

The Baptist Union of Norway

Concept Document Proposal for✚

Binding Membership in Practice

Version: Ready for Consultation

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Purpose

Being a member of the Baptist Union of Norway entails the assigning of rights and obligations to the individual congregations. This document is a proposal for managing binding memberships in the Baptist Union of Norway - what the church system "moderate congregationalism" means to us in practice during the years ahead. Although the document has a practical structure, its content has been derived from a Baptist church viewpoint, as described in the foundational document.

1. Introduction

The proposal for a foundational document for the Baptist Union of Norway states, among other things: "All congregations have the right to vote in the national assembly and have a common obligation to follow up on the decisions that are made" This document focuses on how a congregation's commitment to the national community can appear in practice.

As Baptists we are fortunate to possess a number of rights by virtue of our membership in the Baptist Union of Norway. For example, we have access to resources for guidance and crisis management, access to community and leadership training programs, and access to programs such as VAT compensation and pension plans for employees.

Formal frameworks can never replace the informal life in the community, i.e., the forums and relationships that bind us together as Baptists in Norway. We are completely dependent on dialogue within our national and local meeting places. It is through dialogue that we build our community and form our common understanding, thus shaping us as Baptists and believers. Therefore, while working within formal frameworks, this work must also be nurtured in our communities.

2. Categories for binding membership

The basic document further states that "Congregations are in a binding and intimate relationship to each other where the national assembly is the highest authority". For a community to function, there must be a common understanding of the rules and the framework within which the community operates. In describing these frameworks, we begin with three main categories of binding membership.

2.1 Category 1: Membership criteria for congregations in the Baptist Union of Norway

Category 1 summarizes what Baptist congregations must commit to. The commitments consist of four main elements:

- Articles of Association
- Foundational Document
- Pastoral Approval
- Binding National Assembly Resolutions

2.1.1 Articles of Association

The Baptist Union of Norway's articles of association are the organization's regulations and consist of basic rules for how the organization is to be operated. The articles of association are in accordance with Norwegian law.

The articles of association are part of category 1 because they are fundamental to how we operate as an organization. They set out basic principles for how we interact and who is responsible for what. The articles of association describe the most central functions of the Baptist Union of Norway. They can be said to be an expression of the community's definition of organizational practice and of our expectations towards each other.

2.1.2 Foundational Document

The foundational document describes key historical features and our understanding of Christianity as Baptists in Norway. It highlights key aspects of our faith and Baptist identity.

The foundational document is part of category 1 because it describes the main features of the Norwegian Baptist Society's identity with a background in key historical events, core theological tenets, and the life of the church community. It expresses how we understand ourselves and what we stand for.

2.1.3 Pastor Approval

The pastor approval board assesses whether a person is qualified to be a pastor in a Baptist congregation. The approval board seeks to provide an assessment of the person's qualifications and suitability for service in Baptist churches. It is intended to be of assistance to congregations in their task of ensuring the quality of their pastoral appointments.

The pastor approval board is part of category 1 because it is vital that the central leader in a congregation possesses a high standard and degree of integrity, so that he or she can be a good shepherd for the congregations that are part of our union. In this context, a theological education is also desirable. Pastors are delegated tasks and authority by their congregations. The person in question is a representative of both the local church and the Baptist Union of Norway. As such he, or she, is part of a national pastoral fellowship.

Some congregations do not possess a pastor, but instead have delegated these tasks to another person. Furthermore, the leader of the board (typically called the parish council in our congregations) will have a special responsibility for the operations and management of the local congregation. Both these roles will thus have a special responsibility within a church community. Even if there is no pastor approval process required for these roles, the persons adopting them will have to commit to having a similar degree of high integrity as does a pastor. It is therefore recommended that the Baptist Union of Norway work to prepare centrally adopted guidelines for this purpose.

2.1.4 Binding National Assembly Resolutions

For that which it is unnatural to incorporate in the foundational document or articles of association, at least in a first phase, there may be a necessity for creating a new category of national assembly resolutions. For example, it may be necessary to clarify guidelines for how Baptist congregations should relate to abuse and financial infidelity or unhealthy leadership models and working conditions within congregations.

Binding national assembly resolutions are desired as part of category 1 because it is important to have a quality-assured and thorough process of resolutions that must be binding for all congregations. Furthermore, there must be clarity in respect to which decisions should be binding.

Below are proposals for the process and characteristics of such a binding National Assembly resolution (as opposed to an ordinary National Assembly resolution).

This process is based on congregations being members and thus belonging to the Baptist Union of Norway. Baptists have a tradition of church-based decisions and therefore it is important to have a broad base for something to be considered binding on all. Note that the process is not designed to handle conflicts.

Steps:

1. The case must be promoted by several Baptist congregations jointly, alternatively by the main board.
 2. The Executive Board must assess whether further work is to be done on the case in question.
 3. The case will be assessed by a separate professional council / working group charged with the responsibility of submitting a written assessment of the proposal against for example the principles of the foundational document. In theological matters, the group should be broadly composed, and existing forums can be used for the assessment, for example a further development of the Baptist theological discussion forum. In other instances, it should be considered as to whether it is advisable to procure professional advice from experts in the respective areas in question. If the professional council supports the case, it goes on to the next step.
 4. A description of the case / topic is sent out for consultation to all congregations. At least half of the congregations in the Baptist Union of Norway must provide feedback that they support the case / topic being promoted as a binding national assembly decision, before it is further considered. This is to ensure that there is a potential consensus for the case within the Baptist churches.
 5. The proposed resolution is submitted for consideration by the National Assembly. The same majority is required as for amendments to the articles of association.
- A binding decision of the National Assembly must have a protection period, i.e., a period shall elapse from the time such a type of decision is made or rejected until it can be taken up again. The proposed protection period is 5 years.

There are currently no decisions of such a binding nature and the introduction of such a type of decision will not have a retroactive effect.

2.2 Category 2: Support and contribution to joint activities in the Baptist Union of Norway

This category addresses the co-responsibility Baptist churches have for the activities and focus areas of ministry that they have in common. These may be areas that are too large for individual congregations to have the necessary resources for fulfilling on their own - also one of the purposes for establishing the Baptist Union of Norway in 1879.

Examples of categories of work and commitments that congregations in the Baptist Union of Norway should support and contribute to:

- School Management
- Mission: internationally and nationally
- Realization of strategies for growth and development

- Economic support of the work of the union

2.3 Category 3: Participation in joint endeavors within the Baptist Union of Norway

This category describes the participation of Baptist churches in boards and in national and regional arenas. It further describes how Baptist congregations facilitate the participation of its members in these arenas.

Examples of participation in joint events:

- At national meetings and leadership conferences
- In boards, councils and committees
- In leadership training and development
- In theological reflection
- At camps

3. Not living up to obligations to the community

The consequences of not living up to the community's obligations will be different depending on the category in question. This also implies that the handling process will also be different.

3.1 Category 1: Membership criteria for congregations in the Baptist Union of Norway

If a congregation fails to live up to the membership criteria of the Baptist Union of Norway, a step-by-step process is proposed. The process is designed to ensure robustness in the face of different types of situations. The focus is on thoroughness and dialogue along the way, ensuring also that the various parties are taken seriously and heard. Furthermore, all parties must feel secure in the handling process itself. At the same time, it is based on a recognition that there is a framework for the community that can contribute to promoting unity.

Proposals for the process are described in several steps, but it is important to emphasize that the process generally does not continue until the last step but stops earlier. The goal is always to be able to stop the case as early as possible based on dialogue. For both the congregation and the Baptist Union, the solution may necessitate the implementation of changes.

There can be many ways to detect situations where there is a need to initiate a dialogue about congregations' failures to fulfill obligations to the union. These are not described in detail here.

Step:

1. When church counselors and / or the administration discover or are faced with the situations mentioned, they initiate a dialogue with the purpose of clarifying the facts, resolving any misunderstandings, and seeking solutions. If necessary, support is sought from external parties. If dialogue reveals matters that are to be submitted to a prosecuting authority, it is handled by a separate process. Initiatives that do not lead to this are submitted to the main board.
2. The Executive Board decides on involvement and facilitates the process further. The Executive Board may close the case or forward it to a relevant other body.

3. If another body is involved, it must seek to understand the facts and make an assessment of the severity against the membership criteria specified in category 1. An independent assessment of the case must be ensured, thus assisting the Executive Board and the administration to avoid becoming a party in the case. This body can then submit the matter back to the main board for further dialogue / process.

4. The Executive Board initiates a dialogue in line with input in step 3. It shall ensure both the perspectives of the body and the relevant congregation (s). If necessary, external resources should be obtained to facilitate the dialogue process and conflict resolution. Again, the purpose is to seek a solution.

5. If neither the church council nor the congregation make the necessary adjustments, the Executive Board may submit an exclusion proposal to the national assembly (which presupposes that the exclusion clause is retained). The Executive Board may also propose other measures or sanctions for the National Assembly as an alternative end to the process.

3.2 Category 2: Support and contribute to joint activities in the Baptist Union of Norway

Obligations in category 2 can be secured by introducing a plan where a fixed binding membership contribution from the Baptist congregations is introduced. It is recommended that there may be an opportunity to apply for an exemption from this obligation, for example in connection with a church plant or in the case of particularly demanding financial conditions.

Proposed process for follow-up in the event of non-payment of membership fees:

It is desirable to enter into a dialogue at the lowest possible level (as close to the congregation as possible). The goal is to clarify facts, clear up misunderstandings and seek solutions.

The administration informs the executive board about who contributes and who does not, so that they can consider further dialogue and measures to provide information for to promoting understanding and engagement or to adjust courses on joint initiatives so that they embrace more broadly.

3.3 Category 3: Participation in joint events in the Baptist Union of Norway

Commitment in category 3 can be secured by designing suitable needs-based incentive plans to promote increased participation. These may appear to be different depending on where you participate. For example, an incentive plan can be created which provides an opportunity for those who participate to be indirectly sponsored by those who do not, so that all the congregations are invoiced for a share that goes to specific work, and so that congregations that participate receive support for this. It may also be possible to apply for an exception in this category for the share that is invoiced.

Proposed process for following up non-participation and / or payment of outstanding contributions:

It is desirable to commence dialogues at the lowest possible level (as close to the congregation as possible). The goal is to clarify facts, clear up misunderstandings and seek solutions.

The administration informs the Executive Board of developments, so that they can consider further dialogue and information measures to promote understanding and involvement or adjust courses on joint initiatives, so they have a broader reach.