



22 March, 2017

News:

A report from Baptist Union Council 2017

The gathering was moderated by Rupert Lazar, Baptist Union President in the absence of usual moderator David Mayne, away as part of the European Baptist Federation Transform leadership programme.

‘We are family together, Baptists Together,’ Rupert said, opening the gathering. ‘We pray that we will engage and seek to listen. All of us want to meet with God, want to hear from God, and we want the Spirit to move among us.’

Worship was led by Barbara Carpenter, minister of Stoke St Gregory Baptist Church in Somerset and a Baptist Union trustee. She presided over communion at both the start and end of the two-day gathering.

Charitable Incorporated Organisation (CIO)

A proposal that our Baptist Union becomes a Charitable Incorporated Organisation (CIO) was discussed. The Union is currently an unincorporated charity, which creates challenges and is not “an ideal structure for such a complicated body”, said Shared Services Team Leader Richard Wilson.

The Baptist Union of Great Britain (BUGB) is a registered charity and operates through its charity trustees. Currently it does not have its own legal identity to enable it to enter into contracts or to hold its own property. Incorporation will enable BUGB to enter into long term agreements which will not be affected by a change of trustee, and will provide a legal structure which is better understood by stakeholders. There will also be protection for trustees from personal liability arising from claims by third parties. The change will aid the recruitment of future trustees.

The other main option was becoming a company limited by guarantee. However, Richard explained, it was felt that this didn’t sit well with Baptist ecclesiology: this model raises the possibility of members exercising their vote through a proxy, who might not be a member of a Baptist church or even a believer.

Letters of consultation were sent from Lynn Green on behalf of the BUGB Trustees to all Baptist member churches on 17 January 2017. The letter also invited delegates attending the Assembly in Harrogate on 13 May 2017 to attend an informal question and answer session on the proposed change to legal status.

Council voted unanimously to accept the Trustees recommendation that BUGB incorporate as a CIO. A resolution will now be taken to 2017 Assembly. If approved, a draft constitution will be presented to the 2018 Assembly for adoption.

Pensions

The Thursday morning and early afternoon session saw a presentation and discussion about the pension deficit, led by the Baptist Pension Scheme Employers Group (EG). The Employers Group has been set up to represent the churches. (The Baptist Union Pension Trustees represent members.) The employers group began its work in early 2016, and consists of nine members, moderated by former treasurer Malcolm Broad.

Tim Jackson, treasurer of the East Midlands Baptist Association and EG member, led the presentation to Council. He explained that the pension scheme deficit had risen by 48 per cent. This was due to a combination of factors, such as low interest rates, quantitative easing and low investment returns.

The EG had received a very clear message from churches during the 2015/16 roadshows that we need as a Baptist family to deal with the crisis now, rather than leave it to a future generation, Tim said.

He explained that with such a deficit, there is no silver bullet within the Baptist family: it needs what the EG has described as 'Family Solutions', a series of proposals involving all across Baptists Together.

This solution is not about supporting the structure, said Graham Ensor, a Baptist Union trustee and member of the EG, 'but the churches who are carrying these debts.' There are currently 1300 churches in the scheme.

A proposal is needed for the Pensions Regulator by the end of March next year.

With churches finding out by April what their individual deficits are, another series of pension roadshows across all Associations are being organised during 2017.

Tim added, 'There is a crisis; the whole family needs to contribute. The result will be that the local church should be freed up for mission with the money it's got.'

Finances

An update on Baptist Union finances was given by treasurer John Levick and Richard Wilson, Support Services Team Leader. 2016 saw our Union record a small surplus of £63,000, but without one-off gains on sale of properties this would have been a loss of £118,000.

However, much of this was due to expenditure being significantly below budget. Home Mission giving was down again, as was legacy income.

Richard pointed out that Home Mission giving had experienced a 20 per cent decline in real terms in the last 10 years. In that period our Union's finances had been balanced by cost-cutting. (For instance, the Futures process saw a £1.2m drop in specialists team spending, although all but £400k of this was transferred to Association teams.)

A deficit is forecast for 2017, with potentially a larger one for 2018. Turning Home Mission around was key, he Richard said, adding, 'Irrespective of pensions, we are facing a very tough financial climate.'

RBMHS

The AGM of the Retired Baptist Ministers' Housing Society took place on Thursday afternoon. The Society now owns and manages 243 properties. It has continued to meet the needs of those requiring a property. Its profits are reinvested in new properties.

Chairman Bill Johnston said, 'We give thanks to God and all those who continue to bless the Society – it has been a tremendous success story.'

Ministerial Recognition Committee

Ministries Team Leader Andy Hughes brought the recommendation that Sian Murray Williams be the new moderator of the Ministerial Recognition Committee (MRC). A vacancy arose after John Rackley stepped down after serving for three terms of office. The role involves chairing the National MRC three times a year; chairing various sub committees, disciplinary hearings and attending the Newly Accredited Ministers conference.

'It's a key role in the life of our Union, and we give thanks for John for all he has given,' said Andy.

It's the first time the role has become vacant since the Futures process, and explained it felt right that Council made the appointment. There had been other expressions of interest, 'but it became clear that Sian was the person the Lord was leading,' Andy said.

His report stated that she brings 'a wealth of experience to the role', having been involved in both local ministry at Littlemore in Oxford and then from 2006 serving as tutor at Bristol Baptist College, and now as a spiritual director. She has also served as Moderator of the Faith and Unity Executive.

Council voted unanimously to accept the nomination.

Ministerial guidelines and Same Sex Marriage legislation

There was an update on ministerial guidelines relating to Same Sex Marriage (SSM) legislation. At the previous Council, members did not believe it would be helpful to add any new rules. Since then further consultation with Associations has taken place. Guidance notes drawn up by MRC alongside a resolution stating that decisions relating to presiding at a SSM or not should reside with the local church were brought to this Council.

The resolution was accepted unanimously, with two abstentions.

Guidance notes will be made available to all ministers and nationally recognised pastors shortly. The notes include a detailed explanation of the basis for the conclusions.

BMS General Director David Kerrigan, a contributor to The Courage to be Baptist statement, said, 'I want to affirm the excellent work done - a wonderful example of hard work, real grace in conversation, how incredibly gracious God has been with us that's he given us a way of negotiating this way. As Baptists we have a gift – we recognise the centrality of the local church. The words here make me proud to be part of the Union.'

A bibliography citing resources for further study on the question of SSMs was shared.

Our vision for Mission and the Futures process

Thursday evening and Friday morning saw Council members invited to reflect and review following the Futures process. In 2012 the Futures report had explored how our Union would seek to work together in the future. One of the organisational principles identified in the report was developing the capacity for ongoing reform.

Thursday evening Lynn Green introduced the discussion, beginning with our vision "Growing healthy churches in relationship for God's mission" and speaking on John 15: 1-8. If we want to be faithful to God's call, we need to be open to God's pruning. She invited Council members to reflect overnight on areas where we are flying, and areas where we feel stuck in the mud.

On Friday morning, Council spent an hour sharing together in plenary, beginning with where we are flying as Baptists Together. Very good local churches and ministers, excellent creative and missional engagement with the wider community, our response to asylum seekers and the awarding of Home Mission grants regionally, rather than nationally, were all highlighted.

Members then began to share those areas where we feel 'stuck in the mud'. Areas highlighted were numerous and included our complex structures and the decision making and accountability within them; Home Mission and its communication and promotion; struggling local churches; the pension situation and the wider difficult financial climate; an erosion of covenant relationships and our interdependence as churches, associations and colleges.

They were invited to gather into groups and think about which of the 'stuck areas' were most important to address. These priority areas highlighted key common concerns across the groups. Lynn outlined that the next two All Team Leaders meetings are working with a facilitator to identify potential solutions to these issues.

The Baptist Assembly

Council members approved a recommendation that the Baptist Assembly continue to be one-day event until 'a clear and renewed vision' for the future of Assembly is established.

They were reminded that at the last Council meeting, Faith and Society Team Leader Stephen Keyworth explained that the Futures Process had recognised the need to do something different with Assembly, due to factors such as falling attendance, its growing cost, and organisational changes. There had been a commitment to three one-day Assemblies for 2015-2017, with a review after the second year. A wide-ranging survey had been undertaken, with 1,000 responses.

When the responses were analysed, 'it became clear that there was no consensus about the future direction of Assembly'.

Therefore, the Council report stated, 'Given this lack of clarity, together with our ongoing financial constraints, the many other pressing priorities that we have been engaging with in the last six months, and the forthcoming appointment of a new General Director for BMS World Mission, Baptist Steering Group are recommending that we continue with one day Assemblies until we are able to know more clearly what the future should look like.'

Directory

A petition organised by Baptist minister Bob Almond calling on the Assembly to discuss the reinstatement of the Baptist Union Directory was brought to Council. It had received 120 signatures.

Council discussed the resolution and carefully considered the concerns raised by the signatories. The discussion was very relevant in the light of the previous reflection on Futures as the demise of the directory in printed form was a direct result of our reorganisation in 2012.

Council decided that it did not wish to wait for the resolution to return to them in November, but in recognising the concerns, accepted the resolution as if it had been adopted by Assembly and commissioned Stephen Keyworth to 'investigate as a matter of importance ways in which this information could be made available to all Regional Teams, Ministers and local Church Officers' to begin as soon as possible.

An update will be given at this year's Assembly, and the matter will be discussed at the next Council meeting.

Children and family ministry training

A new course that aims to equip children's and families workers is being offered by Bristol Baptist College

The Certificate in Theology, Ministry and Mission is a flexible one-year course that integrates pioneering vocational training, biblical study and theological reflection.

The course leader is Sian Hancock, Director of the Centre for Family and Childhood Studies at Bristol Baptist College, and a member of the Children and Young Families Round Table, a group of Baptists dedicating to nurturing faith in those children, young people and families whom God has put us next to.

She said, 'We're very excited at the opportunity this flexible one-year course offers. It enables students to start with their understanding of God and what God is doing both within and beyond the local church.

'It will equip students with the practical skills, knowledge and understanding needed to build effective relationships across the generations, to creatively communicate the love of God with clarity and to pastorally care and disciple children and their families.'

College Principal Steve Finamore added the new course could be 'just what churches are looking for'.

He said, 'I am delighted that Bristol Baptist College is expressing its commitment to ministry to children and families with an exciting new Certificate in Theology, Ministry and Mission (Children and Families Ministry).

'We know that churches are looking for ways to equip the leaders of their children's work and we believe that this is just what they are looking for. Alongside specialist modules and placements, it offers training in Bible and theology in a vibrant faith community.

'This will help to prepare us for a ministry that is vital to the future of the church.'

Baptist founder at heart of charity identity

Spurgeons children's charity is putting Christ, and its founder Charles Spurgeon, at the heart of its identity and mission as it undergoes a rebrand as part of its 150th anniversary

Charles Haddon Spurgeon, a Baptist minister, founded the charity in 1867 as a compassionate and distinctively Christian response to the plight of orphaned and vulnerable children in London.

Today it is one of the UK's leading children's charities, supporting children and families affected by social disadvantage. In the last year, it delivered over 80 services, reaching over 37,000 children and 64,000 parents or carers.

It is marking its anniversary year with a rebrand, including new logo (pictured) and website, which were unveiled on Monday (13 March). The work draws on the legacy of the charity's founder.

The 'S' from Spurgeon's signature has been incorporated into the new logo to illustrate an embrace between parent and child, and the cared for and the carer.

The charity's new strapline; 'Hope for every child', springs from Spurgeon's values of hope, compassion and inclusivity and is inspired by his teachings: "Faith goes up the stairs that love has built and looks out the windows which hope has opened."

'Spurgeons is rooted in the story of our founder Charles Haddon Spurgeon,' said the charity's chief executive Ross Hendry. 'A remarkable man of God, Spurgeon's work was built on the rock of God's word and the power of prayer.'

'The Holy Spirit softened Spurgeon's heart to the needs of vulnerable children. The vision he and his supporters were given was realised through the Holy Spirit's power to transform lives – both those who backed the mission to build an orphanage and the lives of the children who went on to receive care.'

'Today, Spurgeons seeks to honour this legacy through our work and by reaching out to the wider church community. The need now is as great as it was then. The work we do with vulnerable children and families is even more complex, but still seeking to be faithful to our calling.'

The charity's church work includes its 'Together for Families' project, funded by Spurgeons, and one-off funding via 'Working with People in Need,' distributed by the Diocese of Peterborough.

The charity plans to use the anniversary year to build on its partnership work with churches involved in community outreach.

It has three staff building up relationships with churches involved in community outreach based in the Peterborough area, East Northants and West Wiltshire. They help to get groups off the ground in socially isolated areas, as well as offering support to existing groups through extra parenting or child development sessions, plus activities and training for volunteers.

Mr Hendry said, 'For over 150 years children, parents, communities, supporters and statutory agencies have trusted us to be consistently led by our values that are rooted in the Christian faith.'

'As part of our desire to honour our calling to serve Jesus faithfully, we want the values that are core to who we are to be reflected in all that we do. We warmly invite churches to share our vision, to partner us and join in the work Spurgeon began 150 years ago.'

Home Mission church focus: Emmanuel Baptist Church, Netherton

- Shining the light of Jesus in this area of Liverpool, through a variety of ministries and community programmes
- Partnering with TLG to work with children struggling at school
- Making a real difference in people's lives in Netherton

Emmanuel Baptist Church is located in Netherton, on the outskirts of the city of Liverpool. As an area, statistically Netherton is in the top 1% on some of the National Indices of Deprivation.

The Emmanuel church community are committed to see the love of God transform this part of Liverpool and seek to shine the light of Jesus in Netherton through a whole variety of ministries and community programmes, including kids' clubs, parent and toddler groups, discipleship groups, and many more. The Eden team, who are part of the church, living intentionally on the estate to reach the people there. This picture gives us a small glimpse of the impact the church is having on the local estate, as Eden team leader Tom Grant explains...

"Team members Emma and Lorna recently ran an Alpha course with some of the mums who attend the 'Eden Tots' parent and toddler group. It is a testament to the relationships that they have built with them that twelve people came along to the course. During the course, it was fantastic to see four of the mums become Christians! AMAZING! It was such a privilege to be able to baptise one of the mums, Amy, on Easter Sunday. Please pray for them all as they start their walk following Jesus.

"We have also recently partnered with an organisation called TLG (Transforming Lives for Good) to run their Early Intervention programme in a local primary school. It is a fantastic programme which enables trained volunteers to work on a one to one basis with children struggling at school. The aim is to see an improvement in the child's behaviour and in turn raise their levels of learning."

From events and opportunities to explore faith to simple opportunities for local people to connect, and education programmes, Emmanuel are showing a holistic approach to the mission of God and making a real difference in their locality.

Questions for reflection: In what ways could you connect with your local community? And could you provide a variety of different opportunities for people to connect with church life?

Baptism

Ebenezer Baptist Church, Scarborough: Jon Charter & Steven Kinsella (Ebenezer Baptist Church) Julie White (Burniston Methodist Church)

Death

LE QUESNE, Sue

Sue was a faithful servant through BMS in Bangladesh and in the UK, before moving to Exeter where she was church secretary at South Street Baptist Church for a number of years. She died on Thursday March 16, and a thanksgiving service will be held at South Street Baptist Church, Exeter at 14:30 on Monday April 3.

Obituary

ISAACS, the Revd Dr Marie: 1936-2016

For more, visit www.baptist.org.uk/obituaries