Definitons

**Open Membership** – anyone who professes a current living faith in Christ and a wish to covenant themselves to our community can become a church member.

**Closed Membership** – only those individuals who have been baptised in the Baptist tradition of believer's baptism can be eligible for church membership.

**Baptist Believer’s Baptism** – the full immersion in water (when possible) of a person with an appropriate understanding of Christianity and witnessed to the local church through personal testimony and a confession of faith.

**Trust Deeds** – an historical document drawn up to enable a church to own property. It contains various conditions which stipulate church practice, many of which still legally apply today.

Background Information

Historical records and practice indicate that HBC originally operated as a ‘Closed Membership’ and ‘Closed Table’ (Communion) church. Over time we relaxed the requirements for communion and became ‘Open Table’, the corresponding requirements for membership remained unchanged. The Baptist Union Corporation (BUC) has not reviewed our historical records and therefore cannot ascertain how common practice might influence the interpretation of our Trust Deeds. They have however reviewed the Deeds and have formed a basic assumption that as they contain no explicit requirements for membership, that we are an Open Membership church.

Whilst there isn’t currently a definitive conclusion as to whether we *should* legally be an Open Membership church, it is certain that we *could* become one if desired.

**Why are we considering this issue now?**

1. We have been operating as a closed membership church for a long time without ever reviewing whether it continues to be appropriate; a pastoral vacancy seems a good time to review our expectations. The church meeting confirmed it would like to explore this area before a new minister is appointed.

2. At some point we will need to adopt a Constitution which indicates how we operate as a Church. The Charities Commission will expect this to be consistent with our Trust Deeds, and the Baptist Union confirms this is best practice. If we remain Closed it would be wise to conduct further investigation to ensure we are not in breach of any charity legislation.

**Things that would remain the SAME under Open Membership:**

- Our belief that believer’s baptism is the ideal for every Christian. It would remain the expectation for anyone who has come to faith within our church, and anyone joining who has not undertaken an equivalent rite in their tradition.

- Our identity as a Baptist Church. Believer’s baptism is only a small part of what makes us Baptists, and the Baptist Union is positive about churches who can embrace Open Membership.

- Candidates interviewed by two other members and a recommendation brought to and voted on in a members meeting. Baptism and membership would remain linked.
Simple Guide to Open Membership

Things that would become DIFFERENT under Open Membership:

- We would allow ourselves the freedom (probably on very rare occasions) to admit someone to membership who has not undergone believer's baptism.
- Baptism would not be necessary for membership; instead emphasis would be on an alternative form of passage/recognition which was significant in the spiritual journey of the individual, and which is seen by them as an appropriate substitution for Baptism.

Some theological reminders

As Baptists we continue to believe that believer’s baptism by immersion is the ideal for those who share our background, however there are important points which remind us to hold this view lightly:

1. Baptism is not required for salvation.
2. A baptism does not have to be by full immersion to be valid (the earliest Baptists only practiced ‘affusion’ – pouring water on the head).
3. For Christians, membership in the Body of Christ is the basis of our unity, not the ‘mode of initiation’ of various traditions.
4. Church membership is primarily about a covenant relationship with each other and God, all other considerations are secondary.
5. The diversity of Baptism practices in the New Testament makes it impossible to establish a definitive description of the rite.

Advantages of Open Membership

- The priority for membership becomes the recognition of a current life of faith rather than an historical rite of passage.
- We can become more inclusive, more easily inviting those believers who want to be a part of our community into church membership.
- Ecumenical respect becomes a greater reality; we humbly recognise that we don’t possess the only correct way to be church.
- It will become increasingly difficult as more churches become Open Membership to assume that membership transfer equates to recognised Baptism. We would begin to spend increasing time and energy attempting to ensure that baptism had occurred.

Disadvantages of Open Membership

- It will require a change in current practice. This will require time, energy and patience during a transition period where we move to a new way of working.
- We will encounter uncertainty and possibly insecurity about what makes us Baptists, we will have to sensitive to this and communicate positively (possibly including some teaching and discussion time).