

Free Church of Scotland
Congregation of Shawbost

Members
Handbook

Produced by the Communications Committee of the
Free Church of Scotland

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Introduction

When you publicly confessed faith in Christ and joined his church, it was a source of joy and encouragement to the wider church as well as to you. However, although you may have just become a member, it may be the case that you might not know much about what joining a church really means. You might not even be sure why you should have joined a particular church at all – you may have joined one just because you know it is what Christians tend to do!

This kind of feeling is not unusual: many new believers have these kinds of questions and this booklet is designed to help you to understand why every believer should join a church and what being part of a church involves.

Why should I join a church?

To begin with, it is important to understand that when you became a believer you entered a world of new relationships: Of course, the most important of these relationships is the one between you and Christ – but you have also come into a Christian family of brothers and sisters as well as a Christian kingdom of fellow citizens (*Ephesians 2:19*).

Although the bond which binds the family – or, if you like, the citizens – is a spiritual one, God commands us to express that bond, and nurture it, in a visible and open commitment to one another, a commitment which will always involve privileges and responsibilities.

When we think about it, that is the way all families and kingdoms work: within families, for example, there are relationships with distinctive roles. Within most families, you will find relationships such as parents and children, husband and wife, older brother and younger brother and so on. God structures all these relationship and, as a result, we find privileges and responsibilities working both ways within the organisation known as ‘the family’ (see, for example, *Ephesians 5:22- 6:4*).

The same holds true of kingdoms: they are also structured with a King (or Queen), treasurers, administrators and lawyers as well as a whole host of offices and roles which enable all the citizens to live in harmony.

In this respect, God's family, or kingdom, is no different: when we become believers, God commands us to join his special family/kingdom called 'the Church'. Although there is an important sense in which you join this kingdom inwardly when you are born again, God commands you to join it outwardly as well.

In Old Testament times, you would enter God's kingdom visibly through circumcision – a sign of initiation and cleansing – but, in our New Testament age, you enter the Kingdom visibly by acknowledging Christ's Lordship and by being baptised – also a sign of initiation and cleansing (*Matthew 28:18-20; Acts 8:36-38; 1 Peter 3:21*)

The Free Church of Scotland is one of many churches which believe that the Bible commands believers to baptize their children.

In the Old Testament, every believer was to put the sign of faith (circumcision) on their children to show that they were to be welcomed as part of God's church. We believe that this practice of putting the sign of faith on our children has carried through into the New Testament as well (*Matthew 19:13-15; Acts 2:39; Acts 16:15; Romans 4:11; 1 Corinthians 1:16; Galatians 3 6-9*). So if you were baptized as a child, and have come to faith, you will not have shown your faith by being baptised, but by coming to the Lord's Table. This act, like baptism, is also a public declaration of faith (*1 Corinthians 11:26*) and is part of a body of privileges and duties which are now yours.

Christ's church is organised into individual, connected groups known as 'congregations'. This title was often used in the Old Testament to describe a local assembly of God's people. In the New Testament also, Paul could speak of the 'churches' (plural) in Galatia. So, wherever the church exists in any place, the people belonging to it are called a 'congregation' or 'assembly' and when you join the church to become part of it, you will do so

by joining a local congregation which will be organised as Christ commanded it to be.

You have joined a congregation of the Free Church of Scotland. There should be a leaflet available in your local church which describes the formal structure of the Free Church.

The formal structure is very simple, just as we see it in the New Testament. To help the church to function properly as a united fellowship, God appointed two types of officer or leader in the church and these are *Elders* and *Deacons* and they can be described briefly as follows:

Elders

Elders are the spiritual leaders in the congregation and they are set apart for the work of spiritual oversight by being ordained. The Minister is an Elder who has been recognised by the church as specially called by God to preach. Together, as a formal body, they make up the Kirk Session.

Deacons

There are also Deacons in the congregation to look after the more practical side of the church's life. Part of their responsibility is to use the money you give to the church in a responsible way. This will involve making sure that the local congregation fulfils its financial responsibility to the wider church, looking after all the buildings, giving practical help to anyone in the congregation who might be going through a particular time of need and contributing to other needy causes. They are also responsible for keeping the congregation informed regarding their stewardship of resources.

Seeing as we now understand why we should join a church and understand a little more of the formal structure of the church to which we belong, we are now in a better position to understand what being part of a church involves.

What does joining the church involve?

If joining the church means that we join a kingdom and a family, then it follows that we immediately have important privileges and responsibilities. Although there are many ways in which we can look at these, we will group them under the following headings: Spiritual Oversight, Worship and Spiritual Gifts & Service. We will then finish by reminding ourselves of the key to spiritual well being in all these areas – our personal spiritual relationship with God.

Spiritual Oversight

Privilege

It is your privilege to have Elders set over you by the Lord. Just as parents exercise loving care, leadership and discipline in our families, so the Elders fulfil that role in the church. When they, as a formal body (the ‘Kirk Session’), received you into the fellowship, they became obligated to care for your spiritual needs by giving you spiritual leadership and training.

Depending on your situation, this might involve such things as guidance, encouragement, comfort and rebuke (*Acts 20:28-31; 2 Timothy 4:2; 1 Peter 5:1-4*) They may also be involved in leading Bible studies and prayer meetings and they will guide believers, as well as those who are not yet believers, with private counsel (*1 Timothy 3:1-7*). On some more delicate matters in particular, older women have a special responsibility to teach younger women in the congregation (*Titus 2:4*).

Responsibility

It is your responsibility to recognise that the Elders are set over you by the Lord, support them in their role and be submissive to their loving encouragement and discipline (*1 Timothy 5:17; Hebrews 13:7,17*).

While the role of the Elders means that you can expect a visit from an Elder

or Minister once in a while, it is important that you feel free to approach them at any time or even ask for a visit if you feel it would be helpful. So, if you are looking for guidance, prayer or help in any spiritual matter, or need someone to talk to about your Christian walk, please do not hesitate to get in touch with the Minister or Elders of your congregation.

Worship

Worship is the greatest act in which we can engage and it is part of the duty of Ministers and Elders to organise and conduct public worship on the Lord's Day – which is the New Testament day of rest and worship and is to be kept holy to the Lord (*1 Corinthians 16:1,2; Revelation 1:10*).

The public gathering, by God's appointment and on his day, is of special importance and you must ensure that you make every effort to be there worshipping with his people (*Acts 2:42; Hebrews 10:25*). The whole of the worship service can be seen as both a privilege and a responsibility when we look at it more closely.

Preaching

Privilege

The proclamation of God's Word is the main part of the Lord's Day worship and is the special responsibility of your Minister.

You will find that the main part of your leadership and training will normally come from the regular teaching of God's Word on the Lord's Day. You will probably also have access to other formal and informal teaching in the form of Bible studies or private counsel with any of the elders or other mature Christians in the congregation.

There should also be regular evangelistic preaching from the pulpit, so that you can bring along friends who are not believers.

Responsibility

You must ensure that you attend the church prayerfully, asking God to make you, as well as others, attentive to the Word in such a way that you receive it with faith and love, laying it up in your hearts and practicing it in your life.

The Sacraments

The Lord's Supper and Baptism are two sets of signs and symbols which Christ gave to the Church to remind us of important spiritual truths and which convey blessing to us when we use them in the right way. They are often referred to as 'sacraments'.

Lord's Supper (1 Corinthians 11:23-35)

Privilege

Sharing in the bread and wine of the Lord's Supper helps us to remember what Christ has done for us (*1 Corinthians 11: 23-35*).

The table, the one bread and the common cup (*1 Corinthians 10:17*) remind us of our union with one another in Christ and, when we come to the table in faith, we are strengthened and refreshed.

In some Free Church congregations – where numbers and church design make it difficult to come to a real table – people come forward to a special area which is often either marked off with a white cloth or contains pews covered in white cloth so as to remind us that we are at a table.

There is no rule in the Free Church of Scotland governing the frequency of communion. It is up to your Session to decide how often it is held.

Prior to the communion service itself, it is usually the practice to give either

communion cards or small metal ‘tokens’ – with a communion related text from the Bible written on them – to those who will come to the table.

This practice is to remind us that the Lord expects the Eldership to organise the administration of the Supper and to ensure, as far as can be expected, that those present at the table ought to be there.

In this connection, it is important to remember that the Elders have a responsibility for ensuring that those who are in open willful disobedience to Christ do not come to the Lord’s table until they profess repentance. In this way, we may lose this privilege for a time if our life brings open reproach upon the gospel (*1 Corinthians 5*).

Following good New Testament example, the Elders serve at the Supper (*John 6:1-13*) and usually there is a special address to those who partake either before or after the Supper is dispensed.

Responsibility

As we prepare ourselves for the Lord’s Supper, we should examine ourselves, repent of any sins that are keeping us from a closer walk with Christ, and publicly re-dedicate ourselves to his service remembering that taking the Supper is also an important part of our witness to others (*1 Corinthians 11:23-35*).

Participation

Part of the Kirk Session's responsibility in the oversight of the congregation is to assess those who make application to receive the sacrament of the Lord's Supper. Any person wishing to make public profession of their faith in the Lord Jesus Christ and to receive the privilege of the sacrament of the Lord's Supper for the first time will normally be examined by the Kirk Session. This examination will take the form of interview before the Kirk Session followed by questions addressed to the applicant. The questions addressed to the applicant will be as follows:

1. Do you acknowledge yourself to be a sinner in the sight of God, justly deserving his displeasure, and without hope except in his sovereign mercy?
2. Do you believe in the Lord Jesus Christ as the Son of God, and Saviour of sinners, and have you received him and do you rest upon him alone for salvation as he is offered in the Gospel?
3. Do you now acknowledge Jesus Christ as your sovereign Lord and do you promise, in humble reliance upon the grace of God, to faithfully obey and serve Him, and to live your life in accordance with the Word of God?
4. Do you promise to submit yourself in the Lord to the government of the church, and to humbly adhere to its discipline?
5. Do you promise to participate faithfully in the worship and ministry of the church, and always to seek its peace and purity?

Baptism (Matthew 28:18-20)

Privilege

When we come to faith in Christ, the Bible commands us to be baptised. As we saw earlier, if you were born into a covenant family (that is, a family in which at least one of your parents was a believer) you will probably have been baptised as a child.

In the Free Church, baptism is usually performed by sprinkling or pouring water – note that the ‘washings’ or ‘baptisms’ of the Old Testament were normally sprinklings while the Holy Spirit is ‘poured out’ upon believers (*Hebrews 9:10,13,19,21; Ezekiel 36:25-28; Joel 2:28; Acts 2:33*). This baptism is a sign of being washed by the Spirit of Christ and of our sins having been forgiven because Christ has paid the penalty on the cross. Again, as we saw earlier, it is also the sign of our joining the visible church of Christ.

Responsibility

When you are baptised – and indeed from then onwards, particularly when you witness someone else’s baptism – you should remember what Christ has done for you, and will do for you yet, in cleansing you.

You should also remember, with thankfulness, that he has united you by the one Spirit into the body of Christ as well as your obligation to obey and serve Father, Son and Spirit which your baptism implies (note that in the Free Church, it is customary to take a vow of allegiance and obedience to your Saviour and Lord when you are being baptised).

Also, as we saw already, we believe that the Bible teaches us as believers, to baptise our children in anticipation of their professing faith as they are brought up in the training and instruction of the Lord.

In this case, if you are baptising your covenant child, you are also required to take a vow obliging you before the congregation to raise your child in this Biblical training and instruction.

Benediction

The Benediction (Blessing) is not a time to find keys, put on coats or start edging to the door!

It is a profound, authoritative assurance of God presence with his covenant people and you should always receive it with faith and thankfulness.

Prayer and Praise

In these acts of worship, we respond to the Grace and Kindness of God by presenting our praise in song and offering our praise, confession, thanks and requests by prayer.

In public prayer, when someone leads the assembly and you are largely

silent, it is vital to remember that you are to participate in the prayer and join with it spiritually as it is offered up – just as certainly as you participate vocally in the singing of praise. You are to participate with understanding and with the whole heart.

Offerings (Collection)

Privilege

It would be easy to see your financial offering as a simple responsibility but there is a sense in which it is also your privilege.

Giving involves you in the work of God's kingdom and stimulates your faith in God to care for yourself as well as for others. To help understand this, it is important to know that every congregation contributes the bulk of its financial resources to the central funds of the Free Church of Scotland.

These funds support the full-time ministry of the church as well as the Free Church College, the Mission work of the church, the office staff in Edinburgh and its national church committee structure.

As well as these costs, your local congregation may also be supporting various Missionary and charitable organisations. It will also be providing accommodation for your Minister as well as maintaining the church building and the manse. There will probably be other expenses which may include such things as local administration, a tape/CD ministry or a church library.

Responsibility

In the Bible, emphasis falls on this 'giving' as an offering flowing freely from a thankful heart.

While many believe that the Old Testament command to give a tenth of our income ('tithe') still applies, there can be no doubt that the New Testament commands you to give proportionately (*Acts 11:29*), sacrificially (*Luke*

21:4); regularly (*1 Corinthians 16:2*); generously (*Romans 12:8*) and cheerfully (*2 Corinthians 9:7*).

The best way to give in a regular, disciplined way – which will ensure a regular income for the local and national church – is to use the envelope scheme. Just ask your treasurer for a book of envelopes so that you can put your offering in the suitably dated envelope every Lord's Day, and put the envelope in the plate.

A simple way to increase your giving by a third – without any additional cost to you – is by signing a Gift Aid form. Your treasurer will give you more information on this.

Congregational Fellowship

Aside from worship on the Lord's Day, your local congregation will also probably have a weekday prayer meeting at which congregational prayers will be offered and further teaching and Bible study will take place. You will find that this meeting will greatly help to strengthen your Christian discipleship.

Your congregation may also have other Small Groups set up for study or prayer, possibly under the supervision of an Elder.

Privilege

Your congregation is the special fellowship to which you have been joined by God and is the place where you are privileged to receive the fellowship of his people.

The fellowship should be characterised by true Christian love. The church fellowship is there to give you loving support and guidance and you will find that there are times when you will need special encouragement, advice or

help (*Colossians 3:14-16*).

Some congregations may have small group fellowship to encourage closer fellowship.

Responsibility

Later, we will see how you can contribute to the fellowship, but it is useful to highlight for now that when you contribute to the life of the fellowship, you will increasingly discover the grace and gifts of others.

True congregational fellowship involves mutual commitment and, if you stumble in your walk, it is important that you don't walk away from the fellowship but remain within it.

Whether or not your congregation has small groups, it is important that you develop close Christian fellowship.

Wider Church Fellowship

You will gradually be introduced to the wider work and fellowship of the Free Church through different events and activities such as special Communion services, Conferences, Psalmody workshops, Highways and Byways Missions and Youth Camps.

Spiritual Gifts and Service

It is important to recognise that God has given you specific gifts of spiritual character and ability with which to serve Him (*Romans 12:4-8*). It is also important to consider how you can use and develop these gifts in your local situation, remembering always that the greatest gift you have through faith is the love of God which you are always to show others (*1 Corinthians 13*). It is useful to remember that your call to serve Christ involves the following three spheres of service:

Church

There may be many different ways in which you can serve Christ in your congregation.

In connection with formal church life, some examples may be Sunday School work, teaching at Bible study groups, crèche, catering, offering lifts to church, church door welcoming, presenting, organising committees for various work, practical jobs in and around the church, specific outreach work, administration and contributing articles for the newsletter.

Informally, there are other very important gifts to offer such as the gifts of encouragement, hospitality, welcoming visitors, visiting the elderly and sick – and, perhaps, taking a gift or a tape of the church services to them – developing friendships, writing to missionaries and spending time with people who are lonely and vulnerable.

In the wider church context, there are summer camps, mission work, involvement with SU in the schools, helping Christian agencies, working with the underprivileged and needy citizens, as well as a host of other areas where your gifts may be used.

Family

Your witness for Christ will be watched most closely at home or by those closest to you.

The Bible has a great deal to say about our family relationships (for example, *Ephesians 5:22-6:2*; *Colossians 3:18-21* – as well as countless proverbs from the Book of Proverbs!)

Christ has saved you in your family situation, and the reality of your relationship with Christ will be noticed first at home or by your wider family, wherever they are.

Pray for your family, that you will be given opportunities to share the Gospel with them if they are not Christians and pray for wisdom to put Christian principles into practice in a sensitive and attractive way (for example, *1 Peter 3: 1*).

Community

You must also live out your Christian life in your neighbourhood and at your workplace.

Your environment is unique to you. God has placed you in your unique environment to be a witness to himself both by what you say, but also, perhaps more often, simply by your consistent Christian lifestyle.

Your workplace and neighbourhood are mission fields and so, whenever an opportunity arises, try to humbly testify as to why you are a Christian, and pray that your lifestyle will not contradict the Gospel message.

Your Spiritual Life

It cannot be overemphasised that you will not progress in any area of the Christian life unless you continue to care for your own spiritual life. Nothing is more important than your own personal relationship with Christ and, like any relationship, it needs to be protected and nurtured. In this connection, it is vital that you develop good spiritual habits for yourself, apart from your involvement with the church.

The two key areas that you must protect at all costs are your own times of Bible reading and prayer. It is during these times in which he speaks to you through the Bible and you to him in prayer that your relationship with God will grow. You will discover that reading and prayer are not always easy and that the Devil will spare no effort in keeping you from them, but your

spiritual health will be greatly enriched as you daily look to Christ in worship for strength, guidance and fellowship.

When it comes to our personal time for worship, try to find a quiet place and time when you can be guaranteed some peace to meditate, read and pray. Make sure that you develop it as a daily routine. It may also help to try to vary the way you read the Bible. Your elders, or others in your congregation, might guide you to some useful daily reading notes that explain passages for you (e.g. *Scripture Union, Daily Bread, UCB, Spurgeon's Morning and Evening*).

Make sure you read both Old and New Testaments, reading larger passages of stories (such as the life of Joseph), and smaller sections when it is detailed teaching (like *Ephesians*). Try learning some of the Proverbs (God's gems of common sense for daily living) and some of the psalms (the language of the heart) off by heart and meditate on them (*Psalms 119:99,100*).

In all your reading of the Bible, pray for the help of God's Holy Spirit to guide and teach you.

Conclusion

We hope that this booklet has given you an insight into the life and work of the Free Church of Scotland and some of the privileges and responsibilities of being a member of your congregation in it.

If you have questions that have come to you from reading this booklet, please speak to your Minister or any of your Elders who will be happy to help you in any way they can. To know more of what the Free Church believes, you could try the following:

Westminster Shorter Catechism

Westminster Longer Catechism

Westminster Confession of Faith

The booklist on the next page was also recommended recently by the Communications Committee of the Free Church of Scotland for recommended reading and, if they are not available in your local church, they are all available from:

Free Church of Scotland Bookshop
15 North Bank Street, The Mound
Edinburgh , EH1 2LS

Tel: 0131 718 4141

bookshop@freechurchofscotland.org.uk

John Stott	Why I am a Christian Contemporary Christian Cross of Christ
R Nicole	Our Sovereign Saviour
J M Boice	Foundations of the Christian Faith
G Fee	How to Read the Bible for all it's Worth
J C Ryle	Regeneration
D Macleod	Spirit of Promise A Faith to Live By
R A Finlayson	The Cross in Experience of our Lord A Just God and a Saviour
Douglas MacMillan	God of all Grace
John Owen	What Every Christian Needs to know
J Packer	Knowing God
John Piper	Desiring God
Henry Scougal	Life of God in the Soul of Man

D Searle	And Then There Were Nine
G Chrispin	The Unopened Gift
G Philip	Journey with God
P Yancey	What's so Amazing about Grace
E Donnelly	Heaven and Hell
S. Ferguson	Grow in Grace
	The Christian Life
J Murray	Redemption Accomplished & Applied
J C Ryle	Holiness
R C Sproul	Now That's a Good Question
J Bunyan	Pilgrim's Progress
Os Guinness	Time for Truth
C S Lewis	Screwtape Letters
	Mere Christianity
Kingsley Rendell	Samuel Rutherford
J Purves	Fair Sunshine
J Kennedy	Days of the Fathers in Ross-shire
D Meek	Quest for Celtic Christianity
Irene Howat	God Found Me
	Pain My Companion
Baruch Maoz	Judaism is not Jewish
C Chapman	Whose Promised Land?
A Cooper	Ishmael My Brother
Samuel Escobar	A Time for Mission
Derek Prime	Active Evangelism
Gaius Davies	Inspiring Women
Samuel Bagster	Daily Light
Stormie Omartian	The Power of a Praying Parent