



The Church of Scotland's understanding of Membership

This paper provides the doctrinal, legal and pastoral¹ foundations of the Church of Scotland's understanding of membership.

It is first worth noting that the Church of Scotland is both Catholic and Reformed.

The First Article Declaratory makes it clear that the Church of Scotland is part of the one, holy, catholic and apostolic Church², because the Church of Scotland is founded on the fundamental doctrines embraced by the early Church and shared with all other Christians.

Nevertheless, the Church of Scotland is also Reformed. It was shaped by the Scottish Reformation of 1560 and in its worship, understanding of ministry and sacramental theology³, it stands with John Knox, John Calvin, and other members of the worldwide Reformed Church. Reformed churches generally affirm conciliar government, the accountability of ministers and elders, and the exercise of oversight by Church courts rather than by individuals.⁴

The Church of Scotland's understanding of membership is therefore shaped by both the Catholic and Reformed tradition of which it is a part, and has a meaning which may not apply in other denominations.

Baptism: Membership of the Body of Christ⁵

Baptism is a once-only event and is regarded as the formal initiation into the Christian faith. Alongside Holy Communion⁶, it is considered a sacrament in the majority of Christian denominations and is universally recognised as being administered with water in the name of the Trinity.⁷ The 'normal order' of the sacraments is that baptism is considered as a standard precondition for participation in Communion.

Both infant and adult baptism are practiced within the Church of Scotland. With regards to the former, Section 6 of the Sacraments Act 2000⁸ provides that one or more of the parents of the child (or other family member with parental consent) must have been baptised

¹ 'Doctrinal' relates to the beliefs and teachings of a church; 'legal' refers to a church's own system of laws and regulations; 'pastoral' refers to the care of their people by church leaders.

² 'Catholic' here means 'universal', and 'apostolic' refers to the way in which a church is understood as being in continuity with the early followers of Jesus Christ and their teaching.

³ 'Sacramental theology' refers to the way in which certain Christian ceremonies and practices are defined and understood; in the Church of Scotland there are two sacraments, namely baptism and Holy Communion.

⁴ 'Conciliar government' refers here to a collective form of decision-making. In the Church of Scotland authority is held, not by individuals, but by members of a hierarchy of courts (Kirk Sessions, Presbyteries and General Assembly), which make decisions and supervise activities locally, regionally and nationally. Membership of these courts is drawn from elders and ministers, individuals within the Church of Scotland who are set apart for leadership roles.

⁵ 'The Body of Christ' is one way in which the Christian church is described in the Bible; for example, in 1 Corinthians 12.27 in which Jesus is said to be the head and his followers are all the other parts of the body thereby connected to Jesus and one another.

⁶ The sacrament in which followers of Jesus share bread and wine in commemoration of the meal that Jesus ate with some of his followers shortly before his crucifixion.

⁷ 'The Trinity' refers to Father, Son and Holy Spirit, the three persons of God in the Christian faith.

⁸ A piece of Church of Scotland legislation; Acts are passed by the highest Church court, the General Assembly.

themselves and be a member or adherent⁹ of the congregation (or be seeking membership), and promise to undertake the Christian upbringing of the child. The Act also permits children to be baptised in certain cases where they are under legal guardianship. Where an adult comes for baptism along with their child or children, the baptism would be administered first to the adult. For both adult and infant baptism, it is the Kirk Session¹⁰ that decides if the person (or family member bringing them for baptism) have sufficient understanding of the Christian faith and the commitment to keep the baptismal promises.

In a general sense, any baptised Christian will be regarded as a 'member' of the universal church of Jesus Christ of which the Church of Scotland is one part. As a sacrament, baptism is a sign and seal of the Covenant of Grace¹¹, and it operates independently of individual merit and performance. As the Sacraments Act 2000 states, 'Baptism signifies the action and love of God in Christ, through the Holy Spirit, and is a seal upon the gift of grace and the response of faith.' Indeed, when someone is baptised in the Church of Scotland, the minister usually says the words "[Name] is now baptised into Jesus Christ. We receive and welcome him/her as a member of the one holy catholic and apostolic Church". The baptised person is therefore incorporated into the spiritual reality of being united with Christ by the Spirit and being part of his Body the Church.

Membership of a Specific Worshipping Community

However, within the Church of Scotland, baptism is not only incorporation into the body of Christ in a universal sense, but it is also the incorporation of the baptised person into a specific believing community. This is reflected in the Sacraments Act 2000, which provides that it 'shall normally be administered during the public worship of the congregation in which the person makes profession of faith...'. Adult baptism is therefore normally followed by the Profession of Faith and vows of membership, which incorporate the person into full membership within the Church of Scotland.

Profession of Faith

The Profession of Faith is a public declaration of belief in one God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit. It is accompanied by the vows of Church membership, which require the baptismal candidate to pledge commitment in the face of the congregation to pursue a life of faith, such as by taking part in regular worship, prayer, Bible reading and giving their time, talents and money for the work of the Church. In the case of adult baptism, as mentioned above, Profession of Faith is usually performed in the same service. Where an individual was baptised as a child, Profession of Faith can take place at any time when the individual has sufficient understanding and desire for membership, and often in practice is at around 16 years of age.

⁹ A 'member' of the Church of Scotland has all the privileges and responsibilities of membership as described in this note. An 'adherent' is a regular worshipper in a congregation who is recognised as such by the Kirk Session but who does not have full membership.

¹⁰ The body of minister and ruling elders for the congregation.

¹¹ The theological concept referring to the way in which God has rescued people from the effects of sin through the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ.

Profession of Faith renders the individual a member of the Church of Scotland within a particular congregation, giving the individual all the rights and privileges of Church membership (such as voting in Church meetings and being elected to offices such as the Eldership). Traditionally, when someone became a member of their local congregation, they were also admitted to the sacrament of Communion at the same time. However, increasingly the sacrament of Communion is offered freely to all baptised people worshipping in the congregation, including members, adherents, and those who may be visitors or only occasional worshippers.

While Profession of Faith is not seen sacramentally in the Reformed tradition, it is still theologically and pastorally meaningful because it facilitates and encourages spiritual growth and maturity within the context of a nurturing community. The Church of Scotland takes seriously the importance of offering ongoing instruction and education for both children and adults. Nurturing lives in the faith and practice of the Church, as well as offering opportunities to make professions of faith, is a necessary component of congregational life.

Other ways of being admitted to membership of a specific worshipping community include:

b) A Certificate of Transference

Those who were already members of another Church of Scotland congregation may join a new congregation by handing over a Certificate of Transference; their names are also removed from membership of their former congregation.

c) Resolution of the Kirk Session

The third way of becoming a member is by Resolution of the Kirk Session; this tends to be used to admit to membership those who are already Christian but whose membership of another congregation has lapsed or who have come from another denomination.

Communion Roll¹²

All adults who are baptised and become a member of a particular congregation have their names added to the Communion Roll. The Communion Rolls and Adherents' Rolls Act 2025¹³ sets out the requirement for a Kirk Session to maintain rolls so that the membership of the congregation at any time can be identified. Under section 2, the Kirk Session must keep two rolls. One is a list of those who have been admitted to membership, also including the date and method of admission and any date of leaving. The other required roll is for adherents, who are the regular worshippers with the congregation but who are not members. The Kirk Session must update its rolls at least annually. It is important to note that under s14, there is provision for the Kirk Session to remove someone from membership if they have not shown sufficient interest in the worship, mission and service of the church; the Kirk Session should raise their concerns with the member personally if possible, and if their commitment does not improve they can be removed from membership at the next review. Whenever someone ceases to be a member (by choice or removal) they are given a Certificate of Transference in

¹² The list of its members maintained by each Church of Scotland congregation.

¹³ Another piece of Church of Scotland legislation.

the hope they will join another Church of Scotland congregation instead, but that is up to the individual.

The reasons for keeping a Communion Roll are not only administrative, pastoral and legal, however, but are also related to the nature and calling of the Church. The Roll names those to whom we, as brothers and sisters in Christ, are accountable. They are symbolic of our nature as being people under discipline.¹⁴ The Roll unites the breadth of members, from all walks of life, and affirms the mutuality of responsibilities between the Church leadership and its members.

Membership brings responsibilities, and it also places responsibilities on the Kirk Session. In order to become a member, the individual undertakes to play a part in the life of the congregation, and they are accountable to the Kirk Session for fulfilling that commitment. On the other hand, being a member of a congregation means that an individual is also within the care of the Kirk Session. The Kirk Session has a duty of care for the spiritual and pastoral needs for all its members (s3.1 of the Church Courts Act 2023), regardless of whether or not they live within the bounds of the parish.

Conclusion

It can therefore be seen that, in the Church of Scotland, membership is in addition to baptism and is always understood within the context of a specific local congregation. It is not possible to be a member of the denomination as a whole but only of a particular congregation, or to be a member of more than one congregation at the same time. It is more correct to say that someone is a member of a particular congregation within the Church of Scotland, than to say that they are a Church of Scotland member.

As stated above, membership brings certain privileges to an individual and places them under the care of the Kirk Session; it also brings responsibilities to play a part in the life of the local congregation. Doctrinally, legally and pastorally, therefore, there is an expectation within the Church of Scotland that those who are baptised will go on to become full members of their local congregations, contributing to the building up of the Body of Christ, under the care and oversight of the Kirk Session.

Office of the General Assembly

The Church of Scotland

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¹⁴ 'Discipline' refers to the process of confronting someone's sin and calling them to repent and be restored to God and to one another.