

Church Membership

Introduction

Like other Evangelical and Baptist churches, Greenstead Evangelical Free Church (GEFC) has a formal church membership. Often people have questions about what this means. This factsheet is written to explain church membership at GEFC:

- why we think it is biblical
- why it is important for Christians to be committed to a church as *members*
- what church membership at GEFC means
- how to become a church member.

We would love you to become a church member at GEFC, if you are able to do so.

Why do you have a formal church membership?

We have a formal church membership because of what the Bible teaches about the nature of the church and of being a Christian. We believe that a formal church membership is the best way of implementing that vision practically so that we can be the kind of church community Jesus wants us to be.

Where is formal church membership in the Bible?

Here are some biblical principles and practice on which a church membership system is based:-

1. Individual Christians are expected to be part of a local church which is their spiritual home and community. In *Acts 2:47*, Luke says '*the Lord added to their number daily those who were being saved.*' Becoming a Christian meant joining the church. It is clear that each church knew who was among their number.
2. The Christian life was to be lived in community. In the New Testament, the church is seen as a community of people who are deeply committed to each other, both in principle and in practice:

Be completely humble and gentle; be patient, bearing with one another in love. Make every effort to keep the unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace. (Ephesians 4:2-3)

Whatever happens, conduct yourselves in a manner worthy of the gospel of Christ. Then, whether I come and see you or only hear about you in my absence, I will know that you stand firm in one spirit, contending as one man for the faith of the gospel. (Philippians 1:27)

May the Lord make your love increase and overflow for each other and for everyone else, just as ours does for you. (1 Thessalonians 3:12)

Let us not give up meeting together, as some are in the habit of doing, but let us encourage one another—and all the more as you see the Day approaching. (Hebrews 10:25).

3. In some places, the church is compared to:

... a household:

If I am delayed, you will know how people ought to conduct themselves in God's household, which is the church of the living God, the pillar and foundation of the truth. (1 Timothy 3:15)

... a temple building:

Consequently, you are no longer foreigners and aliens, but fellow citizens with God's people and members of God's household, built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, with Christ Jesus himself as the chief cornerstone. In him the whole building is joined together and rises to become a holy temple in the Lord. And in him you too are being built together to become a dwelling in which God lives by his Spirit. (Ephesians 2:19-22)

... a body:

Now you are the body of Christ, and each one of you is a part of it. (1 Corinthians 12:27)

... a family:

Therefore, as we have opportunity, let us do good to all people, especially to those who belong to the family of believers. (Galatians 6:10).

Each of these pictures suggests people who are closely bound together and recognisably committed to each other.

4. The church is led by elders:-

Here is a trustworthy saying: If anyone sets his heart on being an overseer, he desires a noble task. Now the overseer must be above reproach, the husband of but one wife, temperate, self-controlled, respectable, hospitable, able to teach, not given to drunkenness, not violent but gentle, not quarrelsome, not a lover of money. He must manage his own family well and see that his children obey him with proper respect. (If anyone does not know how to manage his own family, how can he take care of God's church?) He must not be a recent convert, or he may become conceited and fall under the same judgment as the devil. He must also have a good reputation with outsiders, so that he will not fall into disgrace and into the devil's trap.
(1 Timothy. 3:1-7)

The practical administration is delegated to the deacons, but all the believers are involved in decisions like the appointment of deacons and in church discipline:-

In those days when the number of disciples was increasing, the Grecian Jews among them complained against the Hebraic Jews because their widows were being overlooked in the daily distribution of food. So the Twelve gathered all the disciples together and said, "It would not be right for us to neglect the ministry of the word of God in order to wait on tables. Brothers, choose seven men from among you who are known to be full of the Spirit and wisdom. We will turn this responsibility over to them and will give our attention to prayer and the ministry of the word." This proposal pleased the whole group. They chose Stephen, a man full of faith and of the Holy Spirit; also Philip, Procorus, Nicanor, Timon, Parmenas, and Nicolas from Antioch, a convert to Judaism. They presented these men to the apostles, who prayed and laid their hands on them. (Acts 6:1-6)

Deacons, likewise, are to be men worthy of respect, sincere, not indulging in much wine, and not pursuing dishonest gain. They must keep hold of the deep truths of the faith with a clear conscience. They must first be tested; and then if there is nothing against them, let them serve as deacons. In the same way, their wives are to be women worthy of respect, not malicious talkers but temperate and trustworthy in everything. A deacon must be the husband of but one wife and must manage his children and his household well. Those who have served well gain an excellent standing and great assurance in their faith in Christ Jesus. (1 Timothy. 3:8-13)

What difference would being a member make to me?

1. Being a member means you have taken a significant step of commitment to the church and identification with the church family. That is a practically meaningful way of obeying Jesus's command for us to love one another.
2. It means that you have shown you are committed to the whole church, not just your group of friends.
3. It means that you know that the other church members are committed to you in Christian love.
4. It means that you have put yourself under the pastoral leadership and care of the pastor and elders: you know they are committed to serving you, to promoting your spiritual health, to helping you when times are hard.
5. It means that you can take your part in the decisions which shape the church's direction such as new leaders, new initiatives and ministries, budgets and other significant matters, through the church meeting.

What difference would my being a member make to GEFC?

1. A defined membership enables the leaders and other members to know that you are committed to the church.
2. A defined membership enables you to take your part in the decision-making of the church. This provides a proper check so that the pastor and elders cannot exercise unlimited authority or act without consulting the wisdom of the church membership.
3. A defined membership also allows church discipline to be exercised.

Does it matter whether someone becomes a church member?

We think it does! The New Testament sees the church as a community of people who are committed to each other. We are committed to Christ because he is committed to us. We should be committed to each other as one of the most important expressions of being committed to Christ. Although

commitment may seem scary, actually there is something wonderful about being committed to a single local body of believers.

Whether you are a member or not also affects how far you can be involved in the church and we would like you to be as involved as possible. Leadership positions in church activities are normally limited to members. Becoming a member is the way you can play your part in the decisions the church takes.

What are the responsibilities of church membership?

First, we want to say that as you become a member we are committing ourselves to *you!* Specifically: to your pastoral care, to helping you to grow spiritually and to use your gifts for the glory of God and the building up of the church. The leaders have a responsibility to care for your soul!

The New Testament teaching on church commitment means that we expect members to:-

- Come regularly to church on Sunday (unless away or unwell!)

Let us not give up meeting together, as some are in the habit of doing, but let us encourage one another-and all the more as you see the Day approaching. (Hebrews 10:25).

- Care for others in the church

Above all, love each other deeply, because love covers over a multitude of sins. (1 Peter 4:8).

Rejoice with those who rejoice; mourn with those who mourn.

(Romans 12:15)

We want our church to be a community of love and mutual care!

- Be involved in at least one ministry in the church

Now to each one the manifestation of the Spirit is given for the common good. (1 Corinthians 12:7)

We want you to use your gifts for the common good and as part of our different ministries of outreach! In your membership interview there will be a chance to talk this over with an elder. The elders would always be very glad to talk about opportunities for service.

- Maintain a lifestyle in line with the ethical teaching of the Bible

Do you not know that the wicked will not inherit the kingdom of God? Do not be deceived: Neither the sexually immoral nor idolaters nor adulterers nor male prostitutes nor homosexual offenders nor thieves nor the greedy nor drunkards nor slanderers nor swindlers will inherit the kingdom of God. And that is what some of you were. But you were washed, you were sanctified, you were justified in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ and by the Spirit of our God. (1 Corinthians 6: 9-11).

We are called to live holy lives to please God, to help each other, and to bring honour to Christ. Those unwilling to do so are ineligible for church membership.

- Give regularly

Command those who are rich in this present world not to be arrogant nor to put their hope in wealth, which is so uncertain, but to put their hope in God, who richly provides us with everything for our enjoyment. Command them to do good, to be rich in good deeds, and to be generous and willing to share. (1 Timothy 6:17-18)

The church relies on the generous giving of our members. The Old Testament pattern of tithing 10% of our income is a great challenge but the New Testament emphasizes cheerful, generous, sacrificial giving, rather than any particular percentage, and it may well be that with prayerful management we can exceed this! And we strongly encourage and support giving to other needs, whether Christian causes or other good charities.

- Respect the leadership

Obey your leaders and submit to their authority. They keep watch over you as men who must give an account. Obey them so that their work will be a joy, not a burden, for that would be of no advantage to you. (Hebrews 13:17)

To the elders among you, I appeal... Be shepherds of God's flock that is under your care, serving as overseers — not because you must... but eager to serve; not lording it over those entrusted to you, but being examples to the flock. (1 Peter 5:1-3)

We try to keep a Biblical balance between the requirement that leaders be allowed to lead, and that they must be humble and approachable!

- Keep the peace in the church and resolve relational tensions biblically

Be completely humble and gentle; be patient, bearing with one another in love. Make every effort to keep the unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace. (Ephesians 4:2-3)

If your brother sins against you, go and show him his fault, just between the two of you. If he listens to you, you have won your brother over. But if he will not listen, take one or two others along, so that `every matter may be established by the testimony of two or three witnesses.' If he refuses to listen to them, tell it to the church; and if he refuses to listen even to the church, treat him as you would a pagan or a tax collector. (Matthew 18:15-17).

We expect members to live out the gospel in personal relationships with each other.

- Pray for the church

And pray in the Spirit on all occasions with all kinds of prayers and requests. With this in mind, be alert and always keep on praying for all the saints. Pray also for me, that whenever I open my mouth, words may be given me so that I will fearlessly make known the mystery of the gospel. (Ephesians 6:18-20)

We hope that church members are praying daily for the church, especially for our elders and others with leadership responsibility. There are various opportunities to pray with others: we particularly hope that members will be committed to coming to the weekly prayer meetings and to the quarterly days of prayer.

Why is membership restricted to Christians who have been baptised as believers?

The church is seen as the community of the baptised. We believe that in the New Testament, baptism is the sign of personal faith in Jesus. So only those who have been baptised as believers can be members. However Bible-believing Christians do hold different views and those with such convictions are welcome to come to the services and to take communion, even if they cannot become members.

How can I become a member?

We would love to discuss membership with you and be able to welcome you into membership. Please have a word with the pastor or an elder, who will arrange for a membership interview with you. They will want to hear about how you became a Christian and your subsequent spiritual journey – and also to discuss what being a member means.

Any further questions?

Please contact me on 01206 510114 or by email at pastor@gefc.org.uk

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