

Church Handbook

Christ Church, Haywards Heath

1 The Church

- 1.1 We are a company of Christians who regularly meet together, generally in our building in New England Road. This Handbook is an introduction for newcomers, and a guide for the church as we seek to serve the Lord. It functions as a Constitution, in that it reflects our present understanding of the Bible and of our situation. It is in every way subordinate to Scripture, and is therefore open to change in the light of greater understanding.
- 1.2 We understand that all believers are members of the universal Church, the body of Christ in all places and at all times, and that Christians should express this by coming together as local churches. We do this in order to glorify Christ through corporate praise and witness and through helping one another in our Christian lives.
- 1.3 As an evangelical church, we believe and proclaim the great truths of the Christian faith, as taught by the Lord Jesus Christ and his apostles, and as summarised in the historic Christian creeds and in our own doctrinal basis. We affirm the central importance of the inerrancy and authority of the Bible; of Jesus' death as an atonement for sin; of justification by faith alone, and of man's need for new birth by the Spirit of God.
- 1.4 Although as a free church we are self-governing and therefore independent of any ecclesiastical ruling body, we affirm our unity and interdependence with other evangelical churches. We seek to express this through affiliation to the Fellowship of Independent Evangelical Churches (FIEC) and Affinity (formerly the British Evangelical Council), and through involvement with other churches and Christian organisations, such as the Sussex Gospel Partnership (SGP) and Haywards Heath and District Evangelical Fellowship (HHDEF). We understand that unity must be based on a common commitment to the central truths of the Christian faith.

2 Doctrinal Basis

We believe the following truths of historic, biblical Christianity:

2.1 God

There is one God, who exists eternally in three distinct but equal persons: the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit. God is unchangeable in his holiness, justice, wisdom and love. He is the almighty Creator, Saviour and Judge, who sustains and governs all things according to his sovereign will for his own glory.

2.2 The Bible

God has revealed himself in the Bible, which consists of the Old and New Testaments alone. Every word was inspired by God through human authors, so that the Bible as originally given is in its entirety the Word of God, without error and fully reliable in fact and doctrine. The Bible alone is the complete, final, sufficient and authoritative revelation of God's will for mankind and for the belief and conduct of the Church and of the individual believer.

2.3 The Human Race

All men and women, being created in the image of God, have inherent and equal dignity and worth. Their greatest purpose is to obey, worship and love God. As a result of the fall of our first parents, every aspect of human nature has been corrupted and all men and women are without spiritual life, guilty sinners and hostile to God. Every person is therefore under the just condemnation of God and needs to be born again, forgiven and reconciled to God in order to know and please him.

2.4 The Lord Jesus Christ

The Lord Jesus Christ is fully God and fully man. He was conceived by the Holy Spirit, born of a virgin, and lived a sinless life in obedience to the Father. He taught with authority and all his words are trustworthy. On the cross he died in the place of sinners, bearing God's punishment for their sin, redeeming them by his blood. He rose from the dead and in his resurrection body ascended into heaven, where he is exalted as Lord of all. He intercedes for his people in the presence of the Father.

2.5 Salvation

Salvation is entirely a work of God's grace and cannot be earned or deserved. God in love chose his people before the world began so that they might be conformed to the image of his Son and receive all the blessings of eternal life. Salvation has been accomplished by the Lord Jesus Christ and is offered to all in the gospel. Those whom the Father chose are given new life through the Spirit, who convicts them of their sin and grants repentance and faith. All who repent of their sins and who believe in Christ are forgiven, justified by faith alone, adopted into the family of God, sanctified, and finally glorified in heaven.

2.6 The Holy Spirit

The Holy Spirit has been sent from heaven to glorify the Lord Jesus Christ. He applies Christ's work of salvation to sinners as he imparts spiritual life and gives a true understanding of the Scriptures. He lives in all believers, bringing assurance of salvation and producing increasing likeness to Christ. It is by his Spirit that Christ builds and sanctifies his Church, equipping and empowering its members to serve him.

2.7 The Church

The universal Church is the body of which Christ is the head and to which all who are saved belong. It is made visible in local churches, which are congregations of believers who are committed to each other for the teaching of the Word, for fellowship, for the Lord's Supper and for prayer. To local churches is committed the defence and proclamation of the gospel, the recognition and use of Christ's gifts, and the care and discipline of the people of God. The unity of the body of Christ is expressed within and between local churches by mutual love, respect, care and encouragement.

2.8 Baptism and the Lord's Supper

Baptism and the Lord's Supper have been given by Christ as visible signs of the gospel. Baptism is a sign of union with Christ and of entry into his Church. It does not impart spiritual life or wash away sin, but symbolises the cleansing that is received by faith alone.

The Lord's Supper is a commemoration of Christ's sacrifice offered once for all and a sign of continued union with him and with his Church. Its benefits are received by faith.

2.9 The Future

The Lord Jesus Christ will return in glory. He will raise the dead and judge the world in righteousness. The wicked will be sent to eternal punishment and the righteous will be welcomed into a life of eternal joy in fellowship with God. God will make all things new and will be glorified forever.

3 Church Life and Membership

3.1 Membership

- 3.1.1 A number of corporate activities are central to our life as a local church. We gather together to receive teaching from the Word of God; to share in the fellowship of mutual encouragement and practical help; to remember and proclaim Jesus' death as we participate in the Lord's supper, and to join in prayer and praise.
- 3.1.2 We understand that local churches in the New Testament were made up of recognised members, who were committed to one another for these common activities of church life, all Christians being members in this way. Each one who was joined to Christ was joined to the universal Church, and this union was seen in commitment to a local church. Baptism was the initial sign of coming into union with both Christ and his Church, and the Lord's Supper was the sign of continuing union.
- 3.1.3 Church members are therefore those who have been baptised into union with Christ and his people, and who have committed themselves to:
- a) love and accept one another, irrespective of background, ability, outlook or temperament;
 - b) support one another and the ministry of the church through prayer, fellowship, finance and practical help;
 - c) attend the meetings of the church for teaching, prayer and the Lord's Supper.

- 3.1.4 Membership is thus a commitment of each member to the whole body, and of the whole body to each member, involving accountability on both sides. Those who regularly meet with us but who have not committed themselves in this way are not asked or expected to take up any specific role in the life and work of the church.
- 3.1.5 We receive into membership those who have been baptised, who give credible evidence of faith in the Lord Jesus Christ, and who accept the privileges and responsibilities of members as set out above and elsewhere in this Handbook. Complete understanding of and agreement with the Handbook in every detail is not, however, a requirement of membership.
- 3.1.6 Members whose convictions are at variance with the Handbook at any point are expected to respect the teaching and practice of the church. They are only to seek change in a way that expresses Christian love and humility and which strives to maintain the unity of the body of Christ.
- 3.1.7 Baptismal practice has a direct bearing on the question of membership, and is a subject on which evangelical Christians differ. We teach and practise the baptism of believers only, and do not regard infant baptism as valid. However, although we do not baptise infants, we respect others who hold this practice to be scriptural. Evangelical Christians who in good conscience believe their baptism as an infant to be valid are welcome to join with us in the Lord's Supper and in membership of the church, on the understanding that they will respect our teaching and practice.
- 3.1.8 Believers normally become members after interview with more than one of the elders, and subsequent recommendation and resolution at a meeting of the church.
- 3.1.9 Members who move permanently from the area are encouraged to find a suitable church near their new home and to request a letter of commendation from the church here, thus expressing our unity and fellowship with the wider Church. Until they become members elsewhere, we remain responsible for their care.
- 3.1.10 Resignations from membership are to be reported by the elders at the next convenient meeting of the church.

3.2 Discipline

- 3.2.1 All who truly repent and believe the gospel call on Christ for salvation from sin and judgment, and submit to him as Lord. This entails continually striving, with the help of the Holy Spirit, to become more like Christ, rejecting all false teaching, dishonesty, slander, factionalism, jealousy, selfish ambition, drunkenness, greed, occult practices, false worship (including that of other religions), blasphemy, hatred, bitterness, rage, violence, sexual immorality¹ and obscenity.
- 3.2.2. Mutual rebuke and admonition are the normal and regular means by which members of the church help and encourage one another to leave behind and/or avoid such sinful behaviours. However, when these means fail to bring about repentance, the exercise of formal church discipline may become necessary.
- 3.2.3 The purpose of such church discipline is to glorify Christ through the protection of the church and the sanctification of the member concerned. Discipline is not to be undertaken lightly. It requires a spirit of love and humility, with a conscious desire to restore the person involved. Members are liable to discipline if they:
- a) evidently and stubbornly persist in sinful behaviour;
 - b) deviate seriously from the truth of the gospel;²
 - c) wilfully neglect the privileges and responsibilities of membership.
- 3.2.4 Discipline may entail suspension from serving within the church, from participation in the Lord's Supper or from other privileges. In the last resort it will involve dismissal from membership.

¹ For clarity, we affirm that we uphold the traditional biblical view that (1) sexual intimacy and intercourse is a gift to be enjoyed only within (heterosexual) marriage and that, outside of this setting, it is sinful; (2) marriage involves one man and one woman, who are not closely related members of the same family, bound together in a publicly witnessed and lifelong covenant relationship – thus excluding casual, homosexual, polygamous and incestuous relationships. (3) The casual or habitual practice of sexual intimacy outside of marriage, the viewing of pornography, adultery, homosexual sex, transvestitism, transsexualism, paedophilia and abusive conduct are all contrary to God's will for human beings.

At the same time, we will always seek to make clear and to reflect in practice the forgiveness and grace that Christ extends in the gospel to all repentant sinners – including those for whom sexual sin has formed a major part of their backgrounds. Recognising that many Christians struggle with sexual temptation (whether of a same-sex or heterosexual nature), we will prayerfully seek to provide gracious support of one another in such struggles.

² For example, in opposing the teaching of the church as set forth in the doctrinal basis, or the implications of this doctrine for the practice of the church or the behaviour of believers. (Section 2)

- 3.2.5 Where disciplinary suspension from the Lord's Supper or dismissal from membership becomes necessary, it is by the elders' recommendation and members' resolution at a special meeting of the church.
- 3.2.6 Any member under discipline who disagrees with the elders' view of the matter will be given the opportunity to state his case at a special meeting. The matter is then to be resolved by the members present.

4 Leadership

4.1 General Points on Leadership

- 4.1.1 We understand that Christ has given gifts to the church through the Holy Spirit. These gifts include men and women equipped and empowered for specific service, who are to be formally recognised by the church.
- 4.1.2 We understand that there are two groups of such recognised servants in the local church, the elders and the deacons. While acknowledging that only God is perfect, we believe that all such servants are to:
- a) be above reproach in marriage, in the care and discipline of children, and in business, social and church life;
 - b) show honesty, integrity, hospitality, temperance, patience, self-control, gentleness and godly contentment;
 - c) have a good and sincere grasp of the doctrines of the faith;
 - d) show spiritual maturity, not being recently converted;
 - e) have abilities appropriate to the work entrusted to them.

4.2 Elders

- 4.2.1 The elders, who in the New Testament are also called overseers and pastors, care for the church and supervise all aspects of its work. They must not act on their own authority but in submission to the Lord Jesus Christ, to whom they will give account for their ministry. Their lives are to be governed by God's word, so that they lead by example. Above all, they are to be like Jesus, who came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life for his people.
- 4.2.2 Elders must be able to teach the word, whether to the gathered church, to smaller groups or to individuals, since it is principally by this means that the church is protected, fed, edified and directed. They will vary in degree and type of gift and will consequently have different but complementary teaching roles. It is desirable that one or more be paid in order to give full-time attention to the ministry of the word.
- 4.2.3 We understand that, because elders lead and teach both men and women, only scripturally qualified men may be recognised for eldership. Women are therefore not eligible for this role.
- 4.2.4 Elders must have been baptised as believers, and hold and teach the church's position on baptism of believers only.

4.3 Deacons

- 4.3.1 In the broadest sense, all Christians are deacons as they serve Christ as members of his body. All whose service involves teaching must assent fully to the church's doctrinal basis, and must display the qualities required of deacons as set out above.
- 4.3.2 In the formal sense, the deacons are those who are recognised by the church as leaders in specific ministries. They have widely differing responsibilities, depending on their gifts and the work entrusted to them, both men and women being eligible to serve as deacons. They work closely with the elders, who have overall responsibility for leadership in the church.

4.4 Further General Points on Leadership

- 4.4.1 All church members are to cultivate a teachable spirit, to accept the elders' and deacons' care, and to seek to follow their lead willingly. When members feel that the leaders are mistaken in a course of action, they should explain their thinking directly to them, in a way which glorifies Christ and edifies the church.
- 4.4.2 All in positions of responsibility, both elders and deacons, need the continual prayers of the church that the word and example of Christ may always be the controlling influence in their life, work and teaching.

4.5 Recognition of Leaders

- 4.5.1 All members, and particularly the elders, are to encourage the use and development of gifts within the church. In some cases this may lead to a recommendation that a member with appropriate gifts be recognised as an elder or deacon. Recognition of new elders and deacons is by resolution at a special meeting convened for the purpose.
- 4.5.2 While we understand that it is usual for elders and deacons to be found from our own number, we recognise that it is sometimes desirable to request another church to release a member for ministry among us. Contact between ourselves and such a person and his or her church is to be full and open, lasting for an extended period before a formal request is made. Such cooperation is to be seen as an expression of the interdependence of local churches.
- 4.5.3 Elders and deacons demonstrate their adherence to the fundamental doctrines of the faith by signing the church's doctrinal basis on the occasion of their recognition and on the first Lord's day of each year or, if absent, as soon as possible thereafter.

4.6 Discipline of Leaders

- 4.6.1 Elders and deacons may be removed from office through neglect of duty, sinful behaviour or doctrinal error. As with all church discipline, this is a serious matter and should be carried out with the utmost concern for Christ's glory, the protection of his church and the restoration of the offender.
- 4.6.2 Any accusation against a leader should be made by at least two witnesses. There is to be as much openness as possible so that the whole gathered church may judge whether the accusation is true.
- 4.6.3 If any complaint regarding neglect of duty, sinful behaviour or doctrinal error is found to be justified, the elders are to take disciplinary action. This action is to be confirmed by resolution of members at a special meeting, with the elder or deacon losing recognition and associated ministry from that time.
- 4.6.4 If a disciplinary charge is brought against one or more of the elders, a special meeting of the church may be called by those elders who are not included in the charge or by one third of the members. Those calling the meeting are to explain the reasons for it and the basis of the charge. Every effort will be made to reach a decision by consensus. If necessary, additional special meetings can be arranged. Should the church fail to achieve consensus within three months of the first meeting, the outcome will be determined by a vote taken at a final meeting. If that meeting is quorate (see 5.7) and the charge is upheld by 75% of members present, the elder(s) will be removed from office.
- 4.6.5 In disciplinary cases involving one or more of the elders, advice or help may be sought from leaders of other churches.

5 Decision-making in the Church

- 5.1 Since Christ is the head of the church, the aim of all decision-making is to hear and obey his will as he has made it known. Therefore, we are always consciously to be subject to the Scriptures and to rely on the Holy Spirit for help and wisdom in planning and discussion, whether by the leaders, by the whole church, or by groups with particular responsibilities.

- 5.2 Although the elders have overall responsibility for the church, decision-making should involve general communication and discussion within the membership. This may be of an informal or a more formal nature.
- 5.3 Some issues need to be discussed and decided by the whole church gathered together. The elders will give as much notice as possible of issues to be considered in this way, and where necessary will provide relevant teaching so that discussions are well-informed. Members wishing to raise matters for general discussion should speak to an elder.
- 5.4 Where appropriate, such discussions may take place in one of the main meetings of the church. However, a special meeting is convened for consideration of any matter which is confidential or likely to be time-consuming. Special meetings are generally convened by the elders, but may also be held at the request of one third of the members. Such meetings are announced on the two preceding Sundays. The church also meets regularly, at least once a year, to discuss its finances.
- 5.5 All members should make every effort to attend such meetings and be willing to voice their thoughts on any point. If they cannot be present, they should make their opinions known to the elders privately. Non-members may attend at the convenors' discretion.
- 5.6 Since the church is called to unity and peace, our discussions should reflect these ideals. In practice this means showing mutual respect and submission to one another, particularly where more than one view is expressed. The aim of discussion is to reach decisions through consensus among the members.
- 5.7 Meetings held for discussion are normally chaired by an elder of the church. Decisions can only be taken when there are present a majority of those members who reside locally and who are not normally prevented from attending because of youth, age or infirmity. The elders are responsible for ensuring that decisions are recorded accurately and communicated to all members. Once a decision has been taken, all members are to support it.

6 Evangelism and Missionary Support

- 6.1 We understand that, as a local church, we share in the obligation to preach Christ in the whole world. This obligation applies within our own area and further afield.

- 6.2 Within our own area, it means that all members should use every opportunity to proclaim the gospel and to make it credible and attractive through a godly life. The elders should seek to teach and train the church for evangelistic work and witness.
- 6.3 Further afield, it entails supporting evangelistic activity, church planting ministry and new or needy churches. The elders should ensure that news of such missionary work is brought regularly to the church, so that all members can be informed and prayerful for the advance of Christ's kingdom.
- 6.4 While the ideal pattern is for missionaries to be released from among our own number, it is good to help with the support of workers who are members of other churches. The elders are responsible for assessing the personal and doctrinal standing of all who may receive such support, before making a recommendation to the church. Members are encouraged to have fellowship with those supported, through visits, correspondence and prayer.
- 6.5 At least one tenth of the church's income is devoted to missionary work.

7 Finance

- 7.1 We believe that the Lord provides for the church's needs principally through the giving of the members. All are therefore to give as the Lord enables them, and such gifts are to be seen as God's provision. The highest standards of integrity and efficiency are required in the use of money.
- 7.2 The elders are responsible for bringing to the attention of the church any special needs or financial concerns and for ensuring that a treasurer and auditors are appointed by the members.

8 Premises and Property

- 8.1 We understand that the buildings we own and equipment which we use are God's provision for many forms of activity. No part of any premises owned by the church is a "sanctuary" the use of which is restricted to congregational praise and teaching. The premises of the church can therefore be used in any ways that further the work of the gospel, provided that they reflect sound biblical standards and good stewardship of resources.

- 8.2 In reaching judgments about activities and functions for which the Church Building on New England Road may legitimately be used, the Trustees and/or Elders are required to take into account the original Trust deed, albeit in the contemporary context. The Trust Deed states that the building is "to be used, occupied and enjoyed as a place for the public worship of God by the members of [the Church] for the biblical instruction of children and adults and for the promotion of such other religious and philanthropic purposes and meetings not being political meetings or secular entertainments (excepting Church and Sunday School Socials) or meetings tending to the propagation of doctrines at variance with the doctrines set forth in the Statement of Doctrine contained in the [Trust Deed] and for no other purposes." The Church Building may thus be used for members' private social functions and for activities with a charitable purpose for the benefit of the community, at the discretion of the Trustees and/or Elders.
- 8.3 The members of the church are corporately responsible for the maintenance of the building and other property, whether through their own work or by employing outside agencies. Although the building is not the church, it is an aspect of the church's presence in the world which is continually seen by the public. High standards of safety and upkeep are therefore important.

9 Changes to the Handbook

Proposed changes to the Handbook are explained by the elders at a meeting of the whole church, and a decision is taken at a special meeting convened for the purpose at least three months later.

10 The Church and the Charity

The church was founded on 11th February 1936 with its property held in trust by The FIEC Ltd (Registered Charity), subject to certain rules and conditions laid down in a Trust Deed.

From 1st January 2008 the property and monetary assets used by the church have been owned and administered by a charitable company known as "Haywards Heath Evangelical Free Church" (charity number 1122949,

company number 06459931). The rules governing the charity are the Memorandum and Articles of Association (“MEMARTS”), a copy of which is available on request from the elders. On 11th May 2011 the church and charitable company name was formally and legally changed from Haywards Heath Evangelical Free Church to Christ Church Haywards Heath.

The MEMARTS state that “trustees will insofar as possible conduct the business of the Charity in accordance with the decisions taken by the Church.” The Trustees are the elders or other persons approved by the church.