

# CASTLEREAGH FELLOWSHIP

## MEMBERSHIP POLICY

In June 2023, Castlereagh Fellowship (CF) took the decision to introduce a formal membership. Previously the Fellowship had operated with a looser arrangement whereby the Elders deemed someone a member if they subscribed to the Fellowship's beliefs, attended its services and considered it to be their local church. Following a considerable period of consultation, prayer and Biblical reflection, a formal membership policy has now been adopted. The rationale for introducing such a policy is set out below, along with the benefits and responsibilities of membership and the mechanics of how to become (or cease to be) a member of CF.

- WHY HAVE A FORMALLY DEFINED MEMBERSHIP FOR CF?

1. Because the New Testament implicitly encourages it

Whilst there is no specific passage or verse of Scripture that explicitly commands church membership, there are three strands of evidence which point towards it:

- a. Elders' pastoral responsibility

In Acts 20:28 the Apostle Paul instructs Elders to care for their flock: "Keep watch over yourselves and all the flock of which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers. Be shepherds of the church of God, which he bought with his own blood." It is clear that Elders have a responsibility to a particular flock, and so it is necessary for this flock to be identifiable. The Elders need to know who it is that they bear responsibility for and for whom they will give an account to God.

- b. Submission to Elders

The New Testament explains the relationship of the church to its leaders: "Obey your leaders and submit to their authority. They keep watch over you, as men who must give an account" (Hebrews 13:17);

"Now we ask you, brothers, to respect those who work hard among you, who are over you in the Lord and who admonish you. Hold them in the highest regard in love because of their work" (I Thessalonians 5:12-13);

"The elders who direct the affairs of the church well are worthy of double honour, especially those whose work is preaching and teaching". (I Timothy 5:17)

Without a clearly defined church membership it is impossible to know who it is that the New Testament is instructing to submit to church leaders. Put simply, leadership and submission will only function as intended where members have given a commitment to be led by those who have been appointed as their leaders. The concept of church membership is necessary to take these commands seriously and practically.

#### c. The operation of church discipline

Consider the implications of the words of the Lord Jesus in Matthew 18:15-17: "If your brother sins against you, go and show him his fault, just between the two of you. If he listens to you, you have won your brother over. But if he will not listen, take one or two others along, so that every matter may be established by the testimony of two or three witnesses. If he refuses to listen to them, tell it to the church; and if he refuses to listen even to the church, treat him as you would even a pagan or a tax collector". Clearly church membership is necessary to define the group that will have to deal with this sensitive matter of exhorting an unrepentant person, and finally come to a conclusion regarding their standing within the church. This passage provides authority and guidance for excluding a person from the church and no longer relating to them as a fellow believer. Such exclusion is referred to in 1 Corinthians 5:1-5. Someone must be a member of the church from which they can be excluded.

#### 2. Because there are benefits to church membership

The Christian life is not simply a matter of believing but also of belonging. In a society which is increasingly fragmenting, it is good to have a spiritual home and family to support us.

The benefits of being identified with a local group of believers are significant:

- (a) **Worship:** we are able to join with fellow Christians and demonstrate our gratitude to God for His character and works by collectively thanking Him with our words and serving Him with our lives. Our fellow members encourage us to love the Lord more fully.
- (b) **Fellowship:** fellowship with one another helps to create an environment of mutual love and support. Membership provides a spiritual family to support and encourage us in life's journey.
- (c) **Mission:** membership enables us to support one another in fulfilling our mission to reach our world for Christ.
- (d) **Discipleship:** membership helps express our commitment as members of the body of Christ and strengthens our faith by learning the truth of God's Word and applying Biblical principles to our lives. It places us under the protection of a leadership who are responsible before God for the spiritual wellbeing of the flock.

- (e) Accountability: membership brings with it a degree of accountability to help us to mature in our Christian faith. It formalises our responsibility to live a godly life in community with other believers.
- (f) Service: service is essential if the church is to fulfil its mandate. Membership enables people to find their place so that they can use their gifts and talents to make a real difference for the kingdom of God.

### 3. Because membership gives a degree of legal protection to a church

We live in a society which increasingly challenges Biblical beliefs and practices. Having a defined membership affords a degree of protection to a church's Elders and Trustees, as those who have chosen to become church members will have accepted its beliefs and practices.

- WHAT IS INVOLVED IN BEING A MEMBER OF CF?

Being a member of CF is a reciprocal relationship expressed through giving and receiving. Every member has a unique part to play and contribution to make in the building up of the Fellowship in Christian love.

Membership entails certain commitments and responsibilities:

- (a) Belief: any member of CF must support its Statement of Faith
- (b) Baptism: members of CF are encouraged to have submitted to the ordinance of baptism. (For a full statement of CF's position on baptism, please refer to CF's Baptism Policy.)
- (c) Attendance: members of CF are encouraged to attend its corporate meetings where possible to do so
- (d) Participation: members of CF are encouraged to participate in the life of the Fellowship, including the Lord's Supper
- (e) Prayer: members of CF are encouraged to commit to regular prayer on behalf of the people and work of the Fellowship
- (f) Giving: members of CF are encouraged to give financially to the work of the Fellowship
- (g) Pastoral Care: members of CF are encouraged to adopt a loving and caring attitude to the needs of other members of the Fellowship
- (h) Unity: members of CF are encouraged to promote the unity of the Fellowship and to the restoration of any grievance in a Biblical manner
- (i) Mission and Advocacy: members of CF are encouraged to develop an interest in evangelising the lost, supporting missionaries whether at home or overseas, and taking seriously the injunction to love our fellow man irrespective of religious or ethnic background.

- (j) Service: members of CF are encouraged to pursue involvement in aspects of the Fellowship's works
- (k) Authority: members of CF agree to respect and operate under the authority of its Eldership

- HOW DO I BECOME A MEMBER OF CF?

Should anyone wish to inquire about membership of CF, the process to be followed is as follows:

- (a) Read the Guide to CF and the Membership Policy
- (b) Inform the Eldership of your interest in becoming a member of CF
- (c) Meet with the Eldership to discuss membership
- (d) Upon acceptance by the Eldership, you will be formally welcomed into the CF at one of its Sunday services
- (e) You will be asked to sign a membership form in which you consent to the terms of membership. Your name will then be added to CF's Membership Register and the Trustees will be notified of your decision to become a member of CF at their next meeting.

- HOW CAN I CEASE TO BE A MEMBER OF CF?

If you wish to end your membership of CF, then you should give written notice to the Elders of your intention to resign. The church membership will then be informed of your decision.

If the Elders have concerns about your continued membership of CF in respect of doctrine, morals or attendance, and these concerns persist following any meetings between yourself and the Elders aimed at a resolution of the situation, then your membership will cease and the Fellowship will be informed to that effect.