

MEMBERSHIP HANDBOOK



EVANGELICAL FREE CHURCH OF BEMIDJI

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WELCOME TO THE EVANGELICAL FREE CHURCH OF BEMIDJI

We would like to welcome you to the membership class of the Evangelical Free Church of Bemidji. Whether you are new to our church or you are a long-time, regular attendee, we are excited to walk with you as you pursue this next step of faith as part of your personal discipleship.

You will hear us use the word *discipleship* regularly at E-Free Bemidji. We believe that Jesus Christ has called his church to make disciples. Discipleship drives everything we do, from Sunday morning worship to our various ministries and opportunities throughout the week. You don't have to be a member of a church to be a disciple, but you do have to be a disciple to be a member of the church.¹

A disciple is simply someone who is a believer in Jesus Christ. They have made the decision to become a Christ-follower. They are someone who has believed the good news that God has made a way of salvation for sinners by grace alone, through faith alone, in Christ alone. This is the message of the gospel and it is central to who we are and to all that we do as a local church.²

At E-Free Bemidji, we are committed to helping our members, our regular attenders, and anyone who walks through our doors to know Jesus Christ and to become his disciple. Around here, we like to say that we are

Becoming fully devoted followers of Jesus together.

Over the course of this membership class you will learn more about our church: who we are, what we believe, and why we think that church membership is an important step toward becoming a fully devoted follower of Jesus.

We know that not everyone who calls E-Free Bemidji their home church will pursue membership. Our commitment is to love and care for the gathered church, both members and non-members alike. We simply ask that you would prayerfully consider whether membership at E-Free Bemidji is the commitment that God is calling you to make as you seek to become a fully devoted follower of Jesus Christ.

¹ *Constitution of the Evangelical Free Church of Bemidji*, Art. III: *Confession of Faith*, 7. "The Church."

² For a more complete definition and explanation we would recommend the little book by Greg Gilbert *What Is the Gospel?* (Wheaton, Ill: Crossway, 2010) and the companion book by the same author *Who Is Jesus?* (Wheaton, Illinois: Crossway, 2015).

WHAT IS A LOCAL CHURCH?

You may remember the old nursery rhyme that goes,

*Here is the church, here is the steeple;
Open the doors and see all the people.*

In fact, you may even now be folding and opening your hands as you read these words. While it is most common to refer to a local church as a location (“Which church do you attend?” “Did you go to church last Sunday?”), we know that church buildings and for that matter, church steeples are not necessary for a church to be a church.

But people *are* necessary. Whether the doors of the building are open or closed, if there are no people, there is no church. Author Jonathan Leeman in his book *Church Membership* defines the local church this way:

“A local church is a group of Christians who regularly gather in Christ’s name to officially affirm and oversee one another’s membership in Jesus Christ and his kingdom through gospel preaching and gospel ordinances.”³

More than a Christian club or collection of spiritually like-minded individuals, the local church is made up of people who are united in their common fellowship in the gospel and in the person of Jesus Christ. The church is more like an organism than an organization. In fact, the Bible uses the analogy of the human body to illustrate this point. We read that

“God has placed the parts in the body, every one of them, just as he wanted them to be” and that “you are the body of Christ, and each one of you is a part of it” (1 Corinthians 12:18, 27, NIV).

In that same passage of Scripture, we are cautioned against viewing ourselves as expendable parts of the body lacking value and worth, and are likewise warned against viewing others as parts of the body that we could live without. We thrive, both as individuals and as the church when those who belong to a local church are regularly gathering together as Jesus’s disciples for worship and for fellowship.

At E-Free Bemidji, we want our church to be a safe place for anyone who is considering the claims of Jesus and who has not yet believed the gospel and come to faith in Christ. Likewise, our aim as a local church is to help Christian believers who gather regularly for worship and fellowship to *become fully devoted followers of Jesus together*. Our doors are open to anyone who would come, but we have a special responsibility as a local church to help oversee the spiritual growth of our members.

³ Jonathan Leeman, *Church Membership: How the World Knows Who Represents Jesus*, (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2012) 52.

WHAT IS CHURCH MEMBERSHIP?

Holding membership with an organization typically comes with certain rights, privileges, and access to available services. Naturally, then, people often ask, “What are the benefits of joining a church?” The tongue-in-cheek response frequently is, “You get to vote at church business meetings.” As thrilling as it is to be able to participate in a meeting as a voting member, we believe that church membership has privileges that go far beyond the ballot.

When a person believes the gospel and places his faith in Jesus Christ, he becomes a member of the *Church*, that is, the universal Church (1Cor. 1:2). As a Christian, she now belongs to the Church made up of believers both past and present (Heb. 12:1). In Christ, they are made citizens of heaven and forevermore they belong to the kingdom of God (Php. 3:20; Col. 1:13-14).

Consider this definition of what it means to be a member of a *local* church:

“Church membership is a formal relationship between a church and a Christian characterized by the church’s affirmation and oversight of a Christian’s discipleship and the Christian’s submission to living out his or her discipleship in the care of the church.”⁴

In other words, Jesus Christ has tasked the local church to affirm that each of its members has rightly understood the gospel and has, by faith, trusted in the saving work of Jesus Christ. As each member makes the commitment to become a fully devoted follower of Jesus Christ, the local church commits to oversee the discipleship growth of each of its members.

Scripture frequently describes the Christian life in terms of a *path* of discipleship (Ps. 16:11; 23:3; 25:4). Jesus called his disciples to *follow* him (Mt. 4:19; Lk. 9:23; cf. 1Pt. 2:21). Believers are commanded to *walk* in love, in humility, and in obedience to Christ (Jn. 8:12; Mic. 6:8; 2Jn 6). But nowhere in the Bible do we get the impression that discipleship is something believers are to do entirely on their own.

Jesus's disciples flourish when they walk *with* other disciples. We need fellow brothers and sisters in Christ who will encourage us when our strength is failing (Heb. 3:12-14). We need people who will correct us when we wander from the path of discipleship, and those who will lovingly rebuke us when we start walking in the direction of disobedience (Pr. 27:5-6; Gal. 6:1-2).

A christian who regularly attends worship services and who participates in regular fellowship with their local church will be blessed and encouraged regardless of his or her membership status. However, for those who have made the formal commitment of membership, the local church is able to provide greater accountability and spiritual oversight to its members, especially by those who have been entrusted with the ministry of shepherding the members of flock (1Pt. 5:1-4; Heb 13:7, 17).

⁴ Leeman, *Church Membership*, 64.

DO I NEED TO BE BAPTIZED TO BE A MEMBER?

We recognize that depending on your family tradition, spiritual background, or past church experience that baptism at E-Free Bemidji might look a bit different from what you are used to. If you or the family you grew up in belongs to a tradition that practices infant baptism, you likely cannot recall the day that you were baptized. Others may come out of a church tradition where baptism takes place at a later stage of life. Still others have never even considered the practice or sought to be baptized as part of their Christian faith.

We believe that baptism along with the Lord's Supper (often referred to as Communion) are the two ordinances that the Lord Jesus gave to his church (Mt. 26:26-28; 28:19). According to our Confession of Faith, we believe that,

“baptism and the Lord's Supper...visibly and tangibly express the gospel. Though they are not the means of salvation, when celebrated by the church in genuine faith, these ordinances confirm and nourish the believer.”⁵

At E-Free Bemidji we practice open communion. This means that the communion table is open to *anyone* who professes faith in Jesus Christ, whether or not he or she is a member of our church.⁶ It is our usual practice to celebrate the Lord's Supper as part of our Sunday morning worship services about once every two months.

Baptism, however, is a one-time act of public profession of faith on the part of the believer. It is our practice to baptize with water by immersion.⁷ We encourage anyone who is considering baptism or who desires to learn more about our church's baptismal practices and convictions to participate in one of our regularly scheduled baptism classes.

Baptism is not a requirement for membership at E-Free Bemidji. Some of those who belong to our church family were baptized as a profession of faith prior to coming to E-Free Bemidji. We do, however, encourage anyone who professes faith in Jesus Christ and who has not yet made the decision to be baptized to prayerfully consider taking this step of obedience as part of their discipleship. Our pastoral staff and elders would gladly welcome the opportunity to visit with anyone who is considering baptism.

⁵ *Constitution of the Evangelical Free Church of Bemidji*, Art. III: *Confession of Faith*, 7. “The Church.”

⁶ There may be times, however, when it is good for a believer to refrain from taking the Lord's Supper. Scripture warns us that we are not to share in the Lord's Supper “in an unworthy manner” (1 Cor. 11:27), e.g., if our hearts are in state of unrepentance or we are aware of an unresolved conflict with a fellow Christian. For this reason, when we gather for the Lord's Supper, we encourage one another to “examine themselves before they eat of the bread and drink from the cup” (1 Cor. 11:28).

⁷ While Scripture does not prescribe or mandate a particular *mode* of baptism, we believe that immersion best fits with both the practice and theological meaning of baptism as described in the New Testament (cf. Mt. 3:16; Acts 8:38-39; Rom. 6:2-4).

WHO RUNS THE CHURCH?

As an Evangelical Free Church, we hold to an autonomous and self-governing form of church polity known as *congregationalism*. This means that E-Free Bemidji as a local church has the freedom to govern its own affairs. The members of E-Free Bemidji collectively are authorized to:

- Determine its own membership
- Select its own pastoral staff and governing officers
- Approve any changes to its constitution or by-laws
- Approve the annual church budget
- Approve any major purchases or dissolution of the church

Members of E-Free Bemidji are encouraged to participate in quarterly congregational meetings to conduct the regular business of the church. We encourage both current and prospective members of E-Free Bemidji to obtain a copy of our church constitution and by-laws and to familiarize themselves with the rights and responsibilities of church members.

The E-Free Bemidji Elder Board is made up of our staff pastors and elected lay elders. According to the New Testament, the role of pastor or elder is that of a *shepherd* (Acts 20:28).⁸ Their primary role is to provide care and oversight to the local church—the flock under their care (1 Peter 5:1-4).

The men and women who serve on our Trustee Board have been elected by the members of the congregation to oversee the business affairs of the church. The Trustees oversee areas such as our church budget and financial operations, our church facility and property, and all of our legal papers.

Other church officers elected annually by the members of the congregation include our Church Clerk, Financial Secretary, Treasurer, and Chair of the Global Connections Team.

To learn more about our current church staff and ministry leaders, please visit the Our Leadership section of our website: www.efcbemidji.org/about-us/our-leadership.

⁸ According to the New Testament, pastors are elders and elders are pastors. Today we typically use the term *pastor* to refer to a staff member and the term *elder* to refer to a shepherd serving in a lay role. Jeramie Rinne, in his book *Church Elders* offers the following helpful analogy in reference to these two roles. “Just because a paid pastor may have more availability, education, or gifting, it doesn’t follow logically (or biblically) that a lay elder is any less a real pastor. Volunteer firefighters face the same flames as the paid firefighters, and volunteer elders confront the same challenges of shepherding as the staff pastors.” *Church Elders* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2012) 52.

WHAT IS AN EVANGELICAL FREE CHURCH?

In just about every town and city in America you will find churches of varying denominations. Typically, what distinguishes one denomination from another has to do with its doctrine (what it affirms and believes) and its polity (how the church is governed). While some might see denominational differences as leading to a spirit of division, we believe that these distinctives are important as they help us to be clear about what we believe to be true and how we as a local church are to go about our ministry.

It's not uncommon for someone to ask what the *free* in Evangelical Free refers to. In part, this term is a carry-over from the Scandinavian history of our church movement. Today, the term *free* primarily refers to the way Evangelical Free churches govern themselves (see above *Who Runs the Church?*).

The word *evangelical* comes from the Greek word *evangel*, a word frequently used throughout the New Testament. In English we translate this term as *the gospel*. Therefore, an evangelical is someone who has believed in, or better yet, has trusted in the gospel message. This message is good news; it's the declaration that God has graciously made a way of salvation by sending his Son Jesus Christ to save us from our sins. Through his death on the cross and his resurrection, those who believe this gospel and place their faith in Jesus Christ receive the promise of eternal life in him.

We believe that the gospel not only speaks to how a person becomes a Christian, it also shapes the way we understand not only the message of salvation, but the whole message of Scripture (see below *What Does E-Free Believe?*). And while we do believe that the gospel must inform our worldview as Christians, evangelicalism is not synonymous with a particular political ideology or position on various social issues.

Nationally, the Evangelical Free Church of America is an association of nearly 1,600 churches. The Free Church also includes a worldwide ministry of 1,400 churches on 40 mission fields. The Evangelical Free Church believes in fellowship and cooperation with other churches and denominations of similar faith. We have our early roots in the Scandinavian countries but we include persons from many ethnic backgrounds.

To learn more about the Evangelical Free Church of America, please visit www.efca.org.

HOW DO I BECOME A MEMBER?

As you prayerfully consider becoming a member of E-Free Bemidji, our desire is to strike a proper balance between elevating the importance and value of church membership, while at the same time removing any unnecessary obstacles that might prevent you from pursuing this important step of faith.

The first step toward pursuing church membership would be to join the next round of membership classes. This is typically a three-part class covering the information found in this *Membership Handbook*. The class will also give you and other prospective members the opportunity to ask any questions you might have about the membership process and what it means to be a member of E-Free Bemidji. At the end of the class, you will receive a membership application to complete if you would like to move forward in the process.

The primary qualification for membership is evidence of saving faith in Jesus Christ. While only God can look into our hearts and see if we truly belong to him, we believe that true faith will be evident in what we profess (Romans 10:9; 1 Corinthians 12:3) and in the fruit that we bear (John 15:1-17; Galatians 5:22-23).

Each membership candidate will be asked to prepare a brief personal testimony summarizing their relationship with Jesus Christ. For many people this may be a new experience, so we will be there to help coach you through the process. The specifics of your testimony will, of course, be uniquely yours, but your summary should at least include (1) a brief personal introduction, (2) an indication of how you know that you are a Christian, (3) a description of your life prior to faith in Christ, and (4) a description of how your life has been affected by your faith in Christ. A good goal would be to aim for a personal testimony that takes no more than 3-4 minutes to share.

Prospective members will also be asked to affirm the E-Free Bemidji *Confession of Faith* (see below *What Does E-Free Bemidji Believe?*). We will walk through the *Confession of Faith* together as part of the membership classes. You may come across some doctrinal ideas or theological concepts in our *Confession of Faith* that you are not familiar with or that you have a different perspective on. You will want to talk through these things either with the leader of the membership class or with one of the pastors.

After you have completed the membership classes, you will need to schedule a meeting with some of our elders and/or pastors (see above *Who Runs the Church?*). They will want to hear your personal testimony and will be available to answer any remaining questions you might have about church membership at E-Free Bemidji. The Elder Board will review your membership application and will make their recommendation to the congregation at an upcoming congregational meeting. Applicants who are approved by a majority vote of the congregation will be publicly welcomed into membership at a subsequent regular worship gathering.⁹

⁹ For more information about admission to membership and rights of membership please see the *By-laws of the Evangelical Free Church of Bemidji*.

WHAT DOES E-FREE BEMIDJI BELIEVE?

Confession of Faith

God

1. We believe in one God, Creator of all things, holy, infinitely perfect, and eternally existing in a loving unity of three equally divine Persons: the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit. Having limitless knowledge and sovereign power, God has graciously purposed from eternity to redeem a people for Himself and to make all things new for His own glory.

The Bible

2. We believe that God has spoken in the Scriptures, both Old and New Testaments, through the words of human authors. As the verbally inspired Word of God, the Bible is without error in the original writings, the complete revelation of His will for salvation, and the ultimate authority by which every realm of human knowledge and endeavor should be judged. Therefore, it is to be believed in all that it teaches, obeyed in all that it requires, and trusted in all that it promises.

The Human Condition

3. We believe that God created Adam and Eve in His image, but they sinned when tempted by Satan. In union with Adam, human beings are sinners by nature and by choice, alienated from God, and under His wrath. Only through God's saving work in Jesus Christ can we be rescued, reconciled and renewed.

Jesus Christ

4. We believe that Jesus Christ is God incarnate, fully God and fully man, one Person in two natures. Jesus—Israel's promised Messiah—was conceived through the Holy Spirit and born of the virgin Mary. He lived a sinless life, was crucified under Pontius Pilate, arose bodily from the dead, ascended into heaven and sits at the right hand of God the Father as our High Priest and Advocate.

The Work of Christ

5. We believe that Jesus Christ, as our representative and substitute, shed His blood on the cross as the perfect, all-sufficient sacrifice for our sins. His atoning death and victorious resurrection constitute the only ground for salvation.

The Holy Spirit

6. We believe that the Holy Spirit, in all that He does, glorifies the Lord Jesus Christ. He convicts the world of its guilt. He regenerates sinners, and in Him they are baptized into union with Christ and adopted as heirs in the family of God. He also indwells, illuminates, guides, equips and empowers believers for Christ-like living and service.

The Church

7. We believe that the true church comprises all who have been justified by God's grace through faith alone in Christ alone. They are united by the Holy Spirit in the body of Christ, of which He is the Head. The true church is manifest in local churches, whose membership should be composed only of believers. The Lord Jesus mandated two ordinances, baptism and the Lord's Supper, which visibly and tangibly express the gospel. Though they are not the means of salvation, when celebrated by the church in genuine faith, these ordinances confirm and nourish the believer.

Christian Living

8. We believe that God's justifying grace must not be separated from His sanctifying power and purpose. God commands us to love Him supremely and others sacrificially, and to live out our faith with care for one another, compassion toward the poor and justice for the oppressed. With God's Word, the Spirit's power, and fervent prayer in Christ's name, we are to combat the spiritual forces of evil. In obedience to Christ's commission, we are to make disciples among all people, always bearing witness to the gospel in word and deed.

Christ's Return

9. We believe in the personal, bodily and premillennial return of our Lord Jesus Christ. The coming of Christ, at a time known only to God, demands constant expectancy and, as our blessed hope, motivates the believer to godly living, sacrificial service and energetic mission.

Response and Eternal Destiny

10. We believe that God commands everyone everywhere to believe the gospel by turning to Him in repentance and receiving the Lord Jesus Christ. We believe that God will raise the dead bodily and judge the world, assigning the unbeliever to condemnation and eternal conscious punishment and the believer to eternal blessedness and joy with the Lord in the new heaven and the new earth, to the praise of His glorious grace. Amen.

SOME SUGGESTED NEXT STEPS

Congratulations! Once you have become a member, we hope that you will form new relationships within our church family and that you will find ways to connect in order to grow as a fully devoted follower of Jesus Christ. As a new member, consider taking these next steps:

1. Commit to regularly gathering for worship.

Every Sunday we gather together to worship God, to hear from the Scriptures, and to encourage one another as growing disciples of Jesus Christ. While perfect attendance is not a mark of discipleship, Scripture does encourage us to prioritize gathering together as the body of Christ (Heb. 10:23-25). There are two options for gathering on Sunday morning: a Traditional Service at 8:30 A.M. featuring a variety of traditional hymns and choruses, and our Contemporary Service at 10:45 A.M. featuring a selection of more modern worship songs. For those who are unable to attend in-person, we offer a livestream broadcast on our website (www.efcbemidji.org/live) for both of our Sunday morning services.

2. Join a Life Group.

A Life Group is a small group of 8 to 12 adults who are committed to meeting regularly for the purpose of growing in discipleship. Life Groups are designed to be a place where people can learn together and can love one another. The smaller size and meeting venue are designed to foster a community of discipleship growth that is more difficult to achieve in a classroom setting or in a large group study. Life groups meet to discuss and apply the Bible as taught in the Sunday sermon, to pray together, and to care for one another in Christian fellowship. Visit www.efcbemidji.org/lifegroups for more information.

3. Find a way to serve using your gifts.

The Bible frequently mentions that God has gifted every Christian that we might use our gifts to build up one another (Rom. 12:3-8; 1 Cor 12:4-7; Eph. 4:11-13). There are many ways to serve at E-Free Bemidji, with opportunities on both Sunday morning and throughout the week. If there's an area of ministry that you're interested in, we'll help you find your best fit and will help to equip you to use your gifts and to serve one another. You can get started by visiting www.efcbemidji.org/serve to explore ways you can use the gifts God has given you.

4. Prayerfully consider financial giving.

One of the ways we can express our worship of God is through our financial giving. Scripture encourages us to prayerfully consider designating a portion of our income as a gift to the local church (2 Cor. 9:6-8; 1 Cor. 16:2). At E-Free Bemidji, these gifts are used to support the ministries of the church as well as to support our Global Partners serving in ministry locally and in other parts of the world. There are a variety of ways that you can offer your gift while

worshiping with us on-site as well as ways to give electronically through our website. Please visit www.efcbemidji.org/give for more information.

5. Tell others about your faith in Jesus.

As you grow as a disciple of Jesus Christ and experience the Lord's transforming work in your life, it is natural to want to tell others about the hope you have found. And yet, it can also be a bit intimidating to talk about spiritual things with others who do not know the gospel. One of the best ways to begin is by sharing your own story—your testimony of how you came to understand the message of the gospel, and how you placed your faith in Jesus Christ. Be bold, if you feel stuck, reach out to us so that we can help encourage and equip you to share the good news about following Jesus with others.