

[Assembly Council Update to our Movement regarding work being done following our February 2021 Special Assembly](#)

Dear Friends,

Following the report released in 2020 from our *Taskforce on Affiliation, Baptist Values and Same Sex Marriage* and our *Special Assembly in February 2021*¹, the Assembly Council continues the process of preparing recommendations to bring back to Assembly regarding the matters being considered.

The work and progress of Taskforce 1²

Taskforce 1 is working with Assembly Council to frame recommendations in some of these areas (as per its Terms of Reference):

1. “A process for churches to give periodic reaffirmation of the Association’s basic doctrines, objects, and core values (no less frequently than 5 yearly)” – as per the motions passed at the Special Assembly;
2. The future place and function of our Core Values statements and how we are to live them out across our movement; and
3. To consider, in the light of our current discussions around affiliation, what further exploration and equipping in the area of Baptist distinctives would be helpful, and to promote this in liaison with Assembly Council.

Feedback received

In mid-November last year the Taskforce invited feedback from individual members and churches to help inform its work in the 3 areas above. Assembly Council thanks all who shared feedback.

Several themes are apparent in the feedback. One of these was ongoing concern around the original purpose, ownership, and implications of the Association values. Some were happy to affirm the values as part of affiliation and/or thought this important. However, a common concern was that Values in general are important statements of culture and who we want to be but are confessional and should not be part of a basis for affiliation.

¹ Refer the Appendix of this Update for the text of the motions agreed at the February 2021 Special Assembly.

² Taskforce 1 comprises:

Rev Tim Blencowe – Macquarie Baptist Church
Meighan Heard – Thornleigh Baptist Church
Rev Beth Jackson – Assembly Council, St Ives Baptist Church
Rev Jonny Lam (Chair) – Assembly Council, Eastwood Community Baptist Church
Rev Dr Tim McBride – Morling College, Narwee Baptist Church
Rev Steve Rodda – Ingleburn Baptist Church
Rev Chris Thornhill – Taree Baptist Church
Rev Jess Wiles – Menai Baptist Church
Rev Dr Steve Bartlett – ex officio, Director of Ministries
Dr Edwina Murphy was also part of the taskforce in its early stages

Comments were made that there is little in our belief statements about actual Baptist Distinctives (as was also noted in the *Affiliation, Baptist Values and Same Sex Marriage Taskforce Report*) and it would be good to conduct a review of this – not necessarily with the aim of having a new statement as a requirement of affiliation but to have more of these distinctives positively stated somewhere. It was also recognised that it would be good to conduct a process of helping people better understand them.

There was almost universal acceptance across the submissions (explicit or implicit) of it being reasonable to ask churches and pastors to affirm the 1919 Statements (the “Basic Doctrines” in the Constitution).

Complexity

A key reality acknowledged following the Special Assembly³ is that the matters we are wrestling with as a movement are multifaceted and include at least:

1. The value of the autonomy of the local church and how this interacts with the value of associationism, especially with respect to what we require fellow affiliated churches and accredited pastors to ‘affirm’, ‘support’ or ‘subscribe to’,
2. The appropriate function and use of our core values and how these relate together with our beliefs and objects, and
3. What we are to expect from one another regarding being able to affirm our association’s value regarding marriage.

The Taskforce is seeking to reflect on these and their associated issues systematically.

Regarding our statement on marriage

The work of the Taskforce so far has focused primarily on the place and function of our values, including our value on marriage. It is the understanding of Assembly Council that the decisions made at the Special Assembly in effect affirmed, by majority vote, that our position on marriage should be something required to be affirmed by affiliated churches and accredited ministers. It is also recognised that some of the struggle for clarity and unity around those decisions was because some sensed that using the values as a whole as ‘boundary markers’ for affiliation by requiring them to be regularly affirmed, was not their originally intended function.

Taskforce 1’s reflection is that the statement on marriage does not naturally ‘fit’ with the rest of the Values and would be better articulated elsewhere. The Taskforce and Assembly Council are currently considering various options to address this.

Key Points – the work of Taskforce 1

- Taskforce 1 has received feedback from numerous voices as they work through these complex issues. Their work so far has focused primarily on the place and function of our values, including our value on marriage.
- Assembly Council understands that the decisions made at the Special Assembly in effect affirmed that our position on marriage should be something required to be affirmed by affiliated churches and accredited ministers.
- Taskforce 1’s reflection is that the statement on marriage does not naturally ‘fit’ with the rest of the Values and would better articulated elsewhere. Various options are currently being considered.
- How we use our values and their relationship to the constitution is being assessed. Wherever values are articulated, Taskforce 1 considers that the focus should be on their function to guide and shape our culture together.
- These and other aspects of the issues before us are still being discussed by Taskforce 1. Recommendations will not be ready in time for the 14 May Annual Assembly; however a further update will be brought to that assembly.

³ Refer to the email update from Assembly Council out to our movement on 19 March, 2021.

Regarding our Values

If the statement about marriage is not included in the Values statements, the Taskforce posits the following ways forward for their expression in our Association's life:

1. The Value Statements are an important expression of who we are as an Association. They articulate the agreed motivated direction of our hearts and serve to guide our behaviour.
2. While individual member churches will operate by their own values, the values of individual member churches should not be inconsistent with the values of the Association.
3. Individual member churches, in their capacity as a member church of the Association and in their interactions with the Association, should support the values that operate within the Association.
4. Wherever values are articulated, the focus should be on their function to guide and shape our culture together.

Various possibilities are under consideration for the potential relationship between the Values and the Constitution and an update on this will be part of the May Assembly report.

Moving Forward

There remains a number of threads of the issues before us which the Taskforce has begun to consider but require further reflection. Assembly Council and the Taskforce are in close liaison and the Council is prayerfully working through suggestions from the Taskforce as they are put forward. The purpose of this update is to be transparent with our movement about where this work is up to. Recommendations will not be ready in time for the 14 May Annual Assembly; however, a further update will be brought to that Assembly.

The Council thanks Taskforce 1 members for their ongoing committed work and together we value your continued prayers.

An Open Letter

Recently an email was circulated widely across our movement from a group of 9 pastors making public their Taskforce 1 submission, having invited others to express their agreement with it by signing it. Many have done so. The Taskforce had previously met with some of these pastors to hear their feedback and appreciates the opportunity to engage with these and other voices.

Assembly Council noted one paragraph in particular of the letter which could be read as asserting that the Association has never had statements to which member churches are required to assent.⁴ The Council feels it is important to be clear that since 1919 the "1919 Statement" of 8 basic beliefs has been required to be held as general tenets by all affiliated churches under the Baptist Union Incorporation Act.

⁴ The paragraph reads: "This has never prevented the Association from making statements of beliefs, values or purposes. We have however regarded these as confessional, that is, descriptions of the consensus position of our member churches, with churches and individuals free to dissent. We have steadfastly refused to treat our statements as creedal, that is, as prescriptive positions to which churches and individuals must conform."

Recent conversations with representatives of the above pastors have clarified that this was not the intention of the letter and that its creators welcome the 1919 Statements as foundational affirmations for all affiliated churches. Assembly Council appreciates this clarification and highlights it for the information of all who have read the open letter.

The Council is grateful for all of the voices that continue to speak into this process in good faith as together we seek to know God's way forward for us in these complex matters.

Taskforce 2

The Association affirms the traditional biblical vision of marriage and human sexuality. These theological convictions however are increasingly becoming contentious in our cultural moment, bringing churches into complex pastoral situations with people who are LGBTQIA+ and revealing that there is diversity in ministry practice around this dynamic within our churches.

This was highlighted in the lead up to the 2021 Special Assembly where it was clear that much more consideration and conversation around these matters is needed. Ultimately the outcome of this is to assist our affiliated churches to live in the tension of human diversity - including and valuing all people in meaningful ways without necessarily affirming all their choices. Our posture of truth *and* grace needs real pastoral sensitivity and spiritual maturity - both for the sake of the local church, and for those to whom we are called to embrace beyond it. This is the work of Taskforce 2.

Assembly Council has found it more challenging than anticipated to bring this Taskforce together, and a number of people approached to participate have been unable to commit to do so. The Council is considering how we may need to adjust the form of the Terms of Reference to ensure the workload of taskforce members is considered manageable. The process of seeking appropriate persons to serve continues.

These matters are intensely personal, with deep pastoral and missional implications. We recognise that providing assistance and resourcing to churches to work through these areas is very important, and remain committed to seeing this take shape in the months ahead.

In Conclusion

The intention is to provide time at the May Annual Assembly for a further update from the Assembly Council and Taskforce 1, take clarifying questions from the floor, pray about these matters together, and provide an opportunity for Assembly representatives and members to have informal conversations with Assembly Council and Taskforce 1 members if they desire.

We thank you for your ongoing prayerful support as we work our way through these important matters.

The Assembly Council

Appendix – Motions passed at the February 2021 Assembly

Motion 1: With Regard to Churches

That Assembly affirm in principle that continued support for the basic doctrines, objects and core values of the Association should be an ongoing requirement for Affiliation and request that the Assembly Council bring to a future Assembly recommendations on:

- 1. Any Constitutional amendments necessary to make that explicit,*
- 2. A process for churches to give periodic reaffirmation of the basic doctrines, objects, and core values (no less frequently than 5 yearly), and*
- 3. A suitable process to apply Section 17.5 (a) of the Constitution in circumstances where a church no longer meets such requirements.*

Motion 2: With Regard to Pastors

Assembly affirms that accredited ministers are required to subscribe to the basic doctrines, objects, and values of the Association as defined in the Constitution and requests that Assembly Council bring to the next Ordinary Assembly a proposal to require annual confirmation of this as part of Continuing Ministerial Development.

It was noted informally that Assembly Council would consider the situation of Recognised Ministers in the light of Motion 2 and bring forward appropriate recommendations for Recognised Ministers as well.