



Affiliation, Baptist Values and Marriage Reflections and Recommendations from Assembly Council to the May 2023 Annual Assembly

On Saturday 6 May the agenda of our 2023 Annual Assembly will be given over to progressing the matters of Affiliation, Baptist Values and Marriage that continue to consume significant time and energy for many across our Association. This document outlines and seeks to explain the recommendations of Assembly Council to the Assembly, in the light of where we are currently at with these matters as a movement.

A Brief Recap

Assembly Council brought a number of recommendations for a way forward to the November 2022 Assembly [[see the paper HERE](#)]. Some of these were in-principle motions regarding our position on marriage and other matters, and were agreed by Assembly (Motions 2-8). Others outlined a proposed process for implementing those principles (Motions 10-22), and due to time were unable to be voted on. ***For a summary of what was decided, see the update [HERE](#) which the Council provided just prior to Christmas last year. This document also outlined the steps it was taking following the November 2022 Assembly.***

Key in that update was information about the survey Assembly Council commissioned of those who voted at that assembly, to seek to better understand the reasons people voted as they did for some of these Motions.

Insights from the survey included:

- Just under 80% of those who voted 'yes' for motions 3 and 4 (the 'in principle motions' about supporting the marriage statement) would also be in favour of motions 10-22, which outlined an implementation mechanism requiring affirmation of this support every 5 years. Given Motions 3-4 were passed by a majority of just over 60%, this revealed that the overall support for this way forward of implementation is likely to be very marginal. This accords with consistent narrative feedback received by the Council since that Assembly.
- Had motions 10-22 not been on the table, up to 15% more of the assembly would have felt able to support motions 3-4. In other words, the existence of the process of reaffirmation and all that this entailed was a disincentive for some to support motions 3-4, when they otherwise might have.

In the light of this, Assembly Council was convinced of the need to put motions 10-22 on hold and seek to discern if there were more widely acceptable ways to be faithful to the in-principle decisions made at the November Assembly.

The Envoy Process

In the update to the movement prior to Christmas last year, Assembly Council also advised that it had appointed Tim Dyer, an experienced mediator and trainer of our church consultants, to lead a small team of

envoys to conduct discussions with various parties across our movement in the early part of 2023. These discussions were conducted in February & March and the envoys have reported back to Assembly Council.

A number of key observations were made by the envoys. Firstly, the overwhelming majority of the Association (based on the survey taken after the November Assembly) agree with the Association's position on marriage as being between 1 man and 1 woman. However there is significant disagreement over how to respond to churches who do not hold that position, and this tension is deeply felt. The proposals for this that were put to the November Assembly (Motions 10-22), if pursued, would likely lead to a substantial number of churches and accredited pastors either reconsidering whether they could be part of the Association, or not engaging the proposed process at all.

Secondly, the costs of a significant split in the Association, were it to occur, would be catastrophic for the life of our movement. Costs identified include significant loss of pastoral leadership, loss of trust and relational connection, higher levels of local congregational conflict around these matters, reputational damage, reduced association funding and capacity, impacts on the viability of our College, to name some of the main ones identified. The negative impact on our Gen1K Vision would be very significant. These costs are much more likely to occur if, in the steps we take next, implementation of the decisions we have so far made is done without uncovering the unintended consequences and working them through. As hard as it is, we need to feel the weight of these potential costs.

Thirdly, further work needs to be done before implementing a set of measures for responding to churches and pastors who cannot support our position on marriage, to allow the implications to be worked out before decisions are made. These questions go to the heart of how we affiliate; how we are clear about who we are and what is required of affiliated churches and accredited pastors, yet able also to approach this in a grace-filled way.

There is a sense that in respect of how we implement the in-principle decisions already made by Assembly, we are yet to discern the mind of Christ.

The following matters are among those that were identified in the envoy process as needing further prayerful reflection and discernment:

1. *Reflection and work on the nature of affiliation:*
 - a. *theologically*
 - b. *pastorally – in particular how we relationally engage with those who find they cannot support our core statements, values and beliefs*
 - c. *organisationally – how we provide support and pathways for churches who may choose not to stay in the movement or in the end may not be able to stay*
2. *A hurried decision about implementation runs significant risk of unintended consequences. Time needs to be taken to better assess the risks, costs and consequences of various implementation processes.*
3. *There was also a sense of need to do better collective work on the pastoral dimensions of living out our position with respect to marriage. In addition, we are living in a period of major social change in attitudes towards gender, sexuality and marriage. These issues will continue to arise for all churches for the foreseeable future, no matter what our final collective decisions about the matters currently before us are.*
4. *There was a clear sense of the need to re-assert mission and our Gen1K Vision as central to our collective life while moving forward with the above in a timely way.*

[Assembly Council reflections following the November 2022 Assembly, the post-assembly survey and the envoy process](#)

1. **The Baptist Association of NSW & ACT's position on marriage is widely supported by its Churches and Pastors.** At the November 2022 Assembly the motion to adopt the Position Statement on Marriage gained 75% support. The post-Assembly survey revealed that, notwithstanding some disagreement about particular wording of that Statement, support for a traditional biblical view of marriage as being exclusively between a man and a woman among voting members of the November Assembly was around 94%.
2. **Support of our position on marriage is required for ongoing Affiliation of Churches and Accreditation of Pastors.** While there is more disagreement around this than the position itself, a majority of the Assembly see support for our position on marriage as being of sufficient weight and importance as to be in some way required for association. The decisions of Assemblies in February 2021 and November 2022 have made this clear. While Assembly Council would prefer a greater consensus on this, the majority of two Assemblies cannot be ignored. Council also notes again the results of the post-assembly survey which indicated that the level of consensus on these decisions would likely have been even greater (around 75%) if the particular implementation proposal contained in Motions 10-22 was not also on the table. Assembly Council and its committees now operate in light of these decisions. After three years of forums, taskforces and Assemblies, Council does not believe that prolonged discussion about this will bring greater consensus.
3. In the light of the above, Assembly Council does not believe the way ahead is to second-guess the in-principle resolutions that were passed in November 2022.
4. At the same time, Assembly Council recognizes the significantly vulnerable place we are in as an Association currently. The way we express and implement the in-principle resolutions we have already decided will have an impact on who we are as a movement into the future. **We do not want to look back on this moment in our history and regret not taking the time and effort needed to implement these in a way that is best for the health of our movement.**
5. **It is clear to Assembly Council** that to continue to promote a process of periodical reaffirmation, as suggested in motions 10-22 of the November motions, would cause a greater level of distress and discord among Churches and may lead to the exiting of Churches and Pastors who actually support our basic doctrines, objects, core values and Positions Statements. These motions were brought in good faith as a credible way forward. However it is clear to Council that they would not serve us well as the mechanism of implementation. Therefore, Council will not be bringing its Motions 10-22 back to Assembly.
6. **It is clear to Assembly Council** that the decisions made to this point have been identity-shaping for us as a movement already into the future. Churches who desire to be affiliated and pastors who desire to be accredited or recognized will need to support our basic doctrines, objects, core values and our position on marriage. Support for the other 2 position statements on Congregational Government and Local Church Autonomy/Health Association was also strong at the November Assembly and they appear generally uncontroversial in and of themselves.
7. **It is not clear to Assembly Council what process is best employed to engage with already affiliated Churches and already accredited Pastors who cannot support** our basic doctrines, objects, core values or Positions Statements. In this, the Council's view is that we have not yet discerned the mind of Christ.

We have already wrestled with this very significantly. We continue to receive many contributions, representations and views of various forms, strongly held and passionately communicated. We are painfully aware of the level of frustration and distress these matters are producing across our movement.

In this we recognize:

- That we are a deeply relational association/network, and many of us feel this sense of belonging strongly. This is wonderful – and also part of what is making our current challenges so complex.
- That we cannot ‘do nothing’ about the reality of the non-support of pastors and churches for the things that we have agreed together need to be supported.
- That given its complexity, this situation needs careful and unrushed reflection and discernment before any decisions are taken that impact the affiliation of existing churches or the accreditation of existing pastors. Rushed decisions in these circumstances are seldom good decisions as they will likely not identify the unintended consequences that might take place which could otherwise be mitigated or dealt with.

In this space, what do Baptists do? As hard as it is, with humility and patience, we continue to work at the issues and seek to find the way forward under God.

Assembly Council’s recommended next steps

1. That we keep front of mind the in-principle decisions we have already made and are operative within the Association, and do not step back from them.
2. That in the months ahead we focus on the question of **what process is best employed to engage with already affiliated Churches and already accredited Pastors who cannot support** our basic doctrines, objects, core values or Positions Statements, and what the relationship with these churches and pastors should look like into the future. That we intensively work on the matters identified by the envoy process (*in italics on page 2 above*), in order to better find the mind of Christ together.
3. That we recognize that for a church to leave the Association or for a pastor to cease to be accredited in circumstances such as these, whether voluntarily or otherwise, has multiple layers of complexity and grief both for those leaving and for the Association. Council believes that most in our Association desire us to engage relationally and pastorally with Churches and Pastors for whom this may be an outcome over time. This would also lead to unhurried pastoral discussions and clarity about a range of other matters which we know are causing significant anxiety, including the practicalities of property. It is very important for a church which finds itself in this situation that there are supportive pathways which recognize ongoing needs in a number of areas such as Safe Ministry resources and support, insurance, ongoing connection to Baptist agencies, and other matters. It is important for a currently accredited pastor in this situation to be supported and for us to work out if some access to an alternative process of credentialling is possible.

In the light of all of the above, Assembly Council presents the following motion to the 2023 May Annual Assembly:

That Assembly Council present to Assembly by May 2024 a process for relationally responding to already affiliated Churches and already Accredited Pastors who have reached a clear and settled position that means they are unable to support the Association’s position on marriage. This response will work to clarify the relationship between such a church or pastor and the Association where they are unable to continue in formal affiliation or accreditation.

Inclusion of the 3 Position Statements in our Constitution

The 3 Positions Statements discussed at the November Assembly were passed with significant majorities:

- Motion 2 – Marriage – 75%
- Motion 6 – Congregational Government – 85%
- Motion 7 – Local Church Autonomy & Healthy Association – 84%

Motion 5 was also passed, though with a significantly smaller majority of 58%. Motion 5 was: *“That the Association establish Association Position Statements, as agreed by Assembly from time to time, which are then included in the Association’s constitution.”*

The post- assembly survey revealed that for people who did not support this motion, the most common reason (86%) was that they felt this could open the door to a system of adding more and more statements in the future, and a tendency towards legalism. Assembly Council hears this concern and strongly shares a desire to avoid it. It has no desire or intention to introduce further statements. At the same time it notes the strong support for the statements themselves, and believes there would be value in them being located in the constitution somehow. If safeguards could be built into the process to achieve both these ends, in the view of the Council it would be a positive thing.

In the light of this, Assembly Council is recommending that the Position Statements be included in the constitution at this Assembly. However it has drafted these changes such that they are specifically named, rather than there just being a general reference to a category of Position Statements in the constitution. In this way, any future changes or additions to position statements in the constitution would need to be decided specifically by a future assembly.

Finally, it is Council’s view that it is appropriate that these statements are supported by new churches coming into affiliation with the movement, as is already the case for the statement on marriage contained in our Core Values. It also believes that, for all the reasons noted in the preceding sections of this document, it would not be appropriate to make further changes about these matters in our constitution at this point in time.

In the light of this, Assembly Council presents the following motions to amend our Association Constitution at the 2023 May Annual Assembly:

Constitutional Changes to include the Position Statements in the Constitution

- I. *Amend Clause 3.1 (the constitution’s list of definitions) by adding: the term “Position Statements”, having the Meaning “the position statements set out in Clause 6A.”*

- II. *Adding a new Clause 6A as follows:*
 - 6A. ASSOCIATION POSITION STATEMENTS**
The following position statements of the Association on:
 - a) *Congregational Governance (as adopted by Assembly on 12 November 2022);*
 - b) *Local Church Autonomy/Health Association (as adopted by Assembly on 12 November 2022);*
and
 - c) *Marriage (as adopted by Assembly on 12 November 2022)*
shall be known collectively as the Association Position Statements and shall be accessible on the Association’s website.

- III. *Amend clause 6.1 (the list of the Core Values in the Constitution) by deleting clause 6.1(c)(iv) on marriage.*

- IV. *Amend Clause 17.1(a) to read “support the foundational beliefs, the objects, the position statements and the values of the Association....” (additional words underlined)*

[Assembly Council's responses to the Notices of Motion coming to this Assembly](#)

For the information of Assembly, Assembly Council also wishes to be transparent about its views on the various notices of motion that are before this Assembly from the Canberra, Newtown and Chatswood churches. Most of these responses are logical outworking of Council's reflections and recommendations in this document so far.

The Notices of Motion document can be found [HERE](#).

1. Regarding the notice of motion from the Newtown and Chatswood churches, Assembly council advises that it supports part (a) of the motion and does not support part (b) of the motion.
2. Assembly Council does not support the notices of motion from Canberra Baptist Church seeking to rescind Motions 3-8 from the November 2022 Assembly.
3. With respect to the 2 motions from Canberra Baptist Church seeking to change the constitution to require a 2/3 majority to (i) withdraw the affiliation of a church and (ii) make future changes to the constitution, the Council is of the view that these should be left on the table and not discussed until the 2024 Annual Assembly. These motions in and of themselves may not be inappropriate. However, the current circumstances make them more controversial and loaded than they need to be. Assembly Council comes to this assembly strongly advocating for a measured and careful approach to working through the complexities of responding to already accredited churches which are unable to support our marriage statement. In its view, that work is the priority and discussing these proposed changes now would short circuit that process.

[Final Reflections](#)

As previously noted in this document, Assembly Council is acutely aware of the complex and vulnerable position we are currently in as an Association in NSW/ACT. It continues to pray and wrestle deeply with the matters before us and knows this is also true of many others across our movement at this time.

In all of this, Council's view is that the processes so far, as imperfect as they may have been, have been unmistakably Baptist. We have prayed, appointed taskforces, conducted forums, taken surveys, engaged listening processes, and discussed and decided matters at our Assemblies. This is what Baptists do when confronted with challenging issues in their collective life.

Council also wants to acknowledge that dealing with these matters has been and continues to be very difficult for us. The issues, including at times Council's responses in working through them, has caused frustration for some and distress for others. Assembly Council deeply regrets this.

Assembly Council has sought and continues to seek to work through these matters in a way that is helpful for the long term mission and health of our movement. Given its complexity, we freely acknowledge that this is exceptionally difficult. Having said this, Council is of the view that the next steps outlined in this document give us the best chance of moving forward in a healthy way.

Finally, Assembly Council is of the conviction that we must continually come back to what God has already made clear to us, and which we unequivocally discerned over a decade ago now. That is, the call on our collective life to give ourselves to God's mission, and the Gen1K Vision of becoming a movement of 1000 healthy churches in a generation. Working through these matters is a necessary part of working together towards this vision, and yet can also be a distraction from it. God's leading for us in this moment will, we believe, help us pursue a path consistent with the vision He has already revealed to us.

Assembly Council, April 2023.