

Motions before Special Assembly of 27 February 2021 – Information Paper

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THE ISSUE

On Saturday, 27 February 2021 a Special Assembly of the Association of Baptist Churches in NSW & ACT is being held to vote on two motions developed by 5 member churches and two clarifying motions from the Assembly Council.

Canberra Baptist Church will be one of the sites for the Special Assembly because of COVID safety provisions.

This Assembly, with the sole purpose of voting on the motions, follows previous discussion and debate on the issue of same-sex marriage.

The motions (which are attached) seek to provide for the potential withdrawal of the affiliation status of churches who do not hold to the Association’s basic doctrines, objects and values, and for removal of accreditation of pastors on a similar basis.

THE PURPOSE OF THIS PAPER

This paper details the background leading up to the Special Assembly, discusses the salient points and seeks feedback from the TBC congregation. It also presents the leadership team’s views on the motions.

THE SPECIAL ASSEMBLY AND IMPLICATIONS OF THE MOTIONS

The Special Assembly is not a forum for a general debate on same-sex marriage. It's important to understand that a vote in favour of the motions is not a vote against same-sex marriage.

The issue is whether a church/pastor who "no longer holds" to the Association's basic doctrines, , objects and values should potentially be subject to removal from the Association/accreditation. (The beliefs, objects etc are attached).

It is noted that the matter of honouring marriage is addressed under the heading of values, rather than as basic doctrines or objects.

The motions (if voted up) provide for the disaffiliation of a church or removal of a pastors' names from the accredited list on any grounds where it can be deemed that the church/pastor no longer holds to the basic doctrines, objects and values.

Views on marriage are just one issue covered by the beliefs, objects and values etc., but this issue appears to be driving the process leading to the Special Assembly.

THE BACKGROUND

The motions were presented at the September 2019 Assembly regarding ministers and churches who no longer support the basic doctrines, objects and values of the Association.

A key concern of the 5 member churches presenting the motions is a scenario where a church or accredited/recognised minister no longer holds to the Association's stated belief about honouring marriage or other aspects of our core values and beliefs.

[Note: We have no information on why the churches decided that the motions about all the basic doctrines, objects and values would alleviate their concerns. The effect is to re-invent them to the status of criteria for disaffiliation.]

The motions were introduced and 'laid on the table' but not discussed or voted on at that assembly. The purpose was to allow a process of discussion and discernment to take place across our movement around the motions and the practical, pastoral and theological issues that may be related to them.

The Assembly Council established a Taskforce to oversee the Discussion Process regarding Affiliation, Baptist Values and Same Sex Marriage and provided it with Terms of Reference. The Taskforce was also asked to produce a report reflecting on key ideas which were common in the discussion process. Details of the Canberra forum and how to register were published in *The Connector* of 12 January 2020. (Relevant portion extracted and attached). 3 people from Tuggeranong Baptist Church attended this forum.

The Report of the Task Force has been circulated to churches and is attached. Some key points from the report are highlighted later in this paper.

THE ATTACHMENTS

These attachments will help make sense of this document and it is recommended that, if you wish to provide feedback, you read through all of them so that you have an understanding of all of the aspects involved. Some of the salient points from the attachments are included in this document.

Notice of Special Assembly	Text of email received 12 December 2020.
Publication of the Forum in the Connector	An extract from <i>the Connector</i> that invites people to register and attend the forum and provides additional reading on Autonomy, Association and Congregational Government.
Special Assembly Motions with Appendices	The motions with Appendices that include Clauses from the Constitution and are referenced in the motions.
Basic doctrines, Object and Values extracted from the Association's Constitution	Important questions to have in mind as you read and to consider whether they were intended as assessment tool, a series of standards that must be adhered to by everybody and how likely is it that we and other affiliated churches meet the standards. [Note a statement in the Taskforce Report: <i>Some pointed out that if each church who failed to adhere to one of the values were excluded from the Association, there would be few churches left. Concerns were raised about whether there would be an annual audit on churches, checking if they were biasing their resources towards mission, working towards just relationships, or embracing partnerships</i>].
Canberra Baptist Church Response to Taskforce	This very thoughtful submission (extracted from the blog on their website), explains objections to the motions that do not hang on a particular view of same-sex marriage and all could be maintained by parties on any side of the debate on that issue.
The Constitution of Tuggeranong Baptist Church Inc	That includes our statement on autonomy, our purpose (objects), statements of belief and, in the glossary our acceptance of divorced people into positions of leadership. There is no list of values. There is no statement describing our affiliation with the Association of Baptist Churches in NSW & ACT, or any requirement for adherence to the Associations governance documentation such as the Basic doctrines, Objects and Values to be hold membership or leadership roles at Tuggeranong Baptist Church.

THE REPORT OF THE TASKFORCE ON AFFILIATION, BAPTIST VALUES AND SAME SEX MARRIAGE

The *Executive Summary* of their report to Assembly states:

*Overall, there was good representation of different views. For the most part, people were keen to engage with the questions and with one another and to think through different issues. That said, we **were unable to generate much discussion on affiliation and Baptist values beyond the issue of honouring marriage**. Perhaps this was because people in our churches are not particularly aware of Baptist distinctives. Even our Incorporation Act and our Statement of Beliefs do not mention them, except for the baptism of believers only by immersion. In addition, most people appeared unaware of the 'core values' stated in our constitution.*

*However, people strongly supported our current definition of marriage, not because it appeared in our constitution, we suspect, but because they believe it is the biblical view. Despite the desire expressed by some that our definition of marriage be re-evaluated, there was overwhelming support expressed for our current position. **Some people felt that churches who held an alternate view could not be part of our Association, whereas others who held to our definition and wanted to keep it were open to churches holding a range of positions.** {emphasis added}*

The *Executive Summary* lists important questions and refers the reader to more questions listed in the body of the report under the heading *Common Concerns*. Some of the questions that we think require resolution are:

A major question to be resolved is the status of the 'core values,' which did not exist when most of our churches became affiliated with the Association:

Were they intended to be aspirational, or a set of guidelines, or criteria to which strict adherence is required?

If they are used as criteria for affiliation, how could compliance be enforced across all the values?

The *Task Force Reflections* in the Report provide valuable insights.

These include a set of questions under the heading *Common Concerns* to be addressed. For example:

If we exclude churches that disagree, what kind of message will this send to the community?

Would we be suppressing biblical reflection on and/or discussion of these issues in our churches because the cost of dissenting is too high?

Under the heading, *Our Values*

*Our churches as a whole are not particularly aware of Baptist distinctives, nor are they familiar with the 'core values' stated in our constitution. One may wonder how 'common' or 'central' they are when almost no one is aware of them. A number of people noted that they appear to be **aspirational and not intended to be the basis for the exclusion** of churches. **Some asserted that even those who supported same-sex relationships could affirm the statement on marriage.** On the other hand, many people pointed out that **our acceptance of divorce could be seen to be in contravention of this value.** {emphasis added}*

Under the heading *Baptist Affiliation and Baptist Values* there are examples of two other Baptist Associations. One of the associations aims to bring together Baptist congregations, allowing for variations in theology and practice and the other, more like a denomination which insisted that members/member churches adhere to a particular theological position resulting in a split.

This section of the Report concludes with the significant statement:

Our decisions depend on what kind of association we want to be. Generally, when Associations divide, they become polarised at either end of the spectrum. {emphasis added}

The Taskforce Report is attached.

THE CANBERRA BAPTIST CHURCH SUBMISSION TO THE TASKFORCE

The submission of the Canberra Baptist Church to the taskforce is also attached for your information, as it provides good insights and balanced discussion regarding the matter.

In relation to the motions, the CBC submission states (in part) that:

The motions, if successful, risk severely damaging the Association. That would be an unnecessary tragedy.

We oppose the motions because:

- 1. The Baptist tradition has always affirmed the autonomy of local churches, which leads to diversity in faith and practice. Baptist churches join together in an association to do what they can't do alone or can do better together. The Association is not supposed to dictate what member churches or accredited ministers must believe or practice.*
- 2. It would be dangerous to split the Association over same-sex marriage. Doing so will prepare the ground for further division over other theological and moral issues, cause significant pastoral harm to churches and individual members, and damage our reputation in the Australian community.*
- 3. The 'basic doctrines' and 'core values' as currently expressed are not suitable for assessing fitness for affiliation or accreditation.*

None of these objections hang on a particular view of same-sex marriage and all could be maintained by parties on any side of the debate on that issue.

THE TUGGERANONG BAPTIST CHURCH INC CONSTITUTION

Principle of Autonomy

- 3 a) We hold that the church is under Christ's headship and power is exercised by the church assembled as a Fellowship, **decisions thus made shall not be subject to change or reversal by any other body.** This Church is autonomous, but advice and counsel may be sought from qualified ministers or other bodies of like principles and faith. {emphasis added}

THE POSSIBLE CONSEQUENCES

- Resource costs (financial, time, human effort) to the Association and individual churches e.g. investigations into situations where it is considered the beliefs, values etc may not have been upheld; churches needing to re-align governance documents to comply with the beliefs, values;
- Individuals deciding to leave a church within the Association due to concerns about potential or actual conflict arising from "enforcement" of the values;
- Impact on the autonomy of TBC Incorporated and its membership. TBC and/or individual members may feel constrained, or obligated, with regard to ministries or activities in order to be seen as complying with the beliefs, objects and values.
- Flawed and subjective processes due to the "unassessable" nature of many of the foundation beliefs, objects and values e.g. how can churches be assessed against "Biasing our resources toward mission, both locally and globally" or in relation to "motivated by love for God and others"?

THE LEADERSHIP TEAM VIEWS

It is acknowledged that there is a range of views on the issue of same-sex marriage within the broader community, the general church community and (probably) within the TBC community. Now is not the time to debate this general issue, nor to seek to arrive at any consensus or agreed view, if indeed that were possible.

The TBC Leadership team considers the following points are relevant:

- The proposing churches framed their motions in the context of their concerns about same-sex marriage, possibly to provide a basis for action in relation to the stated value of *honouring marriage*. However, the motion provides for a much broader range of criteria for disaffiliation as it is framed in terms of adherence to all doctrines, objects and values.
- Different views on this value or any other value should not be used as the basis to remove ministers from accreditation, nor to withdraw the affiliation of individual churches.
- The Constitution of the Association of Baptist Churches in NSW&ACT already provides for withdrawal of affiliation (Para 17.5).

In light of the above, the TBC Leadership Team believes that the motions should be opposed.

Any information session or public discussion at Tuggeranong Baptist Church about voting at the Special Assembly is not a forum for sharing of views on, or discussion of, same-sex marriage and any such discussion will be stopped by the chair of the meeting. It is likely that all members of the congregation do not share a single view and the holding of a specified view is not a requirement at TBC.

THE FEEDBACK SOUGHT AND MECHANISM

The leadership team seeks feedback that:

1. Affirms the team's decision to oppose the motions.
2. Alternatively, explains why it is advantageous to Tuggeranong Baptist Church Inc, other affiliated Baptist Churches and/or the Association of Baptist Churches in NSW & ACT, for the motion to be carried.
3. Does not address the subject of same-sex marriage itself which motivated the 5 churches to frame their 3 motions or any other value.
4. Seeks further information.

Feedback is to be provided in writing/email and sent to projects@tbcchurch.com.au before 14 February 2021.

THE TUGGERANONG BAPTIST CHURCH VOTING AND NON VOTING DELEGATES

We are allowed 5 voting delegates to the assembly and anyone can join in as a non-voting delegate up to the COVID Safe limit of 45 attendees at Canberra Baptist Church.

Follow this link to register as a non-voting delegate <https://www.thegathering.com.au/special-assembly-2021/> If you wish to nominate to attend as a voting delegate, send a message to projects@tbcchurch.com.au before 14 February.