



# **Becoming a Church Member**

Board of Christian Training 2007

## **Preface by the Moderator**

Two issues particularly challenge today's Church.

The first is that we need to explain the truth that God has conveyed to us in the Bible in language that everyone can readily understand. The second is that we must encourage new believers to grow strong in faith by serving Christ alongside others in the context of the local church.

This booklet does both. As a Church we are indebted to those who have worked so wholeheartedly to produce it. As Moderator I have great pleasure in commending it to the Church with the prayer that God may use it over and over again to instruct and inspire all who read it. May this generation rediscover the benefit of belonging to the family of God and then witness to their faith in Jesus Christ as Saviour and Lord through membership of the Presbyterian Church in Ireland.

*John M. Finlay*

## Introduction

When the Discipleship Panel of the Committee on Congregational Life began to consider producing a membership course for the Church, it was aware that a reaction might be, 'Do we need another course?' The Church already has good publications which are widely used in preparing people for coming to the Lord's Table. This course does not reject these, but deliberately incorporates material produced by the former Board of Evangelism and Christian Training. We believe, however, that the Church in twenty-first century Ireland is facing a new situation which requires that old truths should be presented in new ways. As congregations present the Gospel not just to those who come inside their doors, but also to those outside, men and women who have not been brought up with a church background are coming to faith in Christ. This course sets out to provide material which can be used with such converts.

We have made our theme, not admission to the Lord's Table, but entering into Church membership. This has required a number of additions.

1. We have not assumed that the majority of candidates for membership will be young people in their teens.
2. Material on baptism is included, for many now seeking membership have never been baptised since they come from outside the Church.
3. Some basic help to living within the Church and growing in the faith is included. Previously this subject was dealt with in other publications; we believe it should be part of initial instruction.
4. In an age when joining any group is a commitment many are not prepared to make, we have set out why Church membership matters.

This book is not intended to be read by new Christians on their own. We hope that it will be worked through under the guidance of the minister or another experienced leader in the congregation. While there are four main sections, we have consciously left the structure loose for we recognise that while with some individuals or groups may be able to cover this material in four sessions others will need to take smaller bites. We know that there is a wide variety in the practice of our churches, so at several points there are indications that the practice of the congregation will be explained.

This is very much a joint production and I wish to thank the members of the Discipleship Panel for the time and skill which they have given in the preparation of this course. We offer it to the Church with the prayer that it may be a useful tool to strengthen those who are beginning the great and joyful experience of serving our Lord Jesus Christ within the fellowship of his Church and amid the challenges of a world which is also his.

*Brian Savage*

# 1. The Church and its members

## Why join the Church at all?

Joining anything isn't very popular today and some Christians do not see the point of joining the Church<sup>1</sup>. It's quite possible to be a Christian and to be involved in a church without the commitment of joining so – why join? It's much the same as when people say, "We love each other so why do we need the formal commitment of marriage? Why can't we just live together?" God takes a different view. Right from the beginning he not only saved people but added them to the Church<sup>2</sup>.

The New Testament uses several pictures to give us an idea of what the Church is like. It is Christ's body<sup>3</sup> to which Christians 'belong' as limbs and organs. Not belonging is not an option, "Now the body is not made up of one part but of many. If the foot should say, "Because I am not a hand, I do not belong to the body," it would not for that reason cease to be part of the body."<sup>4</sup>

The Church is also God's family<sup>5</sup>. Jesus taught us to call God our Father<sup>6</sup>, in his letters Paul calls Christians 'brothers' (which includes sisters as well) over 100 times and Jesus, himself, calls us brothers<sup>7</sup>. A family has members and is a group to which we belong. Into this family God graciously adopts us<sup>8</sup>

## What church are you joining?

The Church is the family of all whom God has saved by grace through faith in Christ. All Christians everywhere are brothers and sisters in Christ. In this family we are united with people "from every nation, tribe, people and language"<sup>9</sup>, with those who have believed in past generations and those who will believe from now until Christ comes again.

The local church is the family of believers in a particular place. Just as Paul could write to "the church of God in Corinth"<sup>10</sup>, so we can speak of "the church of God in ....." Later in this course

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<sup>1</sup> Throughout this booklet 'Church' is used for the universal Body of Christ; 'church' is an alternative to 'congregation', the local manifestation of the Church.

<sup>2</sup> Acts 2:47

<sup>3</sup> Romans 12: 3-8, 1 Corinthians 10: 16-17 & 12: 12-27 and Ephesians 4

<sup>4</sup> 1 Corinthians 12: 14-15

<sup>5</sup> Galatians 6: 10; 1 Peter 4:17

<sup>6</sup> Matthew 6: 1,4,6,9,15,18,32

<sup>7</sup> Hebrews 2:11

<sup>8</sup> Ephesians 1:5

<sup>9</sup> Revelation 7:9

<sup>10</sup> 1 Corinthians 1:2

there will be an opportunity to think about how your local church is seeking to serve God in your community.

Sometimes the word “church’ is used of a Christian denomination; we speak of the Presbyterian Church or the Methodist Church. Denominations are made up of local churches who agree with each other about what they believe and do. In joining your local church you will also become a member of the Presbyterian Church in Ireland.

### The Presbyterian Church in Ireland (PCI)

The Presbyterian Church believes that the Bible, and the Bible alone, teaches us what we should believe and how we should live. We believe that the Bible is God’s Word which means that what we read there is what God is saying to us. This is why the reading and teaching of the Bible is so important when we meet for worship on Sunday and why church members are encouraged to read the Bible for themselves. The churches of the PCI are led and cared for by elders who are chosen by and from the members of the congregation. One of the duties of elders is to meet and receive new members.

## 2. Becoming a member

If you have understood part 1, **The Church and its Members**, you may be thinking that since you are a Christian, you are already a member of the Church, God's family and Christ's body. That is quite right. At the deepest, truest level only God can add people to his Church.

However, we have also seen that being a member of the Church also involves being a member of a local congregation and of a denomination of the world-wide Christian Church. Becoming a member of a congregation of the Presbyterian Church in Ireland is the subject of this section.

### Congregation and elders

When men and women were converted through the preaching of the apostles as we read in the Acts of the Apostles, they were formed into congregations under the leadership of a group of elders not of one person. The elders were chosen from the church members and by the church members<sup>11</sup>. Part of the responsibility of elders is to ensure, as far as humanly possible that only those who are sincerely professing faith in God become members of their congregation. This is not done because the elders want to judge others, but because of the fact that "whoever eats the bread or drinks the cup of the Lord in an unworthy manner will be guilty of sinning against the body and blood of the Lord."<sup>12</sup> Only God can see into the human heart and the elders seek only to make sure that people really understand the significance of the profession they make.

Everyone who becomes a member of a congregation of the PCI should publicly confess their faith and promise to continue follow him always. How this is done will vary from church to church and at this point your minister will explain what happens in your church. Even though the form may vary, content of what you will be saying is reflected in these promises.

### Members' promises

My confession

*I am trusting God as my heavenly Father  
Jesus Christ as my Saviour and Lord  
the Holy Spirit as my Teacher and Guide*

My vows

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<sup>11</sup> Acts 14:23

<sup>12</sup> 1 Corinthians 11:27

*I promise that, with God's help, I will  
follow Christ through all my life,  
witness to him by what I say and how I live  
and serve him in the fellowship of his church in (.....) and wherever he may lead me  
in the future.*

## **Members' Privileges**

Twice Jesus told his disciples to do certain actions which would serve as signs to point to important Bible teaching about salvation. Those who are members of the church have the privilege of sharing together with other members in baptism and the Lord's Supper. These two actions are normally called *sacraments*.

### **Baptism**

Baptism is symbolic washing. It points to the fact that we must have our sins washed away and become clean in God's sight, it does not make us clean. It also points to the pouring of the Holy Spirit into our lives.

Baptism has to do with the beginning of the Christian life and so people are baptised when they join the Church. We believe that the church family is made up of those who profess faith in Jesus Christ and their children. You may have already been baptised as a child. In this case becoming a member of the Church by professing your faith is a confirmation of the place in the Church which was claimed for you by your parents. You do not need to be baptised again.

If you have not been baptised, then, when publically profess your faith, you will be baptised and enter the membership of the Church.

### **The Lord's Supper**

The Lord's Supper has other names and is sometimes called Communion, Eucharist or The Breaking of Bread.

The Lord's Supper is a symbolic meal, in which Christians share bread and wine together following Jesus' own instruction and example<sup>13</sup>. Because the Lord's Supper has to do with the continuing of the Christian life, we eat it regularly but simply taking part does not give us salvation. In the Lord's Supper, Christians are doing a number of things including...

#### Remembering

The Lord's Supper is a sign which points us to our Saviour. We eat and drink in remembrance of him, and in particular of his death for us. The bread is broken to remind us that his body was broken for us; the wine is red, the symbol of his blood which was poured out for us.

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<sup>13</sup> Matthew 26: 26-30, Luke 22: 14-23, 1 Corinthians 11: 23-32

### Professing

Those who share in the Lord's Supper are renewing their profession of faith. When Jesus passed round the bread and wine he did so saying to his disciples that his life was given for them; in taking the bread and wine we are claiming that Christ gave his life for us.

### Sharing

Christians eat the Lord's Supper together because the act of sharing the same meal is the symbol of the salvation we share with all believers<sup>14</sup>.

### Proclaiming

The Lord's Supper is also a reminder that our Lord will come again. We "proclaim the Lord's death until he comes". The Bible often says that God's kingdom is like a feast<sup>15</sup>, the little meal we share is a token of greater things to come.

## Who should come to the Lord's Supper?

The answer to this question is based on what the Lord's Supper is. Sharing in the Lord's Supper is for those who have received the Lord Jesus Christ into their lives. They know that they are sinners in the sight of a holy and perfect God and believe that Christ has died for the forgiveness of their sins. In repentance and faith they have come to Christ for salvation, have committed their lives to Christ and recognised Him as Lord.

## **Professing Faith**

Here are some of the things which cause people to hesitate as they think about professing their faith publicly.

*'Do I need to be baptised?'*

The short answer to this is 'Yes'.

Jesus commissioned his disciples to make more disciples and he specified that this was to be done by baptising and teaching.<sup>16</sup> He wants his disciples to be both baptised and taught. That teaching is "to obey everything I have commanded you". Baptism is Jesus' will.

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<sup>14</sup> 1 Corinthians 10: 16-17

<sup>15</sup> Psalm 23:5, Matthew 22: 1-14, Luke 13:29

<sup>16</sup> Matthew 28: 18-20

*'But I don't know how/when I became a Christian'*

How we come to faith may be important for us, but what really matters is the fact that we believe. Some come to Christ decisively during a church service or mission, others come to him in the privacy of their homes.

Some come to Christ after a period of seeking for meaning in their lives.

Some have come to Christ in childhood, others in their teens or adult years. Whatever the circumstances, the person who comes to the Lord's Table must be someone who has first come to Christ.

Those who have come to Christ will not be perfect, but they will be conscious that the Lord is in their life and that their life is different with Christ and because of him.

In spite of the fact that Jesus tells us to come there are some Christians who think that they cannot take the Lord's Supper. For some the problem is that they cannot give the day and date of their conversion to Christ. Many Christians are in this position. The questions we all need to answer are,

"Am I trusting Christ now as my Saviour?"

"Am I now living in obedience to Christ Jesus my Lord and Master?"

"Can I point to evidence that my life is changing?"

*'I'm not good enough.'*

For some who genuinely trust and follow Christ the problem is that they feel unworthy. In one sense this is natural. We are always unworthy, indeed if only the worthy came to the Lord's Supper no one would be there at all. We must remember that it is Christ Himself who makes us fit to come to his Supper through his dying for us. It is Christ himself who invites those who love and trust him to meet at his table.

*'Isn't it just what everyone does?'*

On the other hand in some places, young people are expected to become new communicants merely because they have reached a certain age whether they trust Christ or not. Such a practice is clearly wrong in sight of God for it leads to false promises and potential hypocrisy. "It is better not to vow than to make a vow and not fulfill it."<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> Ecclesiastes 5:5

### 3. Living the Life

Sharing in the Lord's Supper is very important, but it is only one part of the Christian life. A profession of faith must be accompanied by obedience to Christ in every area of life. The Christian life can only be lived out with the help of Jesus himself, who says, "apart from me you can do nothing".<sup>18</sup> Jesus's help is all we need so we can say with Paul, "I can do everything through him who gives me strength."<sup>19</sup>

Living the life means:

#### A New Power

The Holy Spirit lives in every Christian to give him or her power to live the life.<sup>20</sup> The Holy Spirit also works in each Christian changing and shaping our lives to make us more like Jesus himself. The Bible calls this process *sanctification*.<sup>21</sup>

The world in which we live will often be hostile and unsympathetic<sup>22</sup>. The devil will at times tempt or attack<sup>23</sup> and sin within will also trouble us<sup>24</sup>. New Christians should not be surprised at this, Jesus was tempted and we follow him. Christ alone gives victory in this conflict and he has promised to keep us safe to the end<sup>25</sup>.

#### A New Relationship with the Lord

Because God lives in us by the Holy Spirit, "our fellowship is with the Father and with His Son, Jesus Christ."<sup>26</sup> A relationship cannot last long unless there is regular contact and our new relationship with God is maintained as we speak to him through regular prayer and listen to his voice speaking in the Bible. We also develop our relationship with God by joining in public worship and meetings for prayer, studying the Bible together, fellowship with other believers and the sharing Lord's Supper.

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<sup>18</sup> John 15:4, 5

<sup>19</sup> Philippians 4 :13

<sup>20</sup> Acts 1:8, Romans 8:11

<sup>21</sup> 1 Peter 1:2, 2 Corinthians 3:16-18

<sup>22</sup> 1 John 2:15

<sup>23</sup> Ephesians 6:10-18

<sup>24</sup> Romans 7:21-25

<sup>25</sup> John 10:27, 28; 1 Corinthians 10:13; Jude 24

<sup>26</sup> 1 John 1:3

## A New Loyalty

Jesus is our Saviour, he is our Friend but he is also our Lord and King. We are citizens in his kingdom and we owe our loyalty to him. We must not be ashamed to confess Christ and be known as a follower of Christ in the world<sup>27</sup>. Serving Christ is now our first concern<sup>28</sup> and he has the right to command everything we are and have<sup>29</sup>. Sometimes this will mean making hard choices and may mean the loss of some friends but God will give us many more in their place<sup>30</sup>.

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<sup>27</sup> Romans 10: 9

<sup>28</sup> Matthew 6: 33

<sup>29</sup> Mark 12: 30

<sup>30</sup> Matthew 6: 24, Mark 10:29, 30

## 4. Being a member of the Church

### Your church

At this point your minister will talk to you about the life and witness of your particular church. However, there are some things which are true about all Christians in all churches.

### The Church

As part of the Church, Christians....

#### worship together

*To worship* means to give someone their due, and because God is so worthy of all praise to worship him is to glorify him. In one sense everything which we do as Christians is worship<sup>31</sup> but Christians have always met together to praise God. It is important to remember that this is our purpose. Certainly in worship, the preaching should be biblical and interesting, the singing should be thoughtful and offered with thanksgiving, but we meet to worship God. What matters is that he is pleased and honoured.

Jesus Christ is our Lord and so we heed Paul's urging "in view of God's mercy, to offer your bodies as living sacrifices, holy and pleasing to God — this is your spiritual act of worship"<sup>32</sup>. Christians should be faithful stewards of what God's has given us we offer or money for his work in the world.

#### pray together

In our personal relationship with God we speak to him in private as Jesus taught us<sup>33</sup>. This is part of the picture, When we see Christians praying in the New Testament they are normally doing it together<sup>34</sup>. Even the prayer that Jesus gave us as an example for our prayers assumes what we will be praying together; it begins "Our Father ..." <sup>35</sup>. Since it is God who works in people's lives, it is important to pray for him to work among us.

#### learn together

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<sup>31</sup> 1 Corinthians 10: 31

<sup>32</sup> Romans 12:1

<sup>33</sup> Matthew 6: 5-8

<sup>34</sup> Acts 1: 14; 2: 42; 4: 24; 12: 5; 14: 23

<sup>35</sup> Matthew 6: 9-15

God has given us his Word in the Bible, so that we may know all that needs to be known about himself, about ourselves and how we are to continue in right relationship with him. It is our privilege to read the Bible for ourselves, but God has called and equipped some people to be teachers of others. Through the fellowship of the church we can learn with and from other Christians, sharing with them what God has revealed.

### serve together

Christians sometimes value church life for what it can give to them, but our shared life within the church gives us the opportunity to serve.

Each part of the body has its own special contribution to make to the welfare and work of the whole. Some of that service is given within the church, some is to others outside and some is done as we live out the Good News in our lives at home, work and in society. One of the most important services which we can do for others is to share the Good News about our Saviour. Bringing people to faith in Jesus Christ is God's work, but it is work which he shares with us and we are to be faithful witnesses to him.

We should commend Christ by our actions and our speech. Christians should learn how to share the gospel with others so that we can explain what it is to be a Christian.

### **Andy's Story**

Born and raised on the Shankill Road in Belfast, my earliest experience of Christianity was when I regularly joined my friends in visits to the local mission halls, although this was mainly for the free orange juice. Later I joined a paramilitary organisation but from time to time had significant contact with a number of Christians who always seemed to be there for me when I needed help. Eventually, after a period of searching I trusted Jesus Christ with my life. Now I have fully joined my local Presbyterian Church where I enjoy sharing in the Lord's Supper with my fellow believers and exploring God's Word together in our home group. I believe that every Christian in the church has a part to play in the work of God's kingdom. Now God seems to use me to speak to others about Jesus and help them move closer to a relationship with Him.

*Andrew*

### **Brenda's Story**

After going to a mission in the church I had attended for 40 years, I arrived home very uneasy, realising that unless I had received forgiveness through Jesus Christ I would not be going to heaven.

I soon put my trust in the Lord and received him as my Saviour, which was my greatest decision ever. My life has been enriched in many ways, one of which was to become a full member of my church, where I can share in fellowship, serve God, and receive Communion with other believers to remember Christ's great sacrifice for my salvation.

*Brenda*

### **Eamon's Story**

I am a farmer's son from Rathdrum in county Wicklow. When I was younger I was particularly sensitive to the brokenness we see all around us. However, eventually I began to accept life as I saw it. I became immune to all the things that seemed so wrong and I began to believe that this is the way it should be. I had done many things to offend God and I used to wonder how he could ever accept me. In July 1989 I went to America to work and it was there that I heard the good news for the first time. I realised that God has not abandoned this world to its own devices. More importantly, he sent a Rescuer in the person of his Son to sort out the mess we created. This changed everything. Now I'm back living in Ireland, I have joined the Presbyterian Church and though it, I am working to share this good news with others.

*Eamon*