

Taskforce to Oversee the Discussion Process regarding Affiliation, Baptist Values and Same Sex Marriage

Introduction to the Taskforce Report by Assembly Council

At the September 2019 Assembly 3 motions were tabled from 5 member churches regarding Baptist Affiliation, Beliefs and Values. As indicated by those bringing the motions, a key concern of those churches is the scenario where a church or accredited/recognised minister chooses to no longer hold to the Association's statement in its values concerning marriage as between a man and a woman.

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 this process 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.

Attached is the Taskforce Report. It will be tabled at our 2020 rescheduled Annual Assembly on Saturday 31 October, where there will be time given for questions to be asked about the report. It is then anticipated that at an assembly early in 2021 the motions will be discussed and voted on.

The Assembly Council thanks the Taskforce for the very significant and faithful commitment of time and energy that has been willingly given to lead this process of discussion across our movement and to compile this report. The taskforce members are named at the end of the report and we thank each one for their valuable contribution.

Assembly Council
July 2020

Motions Submitted to the September 2019 Assembly jointly by Newtown Baptist Church, Wollongong Baptist Church, Castle Hill Baptist Church, Campbelltown Baptist Church and Chatswood Baptist Church

Motion 1. With Regard to churches

- *When the Assembly Council is made aware of any church that no longer holds to the association's foundational beliefs, objects and values, that the Assembly council investigates this matter in a timely manner.*
- *If, upon investigation, the Assembly Council finds that that the church no longer holds to our foundational beliefs, objects and values, that the Assembly council, where possible, engage with the church and its leadership to encourage and urge the church to reconsider their position and affirm the beliefs and core values of the Association.*
- *If, after a further period of three months from the conclusion of the investigation, the church continues to reject our foundational beliefs, objects and values, the Assembly Council is to begin the process of withdrawal of affiliation in accordance with section 17.5 (a) of the constitution. The name of the church should be brought to the soonest possible assembly.*

Motion 2. With Regards to accredited and recognised pastors

- *When the Assembly Council is made aware of any accredited or recognised pastor who no longer holds to the association's basic doctrines, objects and values, that the Assembly Council investigates this matter in timely manner.*
- *If, upon investigation, the Assembly Council finds that that the pastor no longer holds to our basic doctrines, objects and values, that the Assembly council engage with the pastor where possible to encourage and urge the pastor to reconsider their position, in accordance with section 6.5 (j) of the Accreditation Guidelines.*
- *If, after a period of no more than three months from the pastor being given an opportunity to be heard by the Assembly Council either in writing or in person at one of its meetings, he or she continues to reject our basic doctrines, objects and values, the Assembly Council is to direct the Committee for Ministry to remove the pastor's name from the list of accredited pastors or the list of recognised pastors in accordance with the Accreditation guidelines section 6.5 (j).*

Motion 3. With regard to property held under the Property Trust

- *That the Assembly Council make whatever changes are necessary to the Property Trust Act to ensure that churches ceasing to be affiliated with the Association can still have occupation and use of their property, as long as they continue to uphold the basic doctrines set out in the Baptist Union of NSW Incorporation Act.*

Taskforce to Oversee the Discussion Process regarding Affiliation, Baptist Values, and Same Sex Marriage

Report to Assembly Council

Executive Summary

The Taskforce would like to thank Assembly Council for the opportunity to facilitate this process and to interact with people across our family of churches. It was encouraging to see us ‘doing Baptist’ together and we particularly appreciate the effort that those in regional churches made to attend forums, some travelling considerable distances. Around 500 people from 140 churches engaged in the process, either through attending forums or by making online responses.

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 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.

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?

How would the opportunity that Accreditation candidates have to ‘respond’ to the Statement of Beliefs align with the requirement to fully subscribe to the core values?

A list of further concerns appear in the full report. These focus on our life as an Association as well as our witness to the community.

Process

The Assembly Council (AC) appointed the members of the Taskforce and commissioned them to conduct a process that allowed people affiliated with our churches to discuss the motions before Assembly and associated issues. This was to be within the framework of the Association's current definition of marriage.

On behalf of the Taskforce, Tim Burns wrote to our churches advising them of the process and the ways in which they could participate. He also wrote to affiliated agencies and Baptist Associations in other states asking if they had anything to contribute. Outside of the forums, we did not meet personally with representatives of any churches, except those directly associated with the motions.

The Taskforce compiled a list of five questions (largely drawn from AC's Terms of Reference) as well as a sixth allowing for any other relevant comments. An online portal was established providing background material and space to answer these questions (allowing for responses of 500 words on each question). The questions were also translated into Arabic and Chinese. Originally, the portal was to close on February 14, but we extended it to March 15 (the day after the final forum). We received 100 discrete submissions to the online portal from people associated with 40 churches (four of the submissions were made on behalf of the whole congregation). [See Appendix 1]

The Taskforce facilitated 12 forums over November 2019 and February/March 2020. There were at least two members of the Taskforce present at each, as well as someone nominated to provide pastoral care, if required. A member of Assembly Council attended where possible. The total number of people attending was 473 and the number of churches represented was 131. [See Appendix 2] There were nine churches represented in the online responses who were not represented at the forums, so the total number of churches involved was 140.

A preamble was read at the beginning of each forum. On the tables were copies of the questions, the motions and, after the first forum, copies of the preamble and the foundational beliefs, values and objects. Groups of five to six people met around a table and had 10 minutes to discuss each question. After this small group discussion, each group appointed someone to report. The questions were taken in turn with each group making one point and other groups asked to confirm if they had made the same point. We continued in this way until all the points had been made and recorded.

After the November forums, we realised that the questions were ambiguous and that people were not interpreting them as we had intended. We thought that it was important to keep the same questions, however, so instead of changing them, we added commentary for the 2020 forums. (We did not add commentary to the online questions.) Despite the commentary, we were fairly unsuccessful in focusing attention in the intended direction. There was particular difficulty over the meaning of 'values,' to be discussed further below.

The Taskforce also invited feedback on the process. Many participants were happy to meet and work together with people from other churches, particularly in regional areas, and many felt that they had gained a broader perspective on the issues involved. A few people at both ends of the spectrum at one particular forum felt they were unable to freely express their views. A few people were frustrated by the tight structure of the online responses and forums, including wanting to come to a resolution at the meeting itself.

Summary of Responses

Question 1.

As Baptists, we believe it is important to associate around common beliefs, values and practices. What does that mean/look like for us?

This question is asking for reflection on how we practise association: whether unity requires uniformity, or allows for diversity (and of what kind); the nature of partnership; the ways that differences might both help and hinder us.

The most common answer was that we associate around Scripture. People were open to diversity of practice. Many identified the need to distinguish between what is central and what is peripheral. Of course, the trouble is in agreeing over what is included in each category.

Many people made the point that our values change and that some things that were once supported with arguments from Scripture (such as slavery, forbidding women to speak in church) are now no longer supported by the majority of our churches.

There appeared to be a greater emphasis on Baptist distinctives among those who did not support the motions. A number of people noted that the Association is meant to support local churches, not control them, and to assist churches to do things together that we could not do apart.

Question 2.

What do we do when our beliefs, values and practices seem to be in conflict with one another? How do we respond?

This question is not only asking about times when our views differ from those of other people or congregations, but also when our *own* values appear to conflict. For example, mercy and justice, grace and truth, welcome and correction, association and autonomy. Or it may be when we treat similar situations in different ways.

Situations where our own values appear to conflict were mainly overlooked.

This comment was typical of one kind of response, although sometimes as an answer to one of the other questions:

‘We need to constantly return to God’s word and find out and know exactly what He says not just what we think we want it to say. If our beliefs and practices do not align with the Bible then we need to change. The Bible is clear marriage is between man and woman so I am not really sure why there is even the thought of same-sex marriage in Christian churches.’

The other kind of response emphasised listening to one another, being patient with one another and bearing with one another in love.

Question 3.

What does it mean to welcome and love people if Baptists cannot affirm their lifestyle and sexual choices?

This question is not directed specifically at same-sex relationships. It applies to any kind of practice that a given Baptist church may not affirm (e.g. greed, oppression, abuse, infidelity).

Many noted that pastoral responses would vary, depending on a number of factors. These included the type of behaviour (and whether it posed a risk to the welfare of others), the context of the local congregation, the person's life situation, and where someone was in their faith journey—whether or not they had made a commitment of faith, for example, or whether they were seeking to become a member or leader.

Some focused on Jesus' love and acceptance of all people and that we should imitate him in this. Others thought that loving people included speaking the truth to them and calling them to repentance: 'Love the sinner, hate the sin' was mentioned a number of times, as was Jesus' interaction with the woman caught in adultery.

Many online responses rejected the view that same-sex attraction is a 'lifestyle choice' and felt it was offensive to members of the LGBTQI+ community. This is not what we were aiming for with the question, hence the commentary. Some expressed the view that 'God made me/them that way' and that this was something to be celebrated.

Question 4.

How might churches best support and provide true community for those seeking to live celibate lives as single persons, regardless of their sexual orientation?

At times, churches may (unwittingly) create an environment in which marriage is assumed to be part of the ideal Christian lifestyle (as celibacy once was). This question asks participants to reflect on ways in which single people might feel affirmed as equal members of the community, whether their state is chosen or not.

Particularly in the forums, many people recognised that our churches can be too focused on one type of family to the exclusion of others and came up with a number of ways that this could be mitigated. This included teaching on the value of singleness, an emphasis on hospitality, avoiding separating the church into rigid demographic clusters, including singles in leadership and service, and creating opportunities for social activities as a church body. In regards to welcoming and including single people, one participant said, 'Welcome people from community, not sympathy.'

Question 5.

How should our movement respond to affiliated churches and accredited/recognised pastors who feel they cannot affirm our Foundational Beliefs and Values as set out in the Constitution and, specifically, the value which contains our definition of marriage?

This question asks how our movement should respond to affiliated churches and pastors who cannot affirm the definition of marriage in our statement of values. It also recognises that churches/pastors may not affirm other values such as being Mission Shaped or Partnership Oriented, and asks how we should respond to that.

A common comment was that churches who do not agree with our values should be given the opportunity to change their mind (following due process), and if they did not do so, be asked to leave. Some added that this should be actively policed and that the values should not simply be affirmed, but practised. Proponents of this view did not reflect on how this would apply to any of the values except marriage.

On the other hand, a significant number questioned whether the values were intended to be used in this way, and whether all the stated values were equally important. 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.

Question 6.

Is there anything else you would like to contribute to the discussion about affiliation, Baptist values and same sex marriage?

This is an open question which provides an opportunity to make any other relevant comments.

People shared very personal stories of being made to feel unwelcome in Baptist churches because of their own or a family member's same-sex attraction or transgender status. They felt that without finding a supportive church environment, the only other option appeared to be to abandon their faith.

People also reflected on how their views on same-sex relationships had changed through getting to know same-sex attracted people and through studying Scripture. There was also discussion of the meaning of words commonly translated as 'homosexuality' and whether they apply to monogamous same-sex relationships.

Some people who had attended forums believed that there was little understanding of the complexity of the issue displayed. Others recognised that most attendees were over 50 years old and thought that perhaps these questions were of less relevance to younger people.

Many people summarised and reinforced what they had said in response to the previous questions.

Reflections from the Taskforce

Forums and Online Responses

The Hunter Forum was the most polarised, with strong views expressed at both ends of the spectrum. The online responses were also generally polarised, although there were a number who expressed mediating positions. The Canberra forum also had a wide range of views expressed in a respectful way. Overall, the regional forums tended strongly towards supporting the motions. There was a greater diversity of opinion in the Sydney, South Coast and Central Coast forums: while the vast majority were still supportive of the current definition of marriage, there was more willingness to allow different expressions within the churches of our Association.

Marriage

The forums were conducted within the framework of not changing our definition of marriage. Some responding through forums and online were disappointed by this and felt that our position should be re-evaluated. Overall, however, there was an overwhelming majority in favour of the Association's current definition of marriage. This was an emotive issue—even when the questions had a wider scope, discussion tended to keep returning to same-sex relationships and, in some forums and online responses, never moved beyond it.

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.

Basis of Affiliation and Baptist Values

Our foundational beliefs have little to say about Baptist distinctives. Only one doctrine in the Incorporation Act reflects this—the baptism of believers only by immersion. However, we do allow people to become members of our churches who 'believe' it, but have not personally practised it. Again, this is the only element of Baptist identity that appears in our Statement of Beliefs. In the statement on the church, for example, there is nothing about the autonomy of the local church. It is mostly a statement of evangelical faith, although there is not much to which even a post-Vatican II Roman Catholic would object.

This is very different from 'Declaration of Principle,' the basis of association of the Baptist Union of Great Britain which emphasises Baptist distinctives: the Lordship of Christ, the authority of Scripture, the liberty of the local church to interpret Scripture under the guidance of the Holy Spirit, baptism of believers by immersion, and mission. It aims to bring together Baptist congregations, allowing for variations in theology and practice.

On the other hand, churches in the Southern Baptist Convention (SBC) associate around 'The Baptist Faith and Message,' which has 18 clauses on everything from the Scriptures to the Lord's Day, and from Peace and War to the Family. This means that the

SBC is more like a denomination than an association. The SBC's determination to adhere to a particular theological position resulted in a split and the formation of the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship in 1991.

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.

Common concerns

Should a church or pastor's stance on same-sex relationships be the 'shibboleth' that determines whether a pastor or church is in or out?

If we permit churches to hold a view on same-sex relationships that differs from those of most of our churches, what will our corporate witness be? What will the legal implications be?

If we permit pastors to hold a different view, what does this mean for membership of Association boards and agencies?

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?

Where would making pastoral concessions to same-sex couples with children fit within this framework? (C.f. The stance missionaries took in Africa on those with more than one wife.)

Technical Reflection on the First Motion

The motions (and responses from some people at the forums and online) suggest that there is a clear way forward to disaffiliate churches if they do not agree with the stated beliefs, values and objects. Some have wondered why the Taskforce is conducting forums and taking submissions when we could have simply followed the established process. However, while congregations joining the association are required to affirm its beliefs, objects and values, the mechanism to remove a church makes no mention of these. Assembly Council may move a motion at assembly to disqualify an affiliated church, with notice to the church and opportunity for the church to respond [17.5 (a)]. The only details given as to why this might be necessary relate to a church continuing to support a minister or leader who is involved in 'unethical conduct' [17.5 (b) – (d)]. Given that the pastors of the churches accepting same-sex relationships are not (to our knowledge), involved in any unethical conduct as laid out in the constitution, these rules do not apply. It would then depend on whether such churches had anyone in a leadership role who was involved in a sexual relationship outside a marriage between a man and a woman. This, however, raises the question of what 'a position of leadership' is: Does it only apply to those in senior leadership positions such as the diaconate/ministry leadership team or equivalent? Or does it apply to everyone in some kind of leadership role—worship leader, small group leader, co-ordinator of the morning tea roster, etc.?

The Taskforce would like to thank Assembly Council for the opportunity to be part of this process and to assure you of our prayers as you continue your deliberations.

Rev Tim Burns (Chair)

Rev Matt Glowacki

Rev Chris McGowan

Cathy Monro

Dr Edwina Murphy (Deputy Chair)

Rev Dr Brian Powell

Rev Christine Redwood

Rev Dr Andrew Sloane

Appendix 1: Online Responses

Churches represented:

Armidale, Belvoir St, Berowra, Campbelltown, Canberra, Carlingford, Carlton-Kogarah, Castle Hill, Central, Chatswood, Doyalson, Faith Bible, Georges River, H30 Dee Why, Hamilton, Hawkesbury Valley, Inverell, Jervis Bay, Lighthouse, Lithgow, Macquarie, Metford, Milton Ulladulla, Moree, Mortdale-Oatley, Mudgee, Narara Valley, New Vine, Newcastle Tabernacle, Newtown, Nowra, Pennant Hills, Petersham, Raymond Terrace, Ryde, Springwood, St Ives, Tamworth, West Ryde, Wyong.

A total of 100 responses were received: 31 responses were received from one church, 12 responses were received from another, 4 responses were received from 2 churches, 3 responses were received from 3 churches, 2 responses were received from 7 churches and the remaining 26 responses each came from a different church.

Appendix 2: Forums

FORUM	ATTENDEES & CHURCHES REPRESENTED
Sydney South (Carlton-Kogarah Baptist Church)	Attendees: 32 Churches represented: 13 Carlton-Kogarah, Georges River Life Centre, Ashfield, Mortdale-Oatley, Clemton Park, Narwee, Liverpool, Heathcote-Engadine, Chester Hill, Tahmoor, Blakehurst, Westview, Sans Souci
Hunter (Warners Bay Baptist Church)	Attendees: 80 Churches represented: 20 Ankura, Doyalson, Hamilton, Hinton, Kurri Kurri, Maitland, Mayfield, Merewether, Metford, Narara Valley, Nelson Bay, New Life Jewells, New Vine, Newcastle Tabernacle, NewCity, Raymond Terrace, Swansea, Tanilba Bay, Toronto, Warners Bay
Illawarra/Shoalhaven (Berry Community Church)	Attendees: 27 Churches represented: 11 Culburra, North Nowra, Wollongong, Nowra, Woonona, Jervis Bay, Dapto, Shellharbour City, Berry Community, Helensburgh, St Ives
North Coast/Mid-North Coast (Port Macquarie Baptist Church)	Attendees: 28 Churches represented: 8 Boambee Community, Forster, Gloucester District, Nambucca, North Haven, Port Macquarie, Taree, Wingham

Riverina (Wagga Wagga Baptist Church)	Attendees: 27 Churches represented: 8 Griffith, Gundagai, Hillston, Junee, Lake Cargelligo, Tumut, Wagga Wagga, Walla Walla
Canberra (Dickson Baptist Church)	Attendees: 38 Churches represented: 8 Canberra, Dickson, Hughes, Mosaic, North Canberra, Queanbeyan, Tuggeranong, Yass
Sydney North (Epping Baptist Church)	Attendees: 68 Churches represented: 28 Bayside, Carlingford, Castle Hill, Central, Chatswood, Eastwood, Epping, Fairfield, Frenchs Forest, Gordon, Guildford, Hurstville Chinese, Ingleburn, LifeChurch Panania, Macquarie, Merrylands, Narrabeen, Northern Life, Northside, Padstow, Parramatta, Pennant Hills, Rouse Hill, St Ives, Thornleigh, West Ryde, Windsor, Wyong
Northern Rivers/Northern Tablelands (The Hub Grafton Baptist Church)	Attendees: 17 Churches represented: 7 Alstonville, Ballina, Casino, Grafton, Lismore, Lower Clarence, Tweed Coast
Central West (Dubbo Baptist Church)	Attendees: 22 Churches represented: 6 Cowra, Dubbo, Forbes, Molong, Parkes, Wellington
Sydney West (Penrith Baptist Church)	Attendees: 26 Churches represented: 12 Berowra, Blackheath, Camden, Campbelltown City, Castle Hill, Glenbrook, Hawkesbury Valley, Lithgow, Penrith, Riverstone, Springwood, Warrimoo
New England/North West (Tamworth Baptist Church)	Attendees: 54 Churches represented: 6 Armidale, Chapel St Baptist, Crossroads Christian Church, Inverell, Moree, Tamworth
Central Coast (Erina Community Baptist Church)	Attendees: 54 Churches represented: 8 Greenhouse, Narara Valley, Kariong Community, Grace Baptist, Erina Community, Green Point, Wyong

Total number of attendees: 473

Total number of churches: 131 (Four churches were represented at more than one forum).