



Baptist Churches

WESTERN AUSTRALIA

Guidelines Concerning Congregational Government

1. INTRODUCTION

- 1.1 The following guidelines are to assist in the practical application of the distinctive Baptist principles as set out in Clause 4 of the Constitution of the Baptist Union of Western Australia Inc.
- 1.2 They follow directly from the principles and are extensions consistent with them. Specifically, they concern the final authority of the local church under Christ in ordering its own affairs, the delegation of responsibility to leaders by the members' meeting, the responsibilities and accountability of such leaders and of those who appoint them, and the conduct of the members' meeting.
- 1.3 Guidelines by definition allow considerable flexibility, and their practical application will vary in detail from church to church. For example, churches differ in size and the most helpful organisational structures may be different in a larger church from those in a smaller one. Yet in every case, the structures and procedures need to be consistent with the distinctive Baptist principles.

2. THE WORD 'CHURCH' IN THESE GUIDELINES

- 2.1 The word 'church' throughout these guidelines is used in reference to the local church. This meaning is by far the most common one in the New Testament.
- 2.2 However, Baptists recognise that the New Testament writers also use 'church' in a universal sense, to refer to all believers.
- 2.3 In these guidelines, 'members' refers to those believers who have taken the step of formally joining the local church. Believers who are adherents of a local church, but who have not actually joined it, are acknowledged warmly to be members of the universal church of Christ. They are not included here in the meaning of 'members'.

3. IMPORTANT BAPTIST DISTINCTIVES

- 3.1 The following fundamental beliefs about the church, foundational for Baptists throughout their history from the seventeenth century till the present, are all to be found in the 'Statement of Faith' of the Constitution.
- 3.2 Taken together, these distinctives characterise a Baptist church.
 - 3.2.1 The Lordship of Christ over His church.
 - 3.2.2 The authority of Scripture in the church.
 - 3.2.3 The church consists only of those who are regenerate.
 - 3.2.4 The baptism of believers, normally by immersion.

- 3.2.5 The priesthood of all believers: all who belong to the church share in finding the will of Christ for the church and in serving God through it.
- 3.2.6 The autonomy of the church: It is competent under Christ to order its own affairs. In keeping with the New Testament pattern, Baptists have always emphasised the importance of the church in its local sense. At the same time, churches have associated for mutual benefit, as is the case with the churches which form the Baptist Union of Western Australia.
- 3.2.7 Congregational church government. (This is discussed in detail in the remainder of these guidelines.)
- 3.2.8 Liberty of conscience: Baptists believe that others should be free to believe and practise their religion as their own consciences direct. Within the church, the individual Christian respects the right of other believers to their own views under God, with the proviso that the agreed doctrinal basis is not contradicted.
- 3.2.9 The separation of church and state: since the church is subject to Christ, no secular authority has the right to dictate to the church what it is to believe or do in its service of God. This does not mean, however, that the church is exempt from compliance with civil law, assuming that the instructions of Scripture are not contradicted.

4. THE FINAL AUTHORITY OF THE CHURCH MEMBERS' MEETING

- 4.1 Paragraph 4.3.1 of the Statement of Faith indicates that "the church members' meeting is the final authority under Christ", and that this authority operates as the Holy Spirit guides the church in the light of the Scriptures.
- 4.2 The involvement of the whole membership in decision making is a consequence of the fact that all the believers collectively constitute a priesthood in the service of God. Every member should have the opportunity to be heard.
- 4.3 The final authority of the members' meeting under Christ is to be upheld, regardless of the size of the particular church and the specific form of organisation that is followed. The members' meeting has the capacity to:
 - 4.3.1 Adopt the vision of the church. Although the church may delegate responsibility for guiding the development of vision to certain leaders, it is the church as such which ultimately adopts its own vision.
 - 4.3.2 Exercise final authority in accepting new members.
 - 4.3.3 Appoint leaders such as pastors, elders, deacons and others with wide-ranging responsibilities. Each church needs to determine how other leaders are to be appointed.
 - 4.3.4 Contribute to decisions made by delegated leaders, and to question and even veto such decisions.
 - 4.3.5 Remove any appointed officer of the church.
 - 4.3.6 Adopt the financial budgets of the church. While a budget will best be framed by those with the necessary expertise, its final adoption rests with the members' meeting.
 - 4.3.7 Receive audited financial statements and the auditor's report annually.
 - 4.3.8 Approve significant expenditure which lies outside of budgetary provision.
 - 4.3.9 Dismiss members. Since a major purpose of all disciplinary action is the restoration of the believer requiring discipline, matters of discipline will often best be discreetly

handled initially at a pastoral level. However, if a matter proves intractable, it may need eventually to come to the members' meeting, which must accept ultimate pastoral responsibility.

4.3.10 Purchase and dispose of real estate and other significant property, and authorise all borrowings.

- 4.4 Every Baptist church through its church members' meeting is to be in control of its own affairs, both internal and external.
- 4.5 In holding to the separation of church and state, Baptists understand that civil authorities are not competent to control the functioning of the church as it serves God in accordance with the Scriptures.
- 4.6 In general, the Baptist Union does not possess authority over the church, consisting as it does of the voluntary association of individual Baptist churches for the greater good and service of all of them.
- 4.7 However, a church may voluntarily enter into a legal arrangement with the Union, as in the case of a loan guarantee agreement. By choosing to belong to the union of churches, a church accepts the responsibilities that come from this association, and acknowledges that the officers and committees of the Union are able to give it counsel without overriding the church's autonomy. In the same way, a church may seek advice or assistance from the Union. The Assembly of the Union has the power to accept churches into and dismiss churches from the Union.
- 4.8 In the case of a young church, the pastor may need to take more responsibility while the congregation is taught and helped to grow towards maturity. However, from the beginning, this arrangement must not be seen as permanent.

5. THE IMPORTANCE OF TRUST IN THE CHURCH

- 5.1 The following two sections discuss the delegation of responsibility to leaders by the members' meeting, and the accountability of those leaders to the church which appoints them.
- 5.2 Delegation is based on trust. The church assigns responsibility to the leader for the fulfilment of a specific task, and as it trusts the leader, it frees that person to achieve what is necessary.
- 5.3 However, the leader who is trusted is also accountable to the church. This is a safeguard for both leader and church.

6. THE DELEGATION OF RESPONSIBILITY TO APPOINTED LEADERS

- 6.1 Paragraph 4.3.2 of the Statement of Faith recognises that 'Christ gives leaders to His Church', and that the church members' meeting sets these people apart to lead, delegating certain authority to them.
- 6.2 Leaders in the church are to be servants, according to the pattern set by Christ. Leaders exist for the church and not vice versa, and always remain accountable to the members' meeting which appoints them.
- 6.3 Congregational church government does not mean that every decision must be made by the members' meeting. Delegation of responsibility and representative decision making by a few mean that the many are free to accomplish other aspects of the work of the kingdom of God.
- 6.4 It is the role of the members' meeting to define the boundaries of the delegated responsibilities. Leaders must then be allowed the scope to lead within those boundaries, without being subjected to inappropriate restrictions by subsequent members' meetings.

Appointed leaders are to be respected in their leadership as they seek the good of those who have appointed them.

- 6.5 Each church must determine which specific appointments are to be made by the members' meeting directly. These should include pastors, elders and deacons. Some churches will prefer that the members' meeting elect leaders to various other positions, such as Brigade Captains and Youth Leaders. Others may equally uphold the principle of congregational government by having such appointments made by an elected group or person to whom that responsibility has been delegated by the members' meeting.

7. ACCOUNTABILITY WITHIN THE CHURCH

- 7.1 Appointed leaders are always accountable to those who appointed them, and whom they serve under Christ.
- 7.2 Accountability operates in various contexts. Ultimately, all leaders are accountable to the members' meeting, whether directly appointed by it or not. However, accountability must also function within a group of pastors, elders, deacons, youth leaders, etc., where responsibility is assigned to individuals by the group.
- 7.3 Financial accountability implies that a leader must function within the relevant budgetary and other guidelines. Proposed expenditure outside of such guidelines should first be approved by the members' meeting. Implied here is the necessity for a budget to be framed in such a way that leaders have appropriate freedom to fulfil the ministry with which they are charged.
- 7.4 Financial accountability also implies that the members' meeting will receive audited financial statements, at least annually.
- 7.5 Accountability means that the members' meeting receives regular reports from the various leaders and ministries within the church. These need to be frequent enough and sufficiently proactive to allow the members' meeting to contribute to future processes, and not to be merely rubber stamping exercises. Leaders also need to keep the appropriate groups within the church, and/or the whole church informed of significant things that are being decided.
- 7.6 In general, all correspondence should be accessible to members. It can be helpful for the members' meeting to be provided with a summary list of correspondence in and out.
- 7.7 All appropriate church correspondence should be brought to the members' meeting. The members' meeting need not be burdened with every item of church correspondence, much of which can be properly handled within a leader's delegated area of responsibility. In some cases, the sensitivity of a pastoral matter may require that the church trust its leaders to deal with it.
- 7.8 In the nomination of persons for election by the members' meeting, it is in keeping with the principle of congregational government that the individual member should be able to bring a name to the church. Nomination only by a small group within the church, such as elders or deacons, can be open to abuse. If an elected nominating committee is used, members still need to be able to have effective input into the process.
- 7.9 A specified minimum number of members must have the constitutional right to institute a special meeting of members at any time.
- 7.10 Members' meetings need to be held with sufficient frequency to ensure genuine participation of all in the affairs of the church, and to facilitate the operation of accountability. While individual churches will choose to hold differing numbers of members' meetings each year, at least four meetings annually is suggested.

8. THE CONDUCT OF THE CHURCH MEMBERS' MEETING

- 8.1 Given that the members' meeting is the final authority in the decision making processes of the church, and the occasion at which the church as a whole recognises the will of Christ, adequate preparation should be made. Those with delegated responsibility should do appropriate background research prior to the meeting.
- 8.2 All present should follow the spiritual principles of prayerfulness, gentleness, courtesy, patience, respect for the contributions of all, recognition of the giftedness of God's people and above all, love.
- 8.3 The role of the chairperson is vital. Generally accepted procedures for the conduct of fair and efficient meetings should be followed. Prior to the meeting it is essential that the chairperson and secretary or administrator should confer, making sure they are fully conversant with the business of the meeting, including all correspondence.
- 8.4 It is helpful that major agenda items, together with relevant facts, be notified to members prior to the meeting.
- 8.5 Voting should be by members only. A church may decide to allow non-members to be present at a meeting and to participate in discussion, though it needs to be recognised that some issues may arise for which it would be appropriate that only members be present.

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