

Church Membership: Is your church protected?

Necessary by-laws regarding church membership all churches should adopt.

Today many are abandoning the Christian worldview resulting in tremendous social change. The change is impacting the church in new ways. The birth of the church occurred in such a diverse time; therefore, we do not need to fear coming change; however, the cultural shift does bring new challenges.

Statements about Doctrine

Most Southern Baptist churches have statements in their constitution and/or bylaws about their doctrinal beliefs. Identification with the Southern Baptist Convention through adoption of *The Baptist Faith and Message (2000)* makes clear a church's biblical stance on theological and social issues. In addition, the church may wish to adopt a statement similar to this, which states their belief that the local congregation, in New Testament fashion, is the seat of authority for that congregation.

The local church (body) holds all authority to interpret, state, propound, and apply theological beliefs, doctrine, and practices in this body. This body may adopt associational statements of faith as a matter of affiliation with associations, but such adoption does not relinquish or diminish this local church (body) as the sole authority to interpret, state, propound, and apply theological, beliefs, doctrines and practices for its membership.

Statements about Membership

The Free Exercise Clause protects religious belief and actions made on behalf of those beliefs. Under the U.S. Constitution, individuals who by virtue of request for membership give the church an implied consent authority over them. If a member's conduct violates the church's moral stance the church can take action against a member and such action is protected under the Free Exercise Clause of the Constitution. However non-members did not agree to live by the doctrinal teachings of the church. The church does not have immunity under the Free Exercise Clause to disciple a non-member and consequently expose the church to litigation.

Most SBC churches have a well-defined process for accepting members into the fellowship. However, churches without a clearly delineated step-by-step process for accepting membership in the church's bylaws could be vulnerable; as are all church that lack a clearly delineated step-by-step process for the removal of membership.

If a member's conduct violates the church's moral stance, the church can take action against a member, and such action is protected under the Free Exercise Clause of the

Constitution. Conversely, the church does not have authority to discipline a non-member under the Free Exercise Clause.

For this reason, the church needs to have a clearly delineated step-by-step process for granting membership and for withdrawing membership in their bylaws. The memberships list should be frequently updated.

The Free Exercise Clause usually provides churches great freedom when it comes to withdrawing membership from an individual. The process should include:

- Identification of the member to whom a notice of withdrawal should be presented.
- Identification of a membership removal process:

Church initiated process may be based on (for example)

- Lack of regular attendance
- By death of a member
- Disagreement with church doctrine and practices
- Actions or behaviors contrary to church doctrine and practices

Church initiated discipline process with a member should

- Identify under what circumstance and why it is crucial to reveal the reason for withdrawing or rescinding a member's membership.
- Determine that once a member receives a written notice that a discipline process has begun, the member cannot withdraw membership until the process is complete.

Members initiated process would likely be a

- Request for transfer of membership
- Request to withdraw membership

Without a clear process, the church is exposed to defamation of character, invasion of privacy and emotional distress litigation; therefore, clear membership bylaws are necessary. The church's bylaws should not allow a person to rescind voluntary or resign their membership once they have been notified a disciplined process has begun.

It is wise to give a copy of the bylaws to current members and those who are considering membership asking them to read, sign and date the bylaws. Retain a copy of the signed bylaws in safe and secure location in accordance with the church record retention policy in accordance with the church record retention policy.

Sample Membership Policy

Section 1

Church Membership

The Church is an autonomous, democratic Southern Baptist Church under the authority of our Lord Jesus Christ. The membership retains the exclusive right of self-governance in all phases of the spiritual and corporate life of the church.

Section 2

Candidacy

New membership Orientation

Candidates for membership of the church are expected to participate in the church's new membership orientation/process/class. Candidates are required to read and sign a copy of the church's bylaws.

Membership

Any individual, after completing the membership orientation and signing the church's bylaws, may offer himself or herself for membership into the church. All candidates will be presented to the church at any regular church service for membership in any of the following ways:

1. Profession of faith and as a candidate for baptism according to church policy.
2. Promise of a letter of recommendation from a Baptist Church.
3. Restoration of membership results from a recommendation of the membership team and includes a statement of the candidate's prior conversion experience and baptism where no letter is obtainable.

Section 3

Rights of members

1. Every member of the church (some churches have a minimum age requirement) is entitled to vote at all elections and on all questions submitted to the church in conference, provide the member is present. (Some churches make provision of absentee balloting).
2. Every member of the church is eligible for consideration by the membership as a candidate for elective offices in the church.
3. Every member of the church may participate in the ordinances of the church as administered by the church.
4. Every member of the church agrees to abide by the doctrinal and moral standards of the church.

Section 4

Discipline of members

The church seeks to be redemptive in all our relationships, but should a member's doctrine or conduct contradict the church's beliefs, corrective steps will be taken. Following Matthew 18

1. The matter is discussed privately with the offending member.

2. If the issue is unresolved, the deacons or pastoral staff will discuss the matter with the offending member.
3. If the matter remains unresolved, the matter will be brought before the church. If necessary, the church will reveal the offensive contradiction of doctrine or conduct to the church for a determination to exclude from church membership.
4. Once a member's disciplinary process is initiated, that member cannot voluntarily resign or rescind their church membership until the matter is resolved.

Section 5

Termination of membership

Membership of the church shall be terminated in the following ways:

1. The death of a member
2. Transfer of letter to another Baptist Church
3. Exclusion by church action (See Section 4)
4. Voluntary rescinding of membership (See Section 6)

Section 6

Rescinding Church Membership

1. A voluntary request to rescind membership by a member who is not under discipline of the church shall be granted.
2. A request from a member who has joined a church of another denomination, who is not under discipline of the church shall be granted.
3. A request to rescind membership by a member who is under the discipline of the church will be forwarded to the membership team. The membership team will consider the matter and make a recommendation to the church at the next regular business meeting, unless they determine a special called meeting is necessary.

Section 7

Restoration of Membership

The church may restore full membership if the individual excluded makes the request, the membership team recommends membership, and the church body approves the motion for membership by a 75% vote.

Additional Resource

Brotherhood Mutual Insurance's Big Book Check List see page 83.

<http://www.brotherhoodmutual.com/www/?linkservid=F2C36837-5056-9664-AA5C155A255BA26A&showMeta=2&ext=.pdf>