

Bethesda Baptist Church Nairobi

Church Constitution

Definition of a Local Church

A local church is an Assembly of God's people who have joined themselves together in full purpose of heart under Christ, submitting themselves unquestionably to Him in His Word.

Purpose of a Local Church

The sole purpose of our existence is to glorify God the Father, Son and Holy Spirit. This is done by pursuing the following objectives:

The united worship of God.

The edification of all the members through the preaching and teaching the whole counsel of God as revealed in the Bible.

The proclamation of the Gospel for the salvation of sinners and their incorporation into the church.

Fellowship amongst the members of the church.

Confession of Faith

We take the whole Bible, the 66 commonly received books of the Old and New Testaments, as our confession of faith. Although we accept no man-made confession as finally authoritative, we receive the 1689 Baptist Confession as true to the Bible. We present below a summary of what we believe the Bible teaches to instruct and guide our members and to preserve us against false doctrine.

Scripture: The Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments are equally and in every part the Word of God, without any error, a sufficient and final revelation of all saving knowledge, faith and obedience. They must be received as the final authority in all matters of faith and practice. No other writings are accepted as Word of God or as having any such authority.

God: There is only one eternal God, who is Spirit, the Maker, Preserver, and Ruler of all things. He is self-sufficient, having in and of Himself all perfections and being infinite in them all. He accomplishes all things according to His will and for His own glory, yet He is not the author or approver of sin, nor does He destroy the responsibility of His intelligent creatures. This God is revealed to us as Father, Son and Holy Spirit, one God in three equal and distinct persons.

Man: God created the first man and woman, Adam and Eve, by a definite creative act, after His own image. The historic fall from the original righteousness in which mankind was created is the source of all the evil in the world. The guilt of Adam's sin is reckoned to all his descendants, so that all men are conceived in a state of guilt, corruption, separation from God and condemnation to eternal death. This

state is known as original sin, and from it proceed all actual transgressions. Therefore, although completely responsible to God to perform what He has commanded, man is completely unable of himself to do any spiritual good, not even to repent of sin and believe on the Lord Jesus Christ.

Salvation Planned: From all eternity God has planned to save for Himself out of lost and fallen humanity an innumerable multitude, not because of any foreseen faith or merit on their part, but because of His mercy in Christ, who He appointed as the only Mediator, the prophet, priest, and king of those whom the Father had given Him. All whom God has thus determined to save will certainly be called, justified, and glorified.

Salvation Accomplished: According to the plan of God, Christ, the eternal second Person of the Godhead, united to Himself a real human nature through the womb of the Virgin Mary, becoming fully God and fully man in one Person, yet without sin. For the salvation of His people, He perfectly kept God's holy law, voluntarily suffered and died as a full and sufficient substitutionary sacrifice for them and thus making reconciliation to God for them. He was buried, rose bodily on the third day, ascended into heaven with the same body, and sat down at the right hand of the Father. In heaven He now reigns over all things for the church and makes continual intercession for His people.

Salvation Applied: The exalted Christ sends forth the Holy Spirit to apply the fruits of His accomplished redemption to all His people, which application is essential unto salvation. The new birth, the giving of a new heart, by which the sinner is enabled to repent and believe, is not an act of man's free will and power, but the result of the effectual and gracious working of the Holy Spirit, who works when, where, and how and in whom He pleases. By this work, often referred to as regeneration, the Spirit enlightens their minds and renews their wills and affections, as God effectually calls them into fellowship with His Son through His Word. The immediate fruits of regeneration are:

Repentance: Repentance is a gift of God, whereby the Holy Spirit convinces a person of the wickedness of his sinfulness and his acts of rebellion against God, so that he turns to God in sorrow in order to walk in obedience before Him and to please Him. No one is saved without genuine repentance and unreserved submission to Christ as Lord.

Faith: Faith is a gift of God by which a person receives and rests on Jesus Christ alone for salvation, as He is freely offered to sinners in the Gospel. Although a person is saved through faith alone, this faith never stands alone but is accompanied by all the other fruit of the Holy Spirit.

Justification and Adoption: Justification is an act of God's free grace by which He pardons all the sins of His people, past, present and future, and reckons them as righteous in His sight on account of the righteousness of Christ imputed to them and not because of anything done in them or by them. Faith in Christ is the only instrument of justification. All those who are justified in Christ receive the promised Holy Spirit of adoption, so that they are truly sons of God.

Sanctification and Perseverance: Sanctification is two-fold:

(i) **Definitive:** at conversion believers are united to Christ in His death to sin and resurrection to

new life. As a result the rule of sin in their lives is broken and they willingly seek to be ruled by the Word of God.

(ii) Progressive: sanctification, which is the process of being entirely conformed to the image of Christ, will be perfectly completed only on the last day. It is the work of the Holy Spirit in us through our mortifying sin and obeying the commands of God. Because of indwelling sin, all believers experience a constant warfare between the flesh and the Spirit. However, the indwelling of the Spirit is the seal and guarantee that every true believer will persevere in the faith until the end.

The Church:

The Lord Jesus Christ is the only head of the universal church, His body, which is made up of all the people of God of all ages. Christians ought to gather together in local churches, to each of which Christ has given the necessary authority to administer order, discipline and worship. A true local church is recognized by the true preaching of the Word of God, proper administration of the ordinances, and the exercise of spiritual discipline. The only officers of a local church are its elders and deacons.

Ordinances:

Christ has instituted and given to His church two ordinances, Baptism and the Lord's Supper:

Baptism is an ordinance of Christ in which a believer is immersed in water upon profession of faith as a sign of his union with the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit. Baptism does not make a person a Christian, nor is it essential to salvation, but it is a means of grace to believers who are being baptized. It is a sin to neglect this ordinance because Christ has commanded that believers be baptized.

The Lord's Supper is an ordinance of Christ in which the assembled believers eat bread and drink the cup. These are signs of the broken body and shed blood of Christ. This ordinance should be observed repeatedly by the Church until Christ returns. It is in no sense a sacrifice but is designed as a memorial of Christ's death, and it is a means of grace by which believers draw near to Him in faith. It is also an affirmation of the unity of all true believers.

Government: The office of elder has alone been appointed by Christ. Such elders are given spiritual authority to oversee the local church in accordance with Christ's Word.

Evangelism and Missions: It is the duty of every church and every Christian to extend the Gospel to all men everywhere, in recognition of the insufficiency of natural revelation unto salvation and that there is salvation only in the Name of Christ. Faith comes by hearing and hearing by the Word of God, and so the principal means for discipling the nations is the preaching and teaching of the Word of God. The goal of such work is the establishing of other local churches, under the headship of Christ, with their own officers directly responsible to Christ.

The Christian Life:

The Law of God: God's revealed will is summarized in the Ten Commandments which, although they

cannot justify the sinner, are binding on all men and form the continuing rule of life for every believer. This includes a regard for the sanctity of the Lord's Day, Sunday, which is the day set apart by believers unto the Lord in the New Testament in fulfillment of the fourth commandment.

The State: Civil government is ordained of God, and it is the duty of every Christian to submit to the civil authorities in all matters consistent with the teaching of Scripture. Christians are especially commanded to pray for their rulers.

Christian Liberty: The Christian must always seek to have a conscience void of offence towards God and man. God alone is the Lord of the conscience, and the believer is not held subject to the doctrines and commandments of men which are in any way contrary to or not contained in His Word.

The Last Things:

Death: The bodies of men at death return to dust, but the souls of the righteous to rest with God, and the souls of the wicked to be reserved under darkness until the judgment.

Return of Christ: At a day and hour which no man knows, Christ will return to this earth personally, bodily, and in glory.

Resurrection and Judgment: On that appointed Day, God will judge all men by Christ Jesus. The bodies of all who have died, both the just and the unjust, will be raised and united with their souls. The resurrected dead together with all those who are alive at His coming will be publicly judged according to their works. The wicked will go into conscious and everlasting punishment, and the righteous into everlasting life.

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Membership

Eligibility: The following are the requirements for all who seek membership in this local church:

A profession of repentance towards God and faith in our Lord Jesus Christ.

Evidence that this profession is genuine by Scriptural experience of conversion, a belief in the truths of Scripture as summarized in the confession above, and a practice of consistent Christian living. (Where there is any definite disagreement with the confession of faith, assurance must be given that active denial will not occur.)

Baptism following repentance and faith. (Any believer who wishes to join the church but who conscientiously believes in the Scriptural validity of his baptism as an infant will have his application sympathetically considered.)

Willingness to submit to the teaching and government of the church.

Procedure for Acceptance: Each applicant shall be interviewed by at least two of the elders and must fulfill the requirements under 5.1. At a congregational meeting, the elders shall recommend to the church for their approval those they consider to be qualified for membership, having circulated the names of the proposed members at least one week previous to the meeting. At the meeting, those proposed shall give orally or have read a short account of their faith. Those approved (as under 8.3.2. & 3.), by the congregation shall usually be received into membership at the following celebration of the Lord's Supper, by the right hand of fellowship of the elders.

Responsibilities of Each Member:

Attendance at the regular worship services, prayer meetings, the Lord's Supper and congregational meetings (Acts 2:42; Heb. 10:25).

Mutual care for every member, according to clear Scriptural principles (for example: Rom. 13:8; Gal. 6:2; Heb. 3:13; 1 Pet. 4:9; etc.).

Regular and proportionate giving for the support of the work of the church, according to how God has prospered (1 Cor. 16:2; 2 Cor. 9:6, 7).

The Scriptural use of spiritual gift(s) in order to edify the whole church (Rm. 12:6; 1 Cor. 12:7).

Scriptural honor and submission to those in spiritual authority in the church (1 Thess. 5:12, 13; Heb. 13:17), including necessary financial support (1 Tim. 5:17), and prayer for them (Col. 4:2-4).

Service for the extension of the kingdom of God throughout the world (for example, by witnessing and prayer). Such service must be carried on in the context of the local church.

Cultivation of personal holiness through regular reading of the Bible and prayer, the right use of the Lord's Day, as well as through public worship and the ordinance of the Lord's Supper.

Marriage: Marriage is to be considered honorable and desirable (Heb. 13:4), but Christians must not marry unbelievers, and must do nothing to promote such marriages (1 Cor. 7:39, 2 Cor. 6:14). Those who become Christians when they are married must remain with their partner (1 Cor. 7:12). Adultery and desertion of a believer by an unbeliever because of the believer's Christianity are the only possible grounds for dissolving the marriage union (Matt. 5:32; 1 Cor. 7:15). Monogamy is the Scriptural standard although those converted within a polygamous relationship may be baptized and received into full membership. However, each individual case must be investigated and approved by the elders.

Family: The husband is the head of the wife and he is commanded to love her; likewise the wife is commanded to obey her husband in all things (Eph. 5:22-25). Children should be recognized as a gift from the Lord, but inability to have children (for whatever reason) should not be considered a ground for separation. Both parents must bring up the children in the nurture and admonition of the Lord (Eph. 6:4).

Any member who is compelled to live at a distance from the church for periods of more than two months

at a time must keep regular personal contact with at least one of the elders.

Privileges of Each Member:

- Participation in the Lord's Supper with other believers.
- Pastoral care of the elders, to whom they have direct access for advice and prayer whenever mutually convenient (Acts 20:28; Eph. 4:11-15; Heb. 13:17).
- Mutual care so that any member can count on the love and practical assistance of other members whenever necessary and possible (Acts 4:32).
- Participation in discussing the business of the church and voting for officers (if over 18 years old).

Types of Membership:

- Resident Membership: Those who fulfill all the responsibilities of membership shall be called resident members.
- Non-resident Members: Any resident member who becomes unable to fulfill the responsibilities of membership under 5.3.1 because of moving away from the area automatically be considered a non-resident member. Upon resuming residence in the area he shall automatically be considered a resident member again and expected to fulfill the responsibilities outlined above.

Discipline:

- Occasions: The New Testament requires churches to withdraw fellowship from erring members in certain circumstances, the purpose being to lovingly restore them through repentance and to keep the church pure for God's glory. In general, this withdrawal is necessary where there is a clear, deliberate, and persistent breach of the basis of membership (2 Thess. 3:6). In particular, there are the following categories:
- A serious offence committed against a fellow-member which is not followed by apology and restitution (Matt. 18:15-17).
- Causing strife or division in the church through party spirit (Rom. 16:17; Tit. 3:10).
- Holding and teaching beliefs contrary to the plain teaching of Scripture and destructive of the Gospel, or the denial of any truth fundamental to the Christian faith (1 Tim. 1:19,20; 2 Jn. 7-10).
- Open immoral behavior (1 Cor. 5:1-5).
- Continual failure to attend the obligatory meetings of the church without good cause (see 5.3.1.).
- Procedure: It must be along the lines of Matt. 18:15-17. If the offense is a private matter, it must first be dealt with privately and then in the presence of witnesses. If this procedure fails to bring reconciliation through repentance, or if the offense is public, charges against a member must be

submitted in writing to the elders. There must be at least two witnesses (1 Tim. 5:19). If all efforts by the elders and congregation fail to bring the offender to repentance, then by the recommendation of the elders and the vote of the members (8.3.2. & 3.), he shall be excluded from the rights and privileges of membership and treated as unbeliever. If at any subsequent time there is satisfactory evidence of repentance, the offender shall be forgiven by the whole congregation and received back into full membership (2 Cor. 2:6-8).

– Voluntary Termination of Membership: Resignation should not be lightly considered, and those wishing to resign must submit a written statement to the elders with their reasons. Recommendation to membership in another church may be withheld by the elders if they consider that the reasons given for resignation from the church are inadequate or invalid.

Church Ordinances

– An ordinance is an outward, sensible sign of an inward, spiritual grace possessed by the recipient. There are only two such signs ordained by Christ to be followed in the church: Baptism and the Lord's Supper.

– Baptism: Baptism is for those who have become believers, and in normal circumstances will not be administered to anyone who does not intend to become a member of the church. Baptism should be administered by immersion in water, publicly in the presence of the congregation. It is only required once, and baptism as a believer by immersion in another church will be recognized as valid.

– The Lord's Supper: The Lord's Supper is for all believers, and attendance of its celebration is obligatory on all members of the church. In normal circumstances only those in membership with this or another church, and who are not under church discipline, will be admitted to the table. As the Lord's Supper is a means of grace for those who share in it, it shall be observed frequently, at least once each month.

7.1. The Lord Jesus Christ is the only head of the church (Col. 1:18), governing it by the Word of God. This government is exercised in particular local churches through elders who apply the Word of God in their teaching and ruling. Each local church is thus independent, being directly under the rule of Christ. Therefore, this church shall not enter into any denomination, association, or union which involves the loss of this independence.

7.2. Scripture recognizes two kinds of officers in the church: elders (also called bishops, presbyters or pastors) and deacons (Phil. 1:1). In normal circumstances the church should be governed by a plurality of elders (Acts 14:23). There is no fixed number of elders or deacons, but men should be appointed to these offices as they are called and gifted by Christ. They will remain in office indefinitely until such a time as they no longer fulfill the duties of their respective offices. No man may be appointed to either office unless he subscribes fully to this constitution.

Church Officers

Elders:

Functions: The main function of elders is to be shepherds over the church as laid down in such passages as Acts 20:20,21,28-31; Heb. 13:17; and 1 Pet. 5:1-3. In particular, there are the following functions:

- Prayer and preaching (Acts 6:4), being considered as the main duty according to apostolic precedent. While every elder is a shepherd, one or more of the elders will be more fully devoted to formal and public teaching of the Word of God (1 Tim. 5:17). Other gifted men may publicly teach the Word of God under the direction of the elders.
- Visitation for the purpose of watching over individual souls (Acts 20:20; Heb. 13:17), by private instruction, encouragement and dealing with any problems. The sick especially should be visited (Jas. 5:14). Each member shall be visited at least once every six months by an elder.
- Church meetings should all be arranged for and presided over by the elders, and they are responsible for the appointment of anyone who must perform an official function in the church.
- Discipline must be maintained by the elders through teaching, rebuking and the recommendation of appropriate action to the church. In any dispute over the interpretation of the constitution the decision of the elders is final.
- Interviewing applicants for membership.
- Recommending to the church additional elders or deacons, or the dismissal of any who fails to fulfill their duties.
- Final authority in matters of finance and property (Acts 11:28, 29).
- All elders shall have equal authority, being subject to one another, and they shall regularly meet together to pray and discuss the spiritual matters of the church (Acts 13:2).
- Qualifications – An elder must possess all the personal, domestic and pastoral qualifications for the office as clearly laid down in 1 Tim. 3:1-7 and Tit. 1:5-9. Three years after his appointment and every three years thereafter, each elder shall be re-examined by the congregation. If the congregation considers that he still possesses the required qualifications and has satisfactorily fulfilled his responsibilities they shall re-appoint him to his office.

Appointment

- The Nomination of an elder shall be by the unanimous recommendation of the existing elders, if they see that his gifts are already evident in the congregation. No man shall be nominated without his prior consent and such consent should arise out of a personal conviction of the Lord's calling him to be an elder.
- After at least two weeks' notice has been given, a specially called church meeting shall vote by ballot on the recommendation, before being put to the vote; the passages in 7.3.2. shall be explained to the congregation. While unanimity in voting is the aim in such an important decision, a 75% vote of acceptance is required to confirm an elder (Acts 14:23).

– The appointment of the elder shall then be publicly confirmed with the laying on of hands of the elders and the prayer of the whole church (1 Tim 4:14).

– Support – It is desirable that at least one of the elders be relieved from his secular calling in order to devote himself fully to prayer and the ministry of the Word. Such an elder is entitled to receive remuneration for his service (1 Cor. 9:13, 14; 1 Tim. 5:17, 18).

Termination of Office

Termination of office is a serious step, and it should be considered only if it is apparent the elder is no longer able to fulfill his duties, or if he has a clear call to minister the Word of God elsewhere, or if he no longer finds himself able to agree fully with the confession of faith as outlined in this constitution. For such reasons he may be released without prejudice.

If at any time an elder's preaching, teaching or manner of life is not in full accord with the doctrinal or moral standards of the church, his service as an elder shall be terminated immediately following a congregational meeting called for this specific purpose (see 8.2.3.), if there is approval by the majority of members present at the meeting. 1 Tim. 5:19-21 should be the guide in all accusations against an elder.

Deacons:

Functions – The main function of deacons in the local church is to assist the elders by relieving them of the more material affairs so that the latter may concentrate on their spiritual duties (Acts 6:1-4). Duties of the deacons include:

Ministry to the sick and needy, especially those who are members of the congregation, including visitation and, if necessary, provision for their material needs from the church's funds. They should keep the elders informed of all such needs.

Collecting, distributing, and accounting for the church's finances. All accounts should be properly audited in accordance with the law and always open for inspection by members.

Periodically reviewing the needs of any paid church worker, or one sent out from the church to labor elsewhere.

Administering the practical affairs of the church, such as preparation for the Lord's Table, and maintenance and preparation for meetings of the church premises.

The deacons shall regularly meet under the chairmanship of one elder. It is desirable that deacons and elders meet together from time to time. Any decision by the diaconate may be over-ruled by the elders.

The church treasurer and secretary shall be appointed by the elders from amongst the diaconate.

Qualifications – Although their functions are of a material nature, deacons must have the proper

spiritual qualities as laid out in Acts 6:3 and 1 Tim. 3:8-13.

Appointment – Nominations to the diaconate will be made by the members of the church (Acts 6:3). A nominee must receive the unanimous approval of the elders because, in their judgment, his gifts are already evident in the congregation. After the nominations have been considered for at least two weeks, a 75% vote of approval by the congregation shall constitute the appointment of a man to the office of deacon.

Termination of Office:

A deacon may resign from office without prejudice if he presents adequate evidence to the church that he is no longer able or qualified to carry out his responsibilities.

If at any time a deacon's ministry or life is not in full accord with the doctrinal or moral practices of the church, his services as a deacon shall be terminated immediately following a congregational meeting, if there is approval by the majority of the membership present at the meeting.

Church Meetings

Purpose: In the New Testament, decisions affecting the life of the church were generally taken when the whole church met together (1 Cor. 5:4), the main purposes being:

To obtain the approval of the church for measures recommended by the elders and deacons.

To inform the members about matters which cannot be made known at public meetings.

Particular items such as finance and expenditure, applications for membership, the exercise of discipline and election of officers, alteration to the constitution, reports on the spiritual condition and life of the church, sending out workers.

Types: There shall be three types of congregational meeting:

The regular church business meeting, which shall be held at least three times a year.

The annual general meeting, to meet as soon as possible after the audited accounts for the previous financial year have been received. The specific purpose of this meeting will be: A) to review and report on all church activities in order to discuss them; (B) to present the financial statement for the previous year; and (C) to discuss and approve the proposed budget for the coming year.

Extraordinary church meetings may be called by the elders, or by a letter to the elders signed by at least one-third of the membership, which also states the specific purpose(s) of the proposed meeting.

Conduct:

Every congregational business meeting should be announced at least two Lord's Days before the date on which it is held. In case of an emergency extraordinary church meeting every member must be notified, preferably in writing. If these requirements are not met, no resolution passed is valid.

For the transaction of business two-thirds of the resident membership at the time of the meeting, must be present to form a quorum. However, in the event of a lack of quorum at a properly called meeting, a second meeting for that agenda may be called and, if that second meeting is publicly announced in two consecutive Sunday morning services, then all those attending that second meeting shall form the quorum. This in no way implies that congregational meetings are optional (see 5.3.1 and 5.6.1.5).

At least 75% approval by the members present and eligible to vote is required to pass a recommendation (except in the case of dismissal of an official). Members must be over 18 years old to vote. Attendance at all official church meetings is obligatory. Non-resident members may attend but are not eligible to vote. If a member is unable to attend he must send a letter of apology. In all matters unanimity of the body of Christ is sought for.

One of the elders shall preside over every church meeting. Each meeting shall begin with prayer and the reading of the minutes of the previous meetings, and shall end with prayer. Nothing shall be brought before the church meeting except through the elders, and in writing. Sufficient opportunity shall be given for discussion of all matters. The Secretary shall record minutes of each church meeting.

Matters discussed at the meetings of the church are confidential. Therefore members are permitted to speak of these matters only to fellow-members.

Formation of New Churches

One of the goals of the church is to extend the Gospel through the planting of new churches.

To attain this end, qualified elders should be prayed for and then commissioned to plant new churches in other needy areas. Such an elder will remain under the oversight of the Bethesda Baptist Church until such time as the new church is constituted, and registration is completed with the Registrar of Societies. From this time, it will be a fully independent church, although it is assumed that ties of very close fellowship will remain.

If there comes a request from an individual or already existing group to be covered by our registration, the elders shall first investigate it, and if it is considered worthy, shall make recommendation to the Church for approval. Such covering may be revoked at the discretion of Bethesda Baptist Church.

Amendments To The Constitution

No human constitution is without its weaknesses and in the light of experience, growth, and deeper understanding of the Scriptures, amendments and additions to this constitution may be found advisable. An amendment can be made only upon the unanimous recommendation of the elders. It must be fully discussed at the church meeting previous to the one at which a vote on it is taken, and at least 75% of the total voting membership must be in approval.

Disolution

The church shall not be dissolved except on the recommendation of all the elders and at least 75% of the total membership. Before any action is taken, prior permission in writing must be obtained from the Registrar of Societies by a written application signed by the elders. The assets of the church shall be realized for cash, all debts paid, and the balance distributed to other churches or causes as the church sees fit, this decision to be made at the meeting where approval was made for dissolution.