

The Baptist Union of Norway

Proposed Basis of Union

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Chapter 1 Introduction

The text of the Basis of Union is intended to provide an introduction to the Baptist Union of Norway's understanding of itself. Against the backdrop of major historical events, theological positions and the life of the church, this document describes the main characteristics of this religious community's identity.

The purpose of the Basis of Union is to give the church's own members a presentation of the key aspects of Baptist doctrine and life. The document will also offer a brief introduction to the church's identity for pastors and congregations that may be considering membership of the Baptist Union of Norway, and to others seeking to learn more about this religious community.

Chapter 2 The origin and development of the Baptist Union

2.1 History

In an international context, the history of Norwegian Baptists dates back some 400 years. The Baptist movement began with a group of separatists, dissenters who broke away from the Anglican Church of England in the 17th century. At that time, there was widespread religious unrest in Europe, as evidenced by the Lutheran Reformation and other reformist movements. The separatists argued in favor of separating church and state, and their understanding of the church emphasized that the congregation was to be limited exclusively to born-again believers. Their radical preaching and practices made them vulnerable to persecution, so they fled to Amsterdam, a European sanctuary for people whose ideas were different. During their time in Amsterdam, they began to practise believer's baptism, i.e. believers were baptized based on individuals' own professions of faith. By the time they returned to England a few years later, this separatist group had transformed into the first Baptist congregation, due in part to the influence of the Anabaptists in Central Europe. Over the course of a few decades, a number of Baptist congregations were founded on the British Isles. In response to persecution, others were founded in North America. The Baptist community eventually developed into a world-wide movement, with congregations on every continent. As Norwegian Baptists, we are part of a world-wide family of Baptist congregations with a presence in almost every country in the world.

However, it took a long time for the Baptist church to reach Norway. This was due to the political conditions that prevailed in Norway. Up until 1845, the Lutheran Church of

Norway was the sole religious community allowed in the country. It was first in 1845, when the Norwegian Parliament adopted the Dissenter Act, that other religious communities were allowed in Norway. The Baptist community reached Norway with the arrival of the Danish seaman Fredrik L. Rymker (1819 – 1884). During a stay in the USA, he had come into contact with Baptists and became a Christian. He returned home to Denmark as a sales representative and a preacher. With financial backing from Baptists in the US, Rymker arrived in Norway in 1857, then began evangelizing to spread Baptist doctrine in the Grenland region of Norway. The first Baptist baptism took place in the Porsgrunnselva River on Christmas Day in 1858. More individuals were baptized the following year. On 22 April 1860, the "Baptist congregation of Porsgrund and Solum" (now the Skien Baptist congregation) was founded by nine members. Thus, the first Baptist congregation in Norway became a reality.

An average of one new congregation was established each year from 1860 to 1870. This did not take place without resistance. For example, clergymen used their pulpits and writings to speak out against this new movement, and there are examples of individuals being chased away from venues for outdoor baptismal services under threat of bodily harm.

The congregations in the cities were at the heart of the work done in the outlying areas. In the 1870s, organizations were set up in several districts. As the Baptist community gained momentum at the national level, with congregations in both north and south, there was a growing need for closer cooperation to strengthen the community as a whole. The dream was to have national bodies through which congregations could collaborate and support each other with a view to evangelization, mission work, the education of pastors and other practical tasks.

One important event in the history of the Baptist church in Norway was thereby the founding of "The Norwegian Baptists' Union" in 1879. The Union was intended to strengthen unity among the local congregations by providing common bodies and meeting places. From that point in time, the Baptists had central leadership that represented them at the national and international levels. This Union, which is currently known as the Baptist Union of Norway, has helped strengthen the sense of affiliation and loyalty between the congregations, and it has helped shape a common understanding of Baptist faith and practices.

From 1860 to 1902, 35 new congregations were founded. The Baptists concentrated on setting up new congregations and reaching out to people to share the gospel with them. From 1910 to 1920 and well into the 1930s, the Baptist community grew rapidly. The highest membership was achieved in the late 1940s, with roughly 7500 baptized members. From the post-war years until 2000, the church experienced a decline in membership. Few new congregations were established. At the onset of the new millennium, 4930 members were divided among 66 congregations.

Since 2000, numbers have been on the rise again, and many new congregations have joined the Baptist Union of Norway. The vast majority of the new groups are migrant congregations. In 2020, there were 105 congregations with roughly 6 700 baptized members, so counting children and others, there were roughly 11 700 members. This means that today, the Baptist Union of Norway is a multi-cultural religious community with members from a large number of nations.

2.2 Activities in the early decades

Norwegian Baptists have engaged in extensive mission work ever since the early 1900s. The largest mission project over time has been in the Bas-Uele region of the Democratic Republic of the Congo. Several missionaries have served in that country. They have primarily worked in extremely poor areas, providing health and education, and doing church work. Today, there is a very robust church there, and the Baptist Union continues to cooperate closely with its members. Today, the work is carried out by the local population. Norway contributes financial support from the congregations, public development cooperation funding, and project follow-up in the form of exchanges of visits.

The Baptist Union of Norway has also engaged in mission work in other countries, usually by sending missionaries and providing support for projects. Health, education, evangelization and church work have been the main areas of focus.

Children and young people are an important target area for all the local congregations. In 1922, a separate organization for children and young people was set up under the auspices of the Baptist Union of Norway. Over the years, many different groups have been organized for people of all ages. Today, this independent organisation is called "Young Baptists".

The Norwegian Baptists' Women's Society, now the Baptist Women of Norway, was established in 1916. The Baptist women have been extremely active in supporting the Baptist Union of Norway's mission work, in addition to having their own mission projects.

Improving the theological expertise of pastors has been a high priority right from the start. In the early years, potential pastor candidates were sent to the USA to study theology, at the same time as targeted efforts were made to start an educational program in Norway. The school was established in Oslo in 1910 as the Baptists' Mission School. In 1958, it was moved to the new training center at Stabekk, and the name was changed to the Baptist Theological Seminary. 2009 marked the beginning of a new chapter in the evolution of the Baptist Theological Seminary, when the name was changed to the School for Leadership and Theology (HLT). This school was established through cooperation between the Baptist Union of Norway and the Pentecostal movement, represented by Philadelphia, the theological college of Norwegian Pentecostals, and they were equal owners.

At the same time as the educational center at Stabekk was established, Holtet Christian Lower Secondary School was also established. Today, it is the Oslo Fjord College of Further Education. The school offers a variety of creative, socially engaging programs of study.

The Baptist Union of Norway belongs to a large international family of churches. We are members of the European Baptist Federation (EBF) and the Baptist World Alliance (BWA). Our membership of EBF means that we collaborate extensively with other European Baptists. Through our affiliation with the BWA, we are part of a world-wide fellowship comprising about 50 million Baptists, divided among nearly 250 Baptist communities in more than 120 countries. Even though we are a small movement in Norway, we belong to one of the largest Protestant denominations in the world.

Chapter 3 The Baptists' ecumenical involvement

The Baptists consider themselves to be part of the world-wide Christian church. We find that a diversity of different denominations enriches the church. That has not always been the case. For long periods of time, Norwegian Baptists were in confrontation with other religious communities, especially the Lutheran state Church of Norway. As we fought for acceptance and the right to exist, we became confrontational in meeting with others. The Baptists' own

struggle for religious freedom challenged us to be more accommodating in respect of other fellow believers. As time passed, confrontation gave way to dialogue. The Baptists have grown more confident in their own position and are more open to cooperation. This is also due to the fact that the political assumptions in Norwegian society have shifted; the State no longer discriminates as much between free churches and other religious communities.

At the national level, the Baptists have become deeply involved in ecumenical work. Already when the Dissenter Parliament, subsequently Norway's Free Church Council, was founded in 1902, the Baptists were involved. The Baptists held several leading positions on Norway's Free Church Council. In 2006, Norway's Free Church Council merged with the Christian Council of Norway, consolidating most Christian religious and faith communities. The Baptists have also held leading positions there.

In the quest for greater understanding between the churches, the Baptists are active contributors to theological talks at the national and international levels alike. The Baptist Union of Norway is a regular participant in the Norwegian Theological Discussion Forum under the auspices of the Christian Council of Norway. The Baptist Union of Norway has also engaged in bilateral talks about doctrine. In the 1980s, the Baptist Union of Norway engaged in talks about doctrine with the Church of Norway, and then in the early 2000s, with the United Methodist Church in Norway. The talks led to greater understanding between the religious communities.

The Baptist Union of Norway's ecumenical attitude has also been of concrete importance for educating pastors in our church. Since 2009, we have worked with the Norwegian Pentecostal movement at HLT. Baptists often participate in ecumenical church services; Baptist pastors take part in interdenominational sessions for the clergy and other interdenominational initiatives. This will vary from place to place.

Chapter 4 Baptist understanding of Christianity

The basis of the beliefs of the Baptist Union of Norway have a lot in common with all other Christian denominations. We all believe in the Holy Trinity of God the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit. As part of the world-wide church, we support the content of the Apostles' Creed and the Nicene Creed. At the same time, the Baptist understanding of Christianity has some distinctive characteristics that are and will continue to be important for the Baptists in

Norway.

The following is a presentation of central aspects of the Baptist faith and practice.

4.1 Christ is Lord of the faithful.

To the congregation, the very center of the Christian faith is Jesus in person and deed. As Baptists, we acknowledge that Jesus Christ is the son of God and savior of the world. We believe that Jesus suffered, died and was resurrected as our redeemer, and that his resurrection led him to victory over sin, death and evil. Jesus is God and he shows us who the true and real God is. Accordingly, we cannot speak the truth about God without praising Jesus Christ. As our savior, he is also our Lord. That Jesus is our Lord means that he is the authority in the lives of the faithful; as Christians, we are called to follow him in all areas of life, through our words, deeds, thoughts and emotions, in good times and bad. As our Lord, Jesus' words and teachings are normative for Christians. One of the key tenets in Jesus' message is the call to repentance and new life. This means that Jesus Christ is also the authority for the congregation. As Christians, we are part of a congregational fellowship in which Christ is the authority and where his teachings have a binding effect on the congregation's beliefs and practices.

Bible texts: John 17:20 - 23 and Eph. 1:17 - 23

4.2 The Bible as an authority

[This chapter will be elaborated upon and sent out for a hearing at a later date, see the cover letter accompanying the document]

4.3 View of humankind

Every person is created in the image of God, that is, with infinite value. A person's value is not defined by other individuals or by the community, but rather by God. That we are created in the image of God makes human life sacrosanct and inviolable, from conception to natural death. Being created in the image of God implies that we have been created to share a fellowship with other people and with God.

People are created for a purpose, i.e. to seek truth and goodness. For that reason, everyone can tell the difference between right and wrong.

Everyone can respond to God's call. This leads to a personal response to God's call to repentance and to follow him. This personal response requires us to respond yes or no to

God's call. No one can be forced to believe. It is therefore fundamental for Baptists that freedom of conscience applies to all people, believers and non-believers alike. This freedom ensues from humankind being equipped by God with free will.

The Bible also tells of humankind's fall from grace into sin. Because of the fall of man from divine grace, we do not always seek to do God's will. The consequence of sin is that man's relationship to God was broken, making all human beings dependent on repentance.

Bible texts: 1. Gen. 1:27, Psalms 139, John 1:12 - 13, Romans 6, Romans 12:2

4.4 View of the congregation

One important feature of the Baptist understanding of Christianity is its view of the congregation. Ever since the advent of the Baptism community, we have maintained that the congregation can consist only of believers who have undergone a believer's baptism, and that the church is separate from power structures. For that reason, the Baptist community has always rejected the state church system.

As a congregational fellowship, the believers are united with God and with each other in a pact. God has called us out of the secular world and into a totally new fellowship in which Christ is the authority. Membership requires a voluntary affiliation with the congregation. Accordingly, it cannot be forced, but must rather be based on an individual's personal, independent relationship with God. The Bible gives us many images and expressions that describe the congregation. Among other things, the Bible describes Christians as God's people, a temple of living stones and a body. These images describe different aspects of being a congregation. The common denominator for all the descriptions is that faith is personal, but that it must always be experienced in fellowship with others.

Baptists will maintain that faith is personal, but that it is not individualistic. In the New Testament, the congregation shows us how we Christians live in a co-dependent relationship with other believers. It takes fellowship to live a Christian life. No one can be a Christian alone; faith must constantly be experienced within the framework of congregational fellowship. Accordingly, the congregation consists of those who gather together for worship services. Members must be registered to meet the formal requirements posed by the State, but on the deepest level, the congregation is a community of believers gathered around the

Lord's Communion table. A congregational fellowship is different from a community of interest. We do not choose each other; God has chosen us. By virtue of our faith in him, we are brought together.

The congregation always acts as a local congregation, meaning the local congregation is the most basic building block of Baptist thinking about congregations.

The Baptists will say that the individual believer in a congregational fellowship is one with Christ's body and hears God's voice. For that reason, the meeting of the congregation should be understood as the congregations' supreme governing body, where everyone listens to God and works together to determine what is God's will. In actual practice, this appears to be a democratic decision. The view of the congregation is a consequence of the view of humankind and the understanding that faith is personal. The congregation does not accommodate authoritarian or hierarchical leadership methods, but authority and trust are given to those elected to be leaders by the congregational fellowship.

To understand the church, it is necessary to ask how the church is organized. The term 'church system' refers to the way in which the congregations are governed and relate to other congregations. The Baptist community has always favored a congregationalist church system, suggesting that every congregation is autonomous and governs itself. The way in which this has been practised specifically has varied in different parts of the Baptist community. The Baptist Union of Norway has practised a moderate form of congregationalism, meaning that the local congregations have ceded some of their autonomy to the church's joint governing bodies. This puts the congregations in a binding, close relationship with each other.

In the Baptist community, all believers are part of the priesthood of believers. This implies that we do not need a special priesthood to act as an intermediary between God and the congregation. Different services in the congregational fellowship are based on affinity, talents and the recognition of calls from the local congregation. Women and men alike can serve as pastors and leaders of the congregation and the religious community. All believers are called to service in the congregation and God equips individuals with certain talents. The talents will be used to strengthen the believers to enable them to serve God in the world.

Norwegian Baptists have different kinds of worship services. The common denominator for them is preaching, prayers and hymns, and the practise of baptism and communion.

Bible texts: Matt. 18:20, Acts 2:42 - 47, 1. Cor. 12, Eph. 4:1 - 16, 1. Pet. 2:9 - 10,

4.5 Baptism

Baptism is pivotal in the Baptist understanding of Christianity. The word 'baptist' comes from the Greek word "baptizein", meaning "to christen". The Baptists began to practise baptism differently from other churches during the Reformation. The Baptists rejected infant baptism, opting instead to believe that baptism could only happen based on the profession of one's own belief.

The Baptists baptize in the name of the Trinity, in keeping with Jesus' commandments.

The Baptists perform baptism with full immersion in response to an individual's personal repentance and profession of faith. Baptism allows an individual to take part in both the victory Jesus won through his death and the new life engendered by his resurrection. This is expressed through the act of baptism. When a person is immersed in the baptismal water, sin and death are not allowed to prevail, because the believer has been raised up to a new life by Christ. This resurrection is also a sign of the physical resurrection that we believe is going to happen in God's new kingdom.

Baptism requires personal conviction on the part of the person to be baptized. No one can be baptized on the basis of others' beliefs. Baptism affects a person's entire life. The new life it offers is shared with other believers and it has both faith-related and ethical consequences. Baptism is also a baptism to Christ's body, which is the congregation. For that reason, baptism is the gateway into the Christian congregation and always a congregational act.

Bible texts: Matt. 28:19 - 20, Mark 16:16, Acts 2:41, Rom. 6:1 - 11, Col. 2:12,
1. Pet. 3:18 - 21

4.6 Communion

Communion is the life blood of the congregation. This is a meal that has three dimensions. Looking back, it refers to the meal that Jesus had with the disciples before he was to suffer and die. In the present, we celebrate our fellowship with each other and the fact that we are one with Christ in his affliction and death. Communion also presages the perfect feast in God's kingdom. Communion is therefore a memorial meal, where we as a congregation praise what Christ has done. Communion is also a meal that celebrates a covenant and a fellowship, reminding us of the new pact established by Christ to which all believers belong. Every time we as a congregation celebrate communion, we are reminded of what Jesus did, and we look forward to the day we can share the meal with Christ. As a congregational meal, communion is for those who profess their faith in Jesus as our Lord and God's only begotten son.

Bible texts: Matt. 26:26 - 29, Mark 14:22 - 25, Luke 22:14 - 20, 1. Cor. 10:16 - 17, 1. Cor. 11:23 - 29.

Chapter 5 Baptists today

Baptist doctrine teaches that it is important for faith to lead to concrete acts. Based on the teachings of the Bible, the mission and the diaconate are the two main areas that give rise to the acts.

The mission is in response to the Great Commission, where the faithful are asked to go and make disciples of all nations. The diaconate is Christian charity in practice, aimed at all people, regardless of creed and background. The diaconate is based on the commandment to 'love thy neighbor as thyself'. The diaconal work expresses God's care for the poor, destitute and marginalised groups in the world. Both the mission and the diaconal work enjoy the support of the local congregation.

These days, the mission has two sides to it. On the one hand, there is the international mission that involves the diaconate, evangelization and providing financial support to selected countries and areas, preferably countries with which several of our congregations have a connection as a result of migration. On the other hand, there is the concrete challenge of doing mission work in our own country against the backdrop of a multi-cultural and secularized society. The church's thoughts about mission work lead congregations to focus on recruiting new people from their local community and on setting up new

congregations in areas where little Christian work has been done.

In the Baptist view of humankind and congregations, fellowship is important. A fellowship will consist of people from many different walks of life, at many different stages of life.

The Baptist Union of Norway is a multicultural religious community with considerable diversity in terms of language, culture and manifestations. We see our multi-cultural religious community as a visible manifestation of the world-wide church that reflects God's people of all nations.

It is important to win over new generations for Jesus, and we consider it a strength that several generations gather together to worship Christ. Working with children and young people has high priority in our religious community, including addressing the challenges faced by second and third generation immigrants who seek to find a sense of belonging in the church, as well as in the rest of the community.

In the Baptist view of humankind, faith is personal. Accordingly, the Baptist Union of Norway strives to be a religious community that will promote an open-minded society. We aspire to help facilitate greater freedom of religion and to personal faith being perceived as a positive contribution to cultural and community life.

Appendices

A. The church system;

Adopted by the National Baptist Convention in Trondheim on 12 July 1963:

1. Faith

1. The Baptists believe the Bible to be the revealed Word of God, and regard it as normative for faith, doctrine and life.
2. The Baptists have no written creed other than the Bible, but they affirm the content of the ecumenical symbols (the Nicene Creed and the Apostles' Creed).
3. The Baptists are one of several evangelistic religious communities that believe in reformational principles in the question of redemption, articulated in the polemic terms: "mercy alone" and "faith alone".
4. The Baptists practise baptism as a profession of their faith. Salvation therefore takes place upon a person's transition to being a believer, like in apostolic times.
5. The Baptists regularly celebrate communion with the Lord. In principle, they view it as a congregational meal, but since it usually takes place at public church services, where all believers are invited and baptized to take a seat at the Lord's table.

2. Church constitution

1. The Baptists have an congregational church constitution featuring autonomous local congregations. The administration rests with a congregational council and a religious leader. The religious leader is usually a pastor (minister) in a full-time position. He performs the ordinary functions of a minister.
2. The Baptist Union of Norway is the cooperative body for all the congregations in the country. The congregations engage in voluntary but close cooperation on tasks of common interest that would exceed the ability of one single congregation. Examples include evangelization, work with schools, work with children and young people, social tasks, foreign missions, etc. Separate boards deal the respective joint tasks. They are responsible to the Baptist Union of Norway's annual meeting, where elected representatives of the local congregations meet to deal with budgets, accounts and responsibilities.
3. The Baptist Union of Norway is affiliated with the European Baptist Federation and the Baptist World Alliance. These organizations are cooperative bodies at the international level. However, they have no authority to make decisions for the national religious community.

3. Relations with other denominations

1. The Baptists' attitude to other denominations is characterized by tolerance.
2. The Baptists collaborate with other evangelistic religious communities in several areas of common interest, e.g. questions involving missions, Sunday school, scouts and youth work, temperance and interdenominational matters.

4. Church and state

1. The Baptists have always championed full freedom of religion. Their ideal is a free church in a free state, where all denominations have parity in the eyes of the State.
2. The Baptists have a positive view of the State and its many functions, urging their members to be loyal and responsible in respect of society with its many tasks.

B. Statement on the Baptist view of the Bible

National Baptist Preachers' Convention, 7 -14 Sept. 1966, Langesund Bad:

We believe the following formulations correspond to what we, as Norwegian Baptists, have always stood for - and still stand for:

- We believe that the Bible is the inspired word of God, given to us as an historic document. It is the sum of the revelation of God, teaches divine creation, gives us laws and the words of the prophets, and leads us to Jesus Christ and the Apostolic age.
- We believe that Jesus Christ is the center of the revelation of God. In him, we find the Scriptures' highest authority and touchstone.
- However, we believe that a purely formal profession of faith in the Bible is not enough. A true understanding of the Bible also includes a correct understanding of the main truths about redemption. Among the key examples, we would mention: The Jesus Christ of the Bible is the incarnation of God, who died and was resurrected to save us from our sins.
- We believe that the Holy Spirit is the life principle of the Word. The Word and the Holy Spirit must therefore not be separated. The Holy Spirit's witness is Jesus Christ, as the Scriptures say: "He (the Holy Spirit) will take what I have to say and tell it to you."
- We believe that the gospel is God's offer of salvation, which an individual must personally accept or reject. The gospel is good news and relevant, and it achieves its purpose when man becomes one with God.

It is with gratitude and joy that we once again emphasize the Scriptures as God's normative Word, offering guidelines for faith, doctrine and life.

We urge all of our people to perform untiring hard work to spread the message of Salvation that has been entrusted to us, and to continue to believe in our Lord and Savior.

C. Value platform DNB

Adopted at the National Baptist Convention in Langesund, 9 - 10 July 1996

1. We are part of the whole, world-wide Christian church, and we profess our faith in one God as the Father, Son and Holy Spirit.
2. We emphasise that it is necessary to have personal faith in Jesus Christ and to live by his example.
3. The final authority for our faith and deeds is Jesus Christ, as revealed in the Scriptures and through the presence of the Holy Spirit among his people.
4. We recognise the Scriptures in the Old and the New testaments as the fundamental authority for understanding God's revelation in Christ.
5. We understand the congregation as a fellowship of believers, who are seated at the Lord's table.
6. We practise baptism, but only for believers, to make them one with Christ's body.
7. We underline that every local congregation has the freedom to and responsibility for discovering the meaning of Christ in their lives and their activities.
8. We emphasise "the common priesthood of the faithful", i.e. that all a congregations' members are called to service. Some are called to provide spiritual leadership, which must always be understood as service.
9. We believe that the mutual obligation expressed through baptism and membership of a local congregation leads to further fellowship between congregations, where this is possible.
10. We believe that every disciple of Christ is called to give testimony of Jesus Christ as our Lord, and that, as part of God's kingdom, the congregation shall participate in the fullness of God's mission on Earth.
11. We confirm that it is necessary to preserve freedom of conscience, and as a result, we accept the differences that exist among us.
12. We support the separation of church and state, thanks to our faith in Christ as the one true Lord, and to ensure freedom of religion.
13. As devout Christians, we live in the hope that Christ will finally be revealed in all his glory and that all of creation will be transformed.