



Articles of Faith

Model of Leadership

The church at present has no full-time pastor. This is not a statement as to the preference of the leadership it is simply based on the way history panned out when the last leader moved on to another church. Simon Minshull was the pastor of LBC for 8 years but in 2003 felt called to serve in Sweden. The church established a recruitment process and interviewed six candidates. In the time of interregnum two things happened. Firstly, those chosen to appoint the new minister felt that none of the candidates were an ideal fit for our church. But secondly the church felt that the better option lay (at least in the short term) of continuing with the four elders in place at the time. This model has continued to the present day.

At present we have three elders; Geoff, Malcolm and Martyn, and a "Broader Leadership Team" (BLT) which includes the deacons; Stuart, Gill and Claire. So how does the leadership play out in practical terms at LBC?

Traditionally Baptist churches have a "democratic" model of church leadership. This is because, despite what the name suggests, the Baptist denomination is not marked out by the sacrament of Adult Baptism. Many other churches including the C of E baptise adults, so the Baptist denomination is not unique on this front. However, it is unique in its view of church leadership. Its distinguishing feature is that it holds to a theological standpoint that states that the will and purposes of God are to be discerned through the whole body of Christ not through the leadership. The outworking of this comes through "The Church Meeting" where all the decisions are made, and the will of God voted upon.

In this regard it is also worth noting that the local church belongs to the "Baptist Union" rather than the Baptist denomination. This again reflects their belief that it is the local church, through the auspices of the church meeting, that should be making the decisions. Hence there is not Baptist hierarchy as there is in the Anglican and Catholic church simply a "union" of local churches that come under the one umbrella heading of "Baptist".

The interesting thing about Ledbury Baptist Church is that very few have a Baptist background and very few are well versed in Baptist theology. Most of us simply felt a sense of God's presence within the church, a warmth of fellowship and simply felt that it was the place where they wanted to worship. We would expect no other, we would not therefore expect everyone to dot every i and cross every t of Baptist doctrine. Indeed, for the present leadership who come from a more diverse denominational background we sometimes find ourselves challenging some of the traditional Baptist viewpoints.

All of the BLT (Broader Leadership Team) but the elders in particular have issues with the "democratic" processes found in the Baptist standpoint. We understand that there is a historical context for their thinking in that the Baptist church came out of a time when it was seeking to confront and offer an alternative to a very authoritarian and hierarchical model found in other churches. However, the words "baby and bath water" spring to mind when I consider their response they made to this at the time. In short (and I will set out our own views below) we struggle to see a democracy in the bible, we also struggle to see an eldership run as a dictatorship but we do see that

God establishes elders over local churches (Titus 1:5-9) whose job is to watch over the flock (Acts 20:28) and that congregations are to submit to their authority (Heb 13:17) not out of fear or from a sense of domination on their part but out of reverence for Christ.

We are not alone in this standpoint and the Baptist Union are obviously aware of this because in their template for a church constitution they offer a guidance document (Guidance document C05) to facilitate the option that many church leaders feel is a more biblically true model. The guidance states that:

Clause 15.12.1 Nominations. This Clause creates a framework for nominations to the role of Charity Trustee, including inviting nominations from church members and enabling names to be publicised in advance of the meeting where a decision is to be taken.

Some churches have indicated that they do not follow this pattern.

Where church members have decided that they would like the existing Charity Trustees to have a role in forming the nomination list, an alternative process is needed. This will usually refer to the possibility of names being suggested, then considered by the serving Charity Trustees before the candidates are considered for appointment by the church members.

Within this kind of process some safeguards are needed, so it is important that the members may enquire as to how the task of formulating the list of candidates has been undertaken. This will generally be a non-controversial issue, where a caring leadership listens and responds to the members' suggestions.

We feel this is an option we would prefer and which has a more biblical mandate. In Titus 1:5 we note that it was the role of the apostles (or those with prior authority) who were tasked with selecting the next generation of elders for the church and it is our contention that this presents a more cogent theological framework. We have adopted this approach within the structure of the Baptist constitution.

The contrary approach often adopted by churches within the Baptist model is to create a scenario where the whole church is given the option of submitting names forward to the church meeting where a voting process ensues. Whilst finding no biblical mandate for this approach the leadership are also mindful of our requirement to attend to the emotional needs of those in our care. This approach has the potential to open the door to an array of options which fail to acknowledge the well-being of the individual. For instance, if one member were to propose a candidate who the remainder of the church felt was not appropriate for a role in church leadership under this model the candidate would have to be presented to the church meeting and (probably rightly) rejected by those in the congregation. We would contend that it is unkind to create an advocacy process that has the potential to leave individuals vulnerable and in a place where they may feel publicly humiliated. The elders must have the option of preventing this scenario. Whilst we wouldn't stop anyone approaching us and suggesting a nomination for eldership the reality is that it is we who would pray and discern God's will for the church and for the establishment of its future leadership presenting chosen candidates to the church for their acceptance through the church meeting model. As elders are "anointed" not "appointed" there is no formal voting structure for this process beyond a straightforward agreement from the meeting.

This is all well and good but what happens in a scenario where the church believes that the elders are in error and their decisions need refinement at best and jettisoning at worse. Indeed, how does the church deal with a scenario where the congregation has lost faith in the leadership and no longer

believes it to be following God? We recognise the need for the eldership to be accountable in some form and there has been much discussion at the time of writing the constitution around the balance to be had between providing the leadership with enough authority to lead, without creating a tyrannical dictatorship and yet providing a safeguard for the congregation if things should go awry.

We feel that the Baptist model goes to one extreme and creates a situation where the power swings in favour of the congregation. This can lead to a situation where the tail wags the dog. Sadly, prior to the current eldership, the church witnessed this first hand where a congregational power base created a fractious time for all. Many left the church and much hurt and pain lay dormant in individuals for a long period within the congregation. Whilst we accept that we don't want to ditch one extreme to go to the other and set up a "heavy shepherding" scenario we do feel the balance of authority should lie with the leadership.

In truth the current eldership are on record as saying that if we lost the confidence of the congregation to lead then we would stand aside. Neither of the elders pushed for eldership, they fell into it by default being asked by the church to take it on in what must be one of the world's longest interregnums! Neither of them have pursued it as a career so we have no ties to the role in terms of financial dependency and they only seek to serve God in the role to which they feel called. They are very fortunate that at the present time the congregation that aligns itself behind the leadership with great cohesion and we are all grateful to God for that as we know such unity infuses the church with a true sense of peaceful fellowship and is what God intends for those He calls His family.

However, there are safeguards in place should the elders go astray. Anyone in the church can make application to the church secretary. Should Gill feel it is appropriate then she will approach the "moderator". In Baptist terms this would be the equivalent of a bishop in Anglican circles and they would fulfil a role of mediator in the situation.

If you have any further questions related to the leadership of the church then please don't hesitate to ask any of those on the BLT who will furnish you with further detail.