up with you again to see how you are getting on and to hear your comments. Also it is an opportunity to explore together the gifts and talents that God has given you and to see if there are ways that they can be used in the church. (1 Corinthians 12v7)

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### **Basis of Faith**

(this is simply the Evangelical Alliance Basis of Faith)

We believe in...

- 1) The one true God who lives eternally in three persons—the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit.
- 2) The love, grace and sovereignty of God in creating, sustaining, ruling, redeeming and judging the world.
- 3) The divine inspiration and supreme authority of the Old and New Testament Scriptures, which are the written Word of God—fully trustworthy for faith and conduct.
- 4) The dignity of all people, made male and female in God's image to love, be holy and care for creation, yet corrupted by sin, which incurs divine wrath and judgement.
- 5) The incarnation of God's eternal Son, the Lord Jesus Christ—born of the virgin Mary; truly divine and truly human, yet without sin.
- 6) The atoning sacrifice of Christ on the cross: dying in our place, paying the price of sin and defeating evil, so reconciling us with God.

- 7) The bodily resurrection of Christ, the first fruits of our resurrection; his ascension to the Father, and his reign and mediation as the only Saviour of the world.
  - 8) The justification of sinners solely by the grace of God through faith in Christ.
  - 9) The ministry of God the Holy Spirit, who leads us to repentance, unites us with Christ through new birth, empowers our discipleship and enables our witness.
  - 10) The Church, the body of Christ both local and universal, the priesthood of all believers—given life by the Spirit and endowed with the Spirit's gifts to worship God and proclaim the gospel, promoting justice and love.
  - 11) The personal and visible return of Jesus Christ to fulfil the purposes of God, who will raise all people to judgement, bring eternal life to the redeemed and eternal condemnation to the lost, and establish a new heaven and new earth.
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- Yes – I'd like to become a member
- Yes – I have read this document including the Basis of Faith and the sections 'What sort of commitment is involved?'
- Yes – I give permission for the following details (including my picture) to be stored in the church database and used appropriately (not passed to third parties) for the Church Directory, the Link magazine, noticesheet and website

firstname(s)

surname

gender  male  female

date of birth

any medical conditions that it would be useful for the church to know about (such as epilepsy or diabetes)

address

address

address

post town

county

postcode

phone (landline)

phone (mobile)

email address

signature

date

Please write a short profile of yourself (200 words max) you could include things such as - where you were born, what school you were at, your first job, present employment, hobbies and sports, your family, favourite book / film / music / holiday destination. Bizarre ambitions. Famous people that you have met. - and a few sentences about how you became a Christian and what your faith means to you (use a separate sheet or send it by email if that is easier)

please return (pages 7&8) to

West Road Church Office, 68 Queens Road, Bury St Edmunds. IP33 3EW  
Email : office@westroadchurch.org.uk