



Bethel
PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

Living Stones
Bethel Church Handbook

Contents

Introduction	
Being a Christian and Belonging to Church	page 3
Bethel Church	page 4
<i>Our History</i>	
<i>Our Beliefs</i>	
<i>Our Leadership</i>	
<i>Our Connections</i>	
Things that Matter in Church Life	page 8
<i>What it means to be a Christian</i>	
<i>How we Grow as Christians</i>	
<i>Sharing the Gospel with Others</i>	
The place of the Bible in Church Life	page 10
Worship: Gathering to Glorify God	page 10
Baptism and Communion	page 12
Every Member matters in the Church	page 13
<i>By simply 'Being There'</i>	
<i>By using our Gifts in God's Work</i>	
<i>By Supporting the Church through Giving</i>	
Handling things that go wrong in Church	page 14
Epilogue	page 15
Hope, Vision and Purpose Statement	page 16

Introduction

Church matters and, if you are a Christian, church membership matters too. It may seem strange to have to make these two statements, but they need to because too often both are treated as though they don't.

Church matters less and less in a world that is becoming increasingly secular. God has been sidelined to such an extent that the idea of church as a God-given institution has become just a quaint irrelevance. But a brief glance over the last 2,000 years of world history (and longer if we include the history of the Jews) tells us that the church cannot be ignored or dismissed so easily. It has been a huge factor not merely in the lives of those who have formed the church as the Christian community, but also in the lives of countless communities and nations to which they have belonged. And that pattern of influence continues to spread today as the church continues to grow around the world.

So too church membership seems to matter less and less to many Christians. In part this is a consequence of the widespread individualism that shapes society as a whole. Community and even family are being exchanged for a self-sustained and self-contained existence for many. You can go through university without ever stepping into a lecture theatre, watch your favourite team without ever being in their stadium and even do your weekly shop without having to go to a supermarket. When it comes to church, it can be tempting for Christians to see the need for it, but only as and when it suits them.

It isn't just that it hasn't always been this way and we have lost something special; but that the Bible makes it clear God never intended it to be this way. Human beings were designed for community. The kind of community that does not merely involve other people but has God at its centre.

The Apostle Peter talks about that in his first letter when he speaks about what it means to be a Christian and how it brings us into a whole new relationship with others because of the relationship we have with Christ. He puts it like this,

As you come to him, the living Stone—rejected by men but chosen by God and precious to him— you also, like living stones, are being built into a spiritual house to be a holy priesthood, offering spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ (1Pe 2.4-5).

The whole idea of ‘stones’ that live and live because they are joined to Christ as ‘the living Stone’ is a graphic picture of building a spiritual community that is strong and will last. Hence the title for this handbook on what it means to belong to the church.

Even though New Testament churches may not have had formal membership lists as many churches do today, when anyone became a Christian they were immediately and publicly identified with the body of Christian believers and were encouraged to play their part in it.

Being a Christian and Belonging to Church

For many people being a Christian and belonging to the church don’t necessarily go together. But when we look at the Bible’s teaching about both, we realise they actually do and that they cannot be separated.

In the New Testament when people heard the gospel and put their faith in Jesus Christ for salvation, it says they were ‘added to the number’ of those who had already believed (Ac 2.47). Even though the word ‘church’ is not used in that passage, it is clear that the group to who they were added was already meeting together regularly and doing all the things that are part and parcel of what the church is all about (Ac 2.42-46).

Elsewhere it is even more explicit. Paul says to the Christians in Corinth, ‘You are the body of Christ and each one of you is a part of it’ (1Co 12.27). Having just described how their Christian experience as not merely something private and personal, but shared with all other true believers, he uses the imagery of the human body to help them grasp what that meant. Just as our natural bodies are made up of many parts but are fundamentally one body, so with the way individual Christians are joined to each other because they have been joined to the Lord Jesus Christ in salvation and share the life he alone can give.

We share the DNA of the natural families into which we are born and are bound to through blood ties with our parents and siblings. So, in an even greater sense in the church family, we share the same spiritual DNA because the eternal life we receive from God is the life we all share by his Holy Spirit.

Paul's big point in what he is teaching the Corinthians is that no Christian can opt out of the body. Just as no body part can say 'I don't need you' so no child of God can say he or she does not need the rest of the spiritual body that is the church (1Co 12.12-27). Indeed, it is only as the body functions well together that the individual parts can enjoy the Christian life more fully.

People sometimes reject this idea because they have had bad experiences with other Christians in the church, or in other churches. So they choose to hold back from getting too close or too involved for fear of getting hurt all over again. Whereas it is not hard to understand such a reaction, it actually does not resolve the underlying issue. If we adopted the same attitude to the families we belong to – with all the hurts and disappointments they inflict – we would soon discover we were losing more than we thought we had gained.

In Bethel we believe it is important for us as Christians to publicly confess our faith in Christ for salvation through membership of the church. It not only shows that we are bound to him in this new life he has given us, but we are bound to one another as well.

Bethel Church

Just as every family has its own particular background and characteristics, so it is with every church. In the New Testament we see many different churches and, while they all share the same spiritual life in salvation that makes them a church, they each have their own flavour. Not surprisingly, the same is true of Bethel.

Our History

Bethel was started in 1991 as a church plant from Ely Presbyterian Church under the leadership of its founding minister, Richard Holst. Initially it met in rented accommodation in the local school, but then had the opportunity to buy what had been a power tool showroom

beside the school. This building was renovated and extended into a place of worship with a useful suite of rooms for its other activities and ministries.

From its earliest days, the congregation has looked for ways not just to attract Christians looking for a spiritual home to come along to Bethel, but to reach out to those who are not yet Christians. Those efforts to share the good news of salvation found in Jesus Christ continue today.

Rev Todd Matocha followed Richard Holst as minister of Bethel in 2006. Todd was from the United States and led the church through the next significant phase of its development during which a growing number of families with young children began to attend.

After his return to America in 2014 Todd was succeeded by Rev Mark Johnston: an Irishman who had ministered in Ireland, London and Philadelphia before moving to Wales. He continues to build on the strong foundations that had already been laid.

Our Beliefs

Bethel is a Presbyterian church. In part this describes the way the church is led. One of the words the New Testament uses for church leaders who are elders is 'presbyter' – hence the label 'Presbyterian' in relation to how the church is governed. But it also says something about what we believe. In keeping with a longstanding practice in the church throughout its history, Presbyterians have recognised the importance of having a clear statement of the main teaching of the Bible on a range of topics.

The *Westminster Confession of Faith* and the *Larger and Shorter Catechisms* that go with it are widely acknowledged as among the very best the church has ever produced. They were designed to expand the already existing *39 Articles* of the Church of England and were significantly shaped by the *Irish Articles* of the Church of Ireland. The fact that the Westminster Confession of Faith was modified and adopted by the Congregationalists in the *Savoy Declaration* and by Baptists in the *1689 Baptist Confession* (as well as its predecessors and

related confessions) speaks for itself in terms of the esteem and acceptance it has across a wide spectrum of churches.

These summaries of what we believe play a key part in the life of the church. We use the catechisms as part of our Sunday School curriculum and they also, together with the confession, function as a guide and safeguard for all the teaching that takes place in the church.

Our Leadership

As has been already pointed out, because Bethel has a Presbyterian form of church government, it is led by elders. These men are elected by the congregation and have overall responsibility for the life of the church. They meet monthly to review the pastoral needs of the congregation and to deal with any matters that relate to the life and ministry of the church.

Our particular view of eldership understands the New Testament to teach that there are two types of elder, those who teach (ministers) and those who rule. They both have the same authority in the church and decisions relating to church life are made collectively by the Session (the body of elders) together. Although the congregation votes these men into office, this does not mean their authority to lead is devolved from the membership. Rather, they are recognised as having the requisite gifts for eldership identified in the New Testament and as such are called to rule under the authority of Christ who is the head of the church and through the authority of his word.

All the elders along with the minister are involved in the pastoral care of the congregation and do their best to get to know everyone in the church to ensure their needs are met. They also seek to be approachable and available for anyone in the congregation to come to them for help or advice.

The work of the elders is complemented by the deacons. The title 'deacon' derives from a Greek word that means 'servant' and points to the responsibilities these men have in the church.

In part they take care of the practicalities of the fabric and finance of the church; but as well as this they have an important role to play in caring for needs in the congregation

and in the wider community. Sometimes described as ‘mercy ministry’ they carry on the time-honoured work of the church in looking after the needs of people who may be struggling with a range of practical needs in life.

The congregation also elects deacons to office and, as with the elders, their suitability for this role is measured by the qualifications set out in several New Testament passages.

The overall leadership provided by the elders is filtered down into the life of the church through a range of people – both men and women – who are responsible for the various groups and ministries run by the church.

Our Connections

The New Testament teaching about the church indicates that the church exists in three dimensions on earth (and four if we include that portion of the church made up of Christians who are now in heaven). There is the church in its local expression of congregations that meet in a particular town or area. The church universal which is made up of all true churches – regardless of denomination – throughout the world. And also the church as it finds its expression in particular regions or geographical areas – as described by Luke when he says, ‘the church [singular] throughout Judea, Galilee and Samaria enjoyed a time of peace’ (Ac 9.26).

For this reason Presbyterian churches have always sought to reflect these key aspects of church life in the wider connections that exist within its framework of church life and oversight.

The wider Presbyterian body of which Bethel is a part is the *Evangelical Presbyterian Church of England and Wales* (EPCEW). It is a relatively young group of churches and was established in the 1980’s with a view to reviving biblical Presbyterianism in England and Wales. From modest beginnings, the denomination has grown and now has churches throughout this region. It is also involved with church planting initiatives in Europe.

The ruling body of EPCEW is called the ‘Presbytery’ and is made up of all its ministers along with ruling elders from each

congregation who are delegated to represent their local churches and be involved in the discussions and decisions that relate to the church as a whole. These meetings are also open to members of EPCEW churches to attend as well as visitors from other churches with whom the Presbytery has links.

From its inception EPCEW has taken seriously its responsibility to cultivate meaningful links with other churches throughout the British Isles and across the world that hold to similar convictions. And, insofar as is practical, it seeks to work in cooperation with them.

Things that Matter in Church Life

Throughout its history the church has all too often lost its way because it has lost sight of the things that matter most if it is to maintain its spiritual health, stability and usefulness. In Bethel we believe the Bible points to certain things that should be central if this is to be the case.

What it means to be a Christian

People give many different answers to the question, 'What makes you a Christian?' Some point to things they do (or don't do) as the basis of why they think God should accept them. Others point to Jesus as the One whose example they try to follow or whose teachings they admire. Others still point to their involvement in church, or even the fact they are citizens of a country that is still in some sense 'Christian'. But none of these definitions of what a Christian is match what the Bible teaches.

When the Philippian jailer asked the question, 'What must I do to be saved?' the Apostle Paul answered, 'Believe in the Lord Jesus Christ' (Acts 16.31). And at the most basic level of the response a person must make to the gospel to enter God's family, then this is it. As Paul puts it elsewhere, 'If you confess with your mouth, "Jesus is Lord," and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved' (Ro 10.9).

For some people that step of faith is a memorable turning point they reached at some point in their life. For others – perhaps especially those who have grown up in Christian families – they can't remember a time when they did not believe. The key

thing, as Jim Packer aptly puts it, is not the moment of conversion, but the reality of 'convertedness'. That is, professing a living faith in Jesus Christ alone for salvation.

There are, of course, many other important aspects and dimensions to what it means to be a Christian – all of which we continually grow into as we grow in the faith. But when people are received into membership in the church, the Elders ask them to explain where their faith is placed to have their sins forgiven and to be sure that God accepts them.

How we Grow as Christians

When the embryonic New Testament church was finding its feet after the Day of Pentecost, we are told how the 3,000 or so people who came to faith through Peter's preaching that day began to grow in their newfound faith. Luke says, 'They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and to the fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer' (Ac 2.42).

He identifies four key elements that are necessary for Christians to grow in their faith: the word of God, fellowship, the sacraments and prayer. And although the word, fellowship and prayer are things we can enjoy informally and personally as Christians, all four together lie at the heart of healthy church life. They have sometimes been described as 'the means of grace'. That is, the means God uses to channel his transforming grace into the lives of his people.

The fact the early Christians in Acts 'devoted themselves' to these things makes it clear they made them a priority. And that is why in Bethel we encourage people to prioritise the three times during the week when we meet to take advantage of these God-given means of spiritual nurture: morning and evening on Sunday and midweek for prayer and Bible study.

Sharing the Gospel with Others

As a church we also believe that every Christian is involved in the task of sharing the gospel with those around us. That does not mean we will all do so in the same way, because we don't all have the same gifts. But, as Peter says, each of us must 'always be prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks you to give the reason for the hope that you have' (1Pe 3.15).

The early church grew not merely through the formal preaching and teaching of the apostles and those who were recognized as evangelists at that time, but as ordinary people 'preached the word [shared the gospel] wherever they went' (Ac 8.4).

We firmly believe that if the church is to grow and become strong, those who belong to the church should proactively look for ways to spread the message of salvation in ways that fit with our personal gifts and abilities.

The place of the Bible in Church Life

It may seem too obvious to have to say it, but it needs to be stated: the Bible should have a central place in the life of the church.

Peter says that it is through the faithful preaching and teaching of the Bible as the word of God that people are born again and brought into the fellowship of God's family (1Pe 1.23). It is the means by which the Holy Spirit engages the minds and hearts of those who are not yet Christians to bring them to faith in Christ.

Peter also says that the same word that brought us into that new life with God is something we should 'crave' as 'pure spiritual milk' that will nurture us from spiritual infancy towards maturity and usefulness in the faith (1Pe 2.2).

The Bible is central in our worship, not as an end in itself – we do not worship the Bible – but as the way in which God makes himself known and engages with us. So too it is the controlling factor in all the different ministries and activities we organise as a church.

Worship: Gathering to Glorify God

So too we believe that worship is crucially important to what it means to be a church. In his letter to the Ephesians – the letter in which he has most to say about the importance of the church – Paul says that the whole purpose of the church is that 'we might be for the praise of his [God's] glory' (Eph 1.12). This is the church's supreme mission statement: 'We exist for the glory of God'.

Again this needs to be stated because too often the church has existed for its own glory, to build its own little empire; but God has planned otherwise.

The Bible sees worship as being expressed in two dimensions. The obvious one is what we do when we meet together as the church to worship God through song, prayer, hearing the Bible read and proclaimed, presenting our offerings to God, receiving the sacraments Christ has ordained for the church and being sent on our way with God's blessing. Worship is the highest activity we can engage in as human beings: in it we are lifted up into heavenly realms to praise the triune God who is our creator and redeemer and commune with him. But the Bible warns us that it is possible to go through this outward expression of worship in a way that renders it null and void. In the prophecy of Isaiah God says, 'These people worship me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me' (Isa 29.13) – something Christ quoted when he was condemning the false worship of his day.

So the other key component of worship that pleases God is that it is 'in spirit and in truth' (Jn 4.24). That is, worship that is stirred by God's Holy Spirit and shaped by God's word, but that also engages the spirit and mind of those who offer it. We are to worship God with head and heart engaged.

The Bible also has a theology of worship that sees it as having order and logic in all we do as we draw near to God. Because we are not free to approach God in our own merit or simply because we choose to (Ps 24.3-5), we remind ourselves we can only do so because God calls us to worship him. So too as we draw near to God, we realise he is enthroned in heavenly splendour and so we come in a spirit of adoration in song and prayer. Because he is holy and we are sinful, confession of sin is a vital element as we stand before him – offered with the reminder from his word that when we confess he will not fail to pardon. Worship is also a dialogue between God and his people. He speaks to us through the Bible, we respond in prayer, song and by bringing our tithes and offerings to him. It is also an act of rich and deep communion with God with its most profound expression being found in the Lord's Supper. Worship is climactically something through which we not only bless God in our praise, but in which God blesses us by his grace – so his parting words to his people are words of benediction and encouragement.

Worship matters and in Bethel we seek to cultivate a rich appreciation of what it entails in order that we may bring God the kind of adoration in which he will delight.

Baptism and Communion

Both baptism and communion have been deep-seated sources of contention within the church throughout its history. In some significant instances this has led to deep divisions occurring in the church over how they are to be understood and practised.

Part of the reason for this has been a failure to understand them in context, because the Bible does not present them in a vacuum. Just as an engagement ring, or a wedding ring are not merely bits of jewellery, but are rich in symbolism and significance which can only be grasped when they are seen in the context in which they are given, so too with these two rites.

Interestingly the context in which both are presented in the Bible is that of the spiritual marriage between God and his people – the covenant that God established with them in which he says, ‘I will be your God and you will be my people’ (Je 30.22). And in both the Old and New Testaments God attaches ‘signs and seals’ (Ro 4.11) to that covenant bond to bind himself to keep his promise to those who believe and assure them that he can be trusted.

So the New Testament rite of baptism replaced the Old Testament rite of circumcision as the rite of initiation into God’s family (Col 2.11-12). And, just as circumcision was to be applied not just to adults who were publicly professing their faith in God’s promise of salvation, but to their children also; so the same scope carries through into its New Testament counterpart. For that reason and in line with very many faithful churches through the ages, Bethel not only baptises those who have come to faith in Christ, but have not been baptised before; but also baptises the children of believing parents.

With the Lord’s Supper, or communion, we understand this to be the sacramental meal instituted by the Lord Jesus Christ for the benefit of his believing people. He did not give it to be a mere memorial of his death (though it includes a perpetual remembrance and proclamation of it); but it is also an act of communion with the

crucified, risen Saviour. In the language of the *Book of Common Prayer*, capturing Jesus' own words in John 6.53-58, it allows us to 'feed on him by faith in our hearts with thanksgiving'. Jesus has promised to presence himself with his people in a unique way in the sacrament in order to bless us.

Every Member matters in the Church

In some church traditions there is an unhealthy focus on the minister as the person who is very much at the centre and to the fore of what happens in the church. That is not the kind of church life we see in the New Testament. Rather, we are told that every member of the church matters and every member has a part to play. Paul brings that out very clearly in what he says in his letter to the Ephesians (Eph 4.11-16). Although ministers and elders have a very definite Christ-ordained role, if they are fulfilling it, they will have the effect of 'preparing God's people for works of service' in order that 'the whole body may be built up' by Christ working through the lives of all his people.

There are two very simple and basic ways through which each member in Bethel is able to play his or her part in building up the church.

By simply 'Being There'

It may seem too simple to merit a mention, but just 'being there' means a great deal. In the same way as a family member's absence is felt when they are not there for a family gathering, so too when God's family meets together. Of course, there are times when people are unavoidably absent for a range of reasons, but the exhortation in Hebrews is always worth remembering:

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 (He 10.25).

Through being together in the formal context of worship itself and being able to mingle with those who are brothers and sisters in Christ and meet those who are new to the church is a very significant way of expressing the oneness and love we enjoy in Christ as the family of God.

By using our Gifts in God's Work

The Bible also speaks about the individual gifts God gives his people: the specific talents and abilities to be used for the benefit of others (Ro 12.3-8; 1Co 12.1-27; 1Pe 4.7-11). Church should be the place where those gifts are put to use.

There are many ways to do that in Bethel: from helping out with practical tasks like serving coffee or cleaning to teaching the children, helping to run the different meetings each week, or visiting those who are no longer able to get out to church. There are many ways to help and we are keen for people to find ways to do so.

By Supporting the Church through Giving

The Bible has a lot to say about supporting the work of the church financially – not as a form of church taxation, but as a tangible expression of gratitude to God for his abundant provision for our daily needs in life.

In Bethel, we include an offering as part of our Sunday worship since giving is an act of worship. There is also a freewill offering box at the rear of the sanctuary through which people can give to missions as well as to specific organisations and projects we support as a church. Some people choose to give by means of a standing order set up in conjunction with their bank. And anyone giving to the church who is a UK taxpayer is encouraged to fill out a Gift Aid form to allow the church to claim charitable tax rebate on their donations.

Further information about giving can be found in one of the free copies of John Stott's booklet, *The Grace of Giving* – available on the bookstall – or by speaking directly with the church Treasurer.

Handling things that go wrong in Church

Anyone who knows anything about church life will know that, sadly, things go wrong in churches. Sometimes it is through breakdowns in relationships. Other times it is people getting caught up in some serious sin or wrongdoing, or perhaps something else. The church is not the church because it is made up of perfect people; it is the church because it is home for sinners who have been reconciled to

God through his saving grace in Jesus Christ. But, since things do go wrong in church life, how should they be handled?

The Bible tells us that the one response we cannot have is simply to try and 'bury' such failures, pretending they have not happened. It is only as we have the courage to face them and build the kind of respect for one another and for those who are entrusted with the spiritual welfare of the congregation that we can to work them through constructively.

Jesus lays down some basic principles for how best to do this in Matthew 18.15-20. There he shows how issues can be addressed in the church discreetly and without allowing them to become the stuff of gossip, but actually help those involved to deal with them.

As with every congregation we pray that such problems may be rare in our church, but when they do occur we very much want to handle them in a way that honours God and respects the individuals affected by them.

Epilogue

The church is meant to be the most special grouping to which anyone can belong. The Bible describes it in all kinds of ways from 'glorious body' and 'radiant bride' to 'fruitful vine' and 'strong city'. We hope that Bethel can be all these things in our own modest way and that you will not only enjoy finding out about us, but would be eager to join with us.

If you have any questions at all about the church, please do not hesitate to speak to one of the elders and we will be eager to try and help.

Bethel Presbyterian Church

Hope, Vision and Purpose Statement

Our Hope:

To Reach our local Community and the wider World with God's Good News for Salvation

To Build God's People as his New Community in the Church and for his Glory

To Send every Christian, equipped for service, to live and speak for Christ wherever he has placed them

Our Values:

That Christ is Supreme

- Over all for his Father's glory and his people's good
- As the One we trust for salvation and are called to obey

That the Church is Central to God's Purpose

- As God's redeemed community
- As God's worshiping community
- As God's serving community

That the Means of Grace are Vital to spiritual Wellbeing

- Because Christ builds his church by the Holy Spirit through his word, fellowship, the sacraments and prayer
- Because Christians grow in relationship with God and with one another through these God-appointed means

That all Christians are Called to Serve Christ

- Every Christian has been given gifts for service
- Every Christian is called to use their gifts for God
- Every Christian is to live for Christ wherever they are
- Every Christian is to speak of Christ in all areas of life

Our Purpose:

To lead people to faith in Christ that we may grow together as the body of Christ and serve Christ as we live and labour for him to the glory of God