

A WORD AND SPIRIT  
MAIN ) TREAM  
NETWORK

**Magazine Issue 58. January 1997**

**Issue Theme : QUO VADIS?**

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*The Executive are always happy to include new names and groupings here. Please let the Editor know of these by the end of March 1997.*

(\*) Please note that not all these groups describe themselves as Word and Spirit Networks but *all* share similar aims.

## Introduction

I bottled out from calling this issue 'The Baptist Union and Sex'. However that really is what it is about. *Quo Vadis?* - *where are you heading?* In the first part of this magazine, we hear a range of responses to the issues that are exercising those of us caught up in the ageing structures of our Union. Peter Wortley writes this issue's letter to the churches and appeals, in a phrase which ministers to me, for an optimistic patience. There follows an adaptation of the introductory speech with which Brian Haymes presented to the Baptist Union Council over 20 meetings' and two year's work from those of us who have served on the General Superintendency Review Group.

Our Mainstream chairpersons then weigh in. Rob Warner wonders out loud whether the denominational consultation can, in practice, deliver much at all. Glen Marshall tackles associating in particular through his contribution with what he immodestly calls a modest proposal! Ann Luther whose brief contribution in the BT supplement on the Denominational Consultation impressed me greatly writes more fully here about her concerns about the process.

The Editorial tries to pull some of these insights together with a special plea to us all to make better use of the London Assembly this year. Then comes the sex! In September, Mainstream hosted one of its occasional consultations. This time on Human Sexuality. John Weaver, a former chair of Mainstream, outlines some of the key ideas and thoughts of the day as well as contributing a review of a recent work by one of the speakers: Margaret Gill. Finally a good friend from my Oxford years, David Cook writes with characteristic sensitivity for us on the subject of Homosexuality.

Letters to the Editor are, may I remind you, always welcome and may even be published!

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# Letter to the Churches

Dear brothers and sisters in Mainstream,



Your editor has invited me to act as "a guide for our readers through the maze of debates and reviews we are experiencing as a Union at this present time."

My response to it is, however, very much a current one since that seems to me to be likely to be most helpful. *It is also entirely personal and unofficial.* For good or ill the Union, in its Didcot setting, has been caught up in a multiplicity of reviews. Even David Coffey and Keith Jones have been submitted to a period of great uncertainty - although those of us called to undertake their review intended to be supportive. The General Superintendents have also been made to wonder how much their ministry is valued and for how long it will be continued. And this before the long awaited superintendency review, of which more anon.

Here permit me a digression. The theme of this issue is "Quo vadis?" - "Where are **you** going?" I don't know what the editor had in mind but for me it conjures up the legendary scene in which Saint Peter, fleeing from a martyr's death, encounters Jesus, who has already been crucified and has risen. "Where are you going, Lord?" asks the apostle. "To be crucified afresh for you" replies the Lord. This raises a number of thoughts as we examine where the Baptist Union seeks to go as we all approach the twenty-first century. We have been asking numerous questions and, yes, we have been trying to ask them in this Petrine manner. What we truly wish to know is where the Lord Jesus wants to take us. Our response to Him might be couched in the words of my College motto, "Domine, sequor" - "Lord, I follow".

There have been two overarching concerns. One is that we never lose sight of the missiological element. We are seeking to go with our "missionary God". The importance of this, so clear to us from the scriptures, has recently been highlighted by the report in the Baptist Times on the decline in the number of baptisms over the past few years. The other major concern is how best we can help each other to achieve our missionary purpose and this may be summarised by the word "associating" - which is not the same as "Association!" Here we do not lack those who very properly remind us that we are not the only followers of Christ and that, where we can, we should travel together.

There is no reason to doubt that David and Keith embarked on their two rounds of "Listening Days" in this spirit of seeking to discover the will of the

Lord for those they are called to serve by leading. The result was a multitude of ideas published in "Towards 2000". It was then underlined in the "National Mission Strategy" which was incorporated in the re-issued "Towards 2000". It seems to me that we have come through a period where all too many questions were being asked without any confidence that our whole constituency was involved. There can have been few church meetings or housegroups that wanted to discuss "The Nature of the Assembly and the Council of the Baptist Union of Great Britain". That said, Ministers' fraternal could certainly have done worse than address the challenges set out in "Forms of Ministry among Baptists".

However we did not seem to be getting very far. The gap between a Baptist church and the Baptist Union Council and its committees is a very wide one. Although the Council is a representative body drawn mainly from the associations, we all recognise that most Baptists know nothing about it. And there has not yet been any sign that the ideas being talked about have persuaded churches that the BU Home Mission funds should be swelled by a great increase in giving. This almost certainly means that ministers are not yet sufficiently persuaded either, for everyone acknowledges that they are the key people, capable of re-directing the interest of their congregations.

Also behind all else the money problem still loomed large. This is what launched the plans that reached fruition in the "Denominational Consultation" held in September 1996. In brief, if we could find out what Baptists generally want of the Union perhaps they would be willing to pay for it. To the credit of the General Secretaries and their colleagues the Consultation took shape as a much more spiritual entity than this. The Consultation was well prepared for by provision of bible study material and by the college principals' exposition of the BU's Declaration of Principle. The Consultation week-end itself was marked by prayer, worship and fellowship. Those present struggled nobly to match up to Saint Paul's claim, "we have the mind of Christ". In effect the question "Quo vadis?" was asked of our Lord Jesus Christ as the head of the Church. The "outcomes" or "advice" of the Consultation have now been publicised and you may judge for yourself whether these are the will and purpose of God.

At the Consultation there was much reference by our non-baptist facilitators to "the decision makers". This has to be understood carefully within the context. If the Baptist Union as an organisation is to change decisions must be taken by its Council. If those decisions are to make the slightest difference to the life of our Union of churches they must be owned by those churches. The primary concern at the Consultation was the possibility of a re-discovery of associating. Is not this what the new church movements have sought after and

achieved? In the BU we are, frankly, a long way behind but there is no reason why we cannot catch up. This theme is also taken up in "Transforming Superintendency", the report on area superintendency as currently experienced among us.

Two difficulties are now emerging.

1) The Superintendency Report has been presented to Council (November 1996) but is not to be **discussed** by Council until March 1997. At the same time every attempt is being made to carry forward the desires emerging strongly from the Consultation.

2) At the Consultation some called for a radical approach to associating and therefore to association life. They envisaged the possibility of ending present associations and BU areas and creating "natural" groupings of churches who would arrange their own "share and care" activity. "Transforming Superintendency", however, assumes a similar area and association set-up as now but still presses for reality in associating. That report's chief contribution here was the insistence on associating being something all ministers and churches did for each other. Hence the emphasis that to achieve a renewal of associating does not require new full time paid appointments. Council has now taken a step to get this whole issue re-examined and to look for a way whereby all in the Union make some annual commitment to each other.

But here another factor appears. The "decision makers" for the associations are **not** the members of the BU Council. Some people there would like to tell the associations what to do but if they do we will not be surprised if that leads to unhelpful conflict. And if associations, who are well represented on BU Council, may react like that what about the churches? We have all heard times without number that Baptist polity is meant to major on interdependency and not independency. Can this mean more that it does at present? Some years ago, in a private conversation, the late Dr Ernest Payne told me he thought that the Baptist Union would follow the lead of the Congregational Union and become a "Church". It seemed to me unlikely then and I find it now a recipe for the break up of the Union. Baptists are surely unlikely to give up their church autonomy. Here there is a natural tension between the frustration of doing anything for a group of Baptist churches and the acceptance that, as the Superintendency Report says, "It is crucial in Baptist terms to think first of the Church as the local company of believers under the authority of Christ." Set within the context of any comments about the alleged "ecclesial" nature of any other aspect of the Union, this is reassuring.

People who have heard so much about the Denominational Consultation, and especially those non-Council members who were there, naturally ask not only **what** is happening but **when** is anything likely to happen? In other ways our

thinking is dominated by myriad references to the Millennium. With Christians everywhere we want to assert to our society that this millennium is that of the coming of Jesus Christ - **it is His**. It seems to me not unreasonable to go back to the BU's idea of "Towards 2000" but now to recognise that action springs both out of the Consultation and out of "Transforming Superintendency". Earlier reports are now effectively sidelined though doubtless they have paved the way for us.

How, then, can all this be taken forward? The Council in November 1996 worked hard to find an answer. Fifteen resolutions were tabled arising from the Consultation and the Council's further considerations. Ten of these are to be acted on by various committees or specially set-up groups. Four are to be looked at by a Denominational Consultation Reference Group. This Group will also have the task to ensure that nothing that emerged with good support from the Consultation is ignored. The remaining resolution on our becoming an Alliance instead of a Union - was unanimously thrown out as threatening to lead to interminable debate about a change of the Union's name! These Council resolutions are about mission and the ministry that under God's good hand will carry out that mission. Of course, we must remember that when we have discussed or even decided something at a committee we have **not yet done anything!** The doing is still to be. Since the Millennium calls us all to Christian action, I think there is a good case for optimistic patience.

We must not let ourselves be too beholden to the St Peter legend but neither should we duck the challenge. The apostle retraced his footsteps and went back to Rome and died as a Christian martyr. Changes will have to come, positions and jobs go, new frameworks come into being. All this will require a willingness for change and an acceptance of self-denial for the common good in order to fulfil the will of Christ our Lord.

*Peter Wortley is Moderator of the Baptist Union Council and, for some 20 years, has served as the Secretary of the London Baptist Association.*

# **TRANSFORMING SUPERINTENDENCY - An Introduction.**

As the General Superintendency Review Group's interim report to the Baptist Union Council of last year indicated, we have found our task more wide-ranging and demanding than we had at first appreciated. Two related concerns came to our attention as soon as we began our reflections. The first is the fact that the General Superintendency has become a crucial feature of our life together in the Union, so crucial that to review the Superintendents' work was to engage with some fundamental questions about all our life. Second, the terms of reference required us to look at the nature of pastoral and spiritual oversight in all its expressions in the Union which includes but is not exhausted by the General Superintendency. These two factors alone made our initial personal ideas, such as diminishing the size of Areas, multiplying the number of Superintendents, seem trivial and superficial. An enquiry of greater depth was being asked of us. We have described our methodology in the report. (\*)

We are grateful to those who wrote personal letters, responded to requests for papers, completed questionnaires and in other ways contributed to the review. The Group members are grateful to the Revd. Malcolm Goodspeed, Head of the Ministry Department, for writing papers for us and being willing to come for two extended meetings with us. In particular, the Review Group wishes to thank the members of the General Superintendents Board for their ready co-operation in this review. They too have written personal letters, shared a day conference with the Group, and have welcomed the Chairman of the Group to visit the Board and, on one occasion, to observe its work in regard to settlement.

We hope that all readers will note and indeed follow our request to read the report as a whole. Given the terms of reference and their wide implications, we could do no other than begin with the theological reflections we have attempted to articulate. We believe this is a genuinely radical approach. And so we begin with God, One God in Trinity. If we are to live as the people of God that is where we have to start. The faith we confess in baptism is faith in God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit. In particular, we reflected on the nature of God as being relational. Moreover, this God to whom the Scriptures bear witness is always "going out" in creation and redemption. God is God for others in sustaining and saving love. It is not for any theological correctness that we began here but because we came to believe that the vision of God is crucial for all ministry and mission. Where there is no vision of God, or maybe worse, where the vision of God is reduced to the concerns of the church, >

(\*) Copies are available from Baptist Publications at a cost of £4 plus p&p (Editor)



there is the inevitability of a sickness potentially unto death.

Our reflections on the nature, being and activity of God known in Jesus by the work of the Holy Spirit led us to set the Church where we believe Scripture locates it, in the call and gift of God. God calls a people to share the purposes of salvation revealed, enfleshed and completed in Jesus Christ. The wonder of grace is that we are called to participate in the mission of God. Being the Church by grace, caught up into the life of God in baptism, being given an apostolic calling, now in our history, is the sheer wonder of gift and calling. Ecclesiology, that marginal doctrine for many contemporary Christians, we believe is fundamentally grounded in the nature and being of God. It has always been important for Baptists. Thus we argue that because we are called to be the Church of the Christlike God we look to the form the Church takes in the world. Does it correspond to the nature of God? In particular, does it reflect the divine nature of relating and being for others? Does it live to participate in the movement of God in history or does it seek that institutional strength, prestige and status that belongs fundamentally to this world? And, does it recognize that God in mercy gives gifts to his people to enable the calling to be answered and lived?

So we came to reflect on ministry, local and trans-local as the New Testament indicates, as part of God's provision for the Church. Superintendency has a context and that is not just the Union but the Union called to participate in the mission of God. That is also where we believe we have to begin. We have no doubt, in the light of our theological and historical reflections that the church needs forms of pastoral and spiritual care which are local and trans-local. It is, in this sense, not a question of whether we need Superintendents, but what kind of superintendency do we need to be all that we are called to be in the purposes of God in this time of our life. The Review Group's opinion is that the present task of the General Superintendents as described in the Home Mission Scheme is beyond fulfilment by any one person. It almost certainly was not intended to be the task of any individual alone but we are clear that the present Superintendents are being asked to carry impossible loads. The wide ranging work of superintendency is required but we argue that it should be reappraised and relocated. There is more to pastoral and spiritual oversight than the Superintendents, even an increased number of them, can do.

Therefore choices must be made about the use of the resources God gives us, which includes Superintendents. We are a Union of local churches, Associations and Colleges. We believe that local congregations need the gift of ministry which God gives and that there will be little likelihood of renewal of congregational life without good and well supported ministry. It is for this pastoral and missiological reason that we recommend that the pastoral care of

ministers becomes the primary task of Area Superintendents. We believe Superintendents should give more time to the knowing, supporting and encouraging of ministers than has been possible. We do not think of this pastoral task as a superficial hand-holding kind of care but rather the full picture we paint in section 7: The Ministry of Area Superintendents. For this we require Superintendents who will be pastoral theologians.

We believe that Superintendents should work with the ministers in the Area at developing appropriate forms for such care to be given. This is the Superintendent's responsibility and she or he will call others into the task in collaboration with the ministers. It is a feature of our approach to the ministers, Associations, Churches and Areas that, rather than be prescriptive, we call on the Superintendents and Areas to devise their own responses. Indeed we are glad to note the creative developments already being made in the light of changing contexts for our churches. If, then, the Superintendents are to care primarily for the ministers, they will be drawn into the life of the Churches. However, we believe that the pastoral care and development of the Churches lies with the Churches in Association.

We are aware that in many contexts Association life is weak. Could it be because we have left the reality of associating to full time employees, Superintendents and Association Secretaries, and so have distanced others from the proper responsibility that is theirs? Is it possible that we have measured Association life by the numbers of people we can get to large meetings where, in fact, very little associating may take place at all? We set out our arguments in section 8: The Superintendency and the Churches. There we hope it is clear that we believe it essential that associating be a reality among us again. We were delighted to hear of parts of the country where new patterns of mutual congregational care and encouragement are being developed. We believe that local ministers and local churches must see again the theological reality of associating which is an authentic expression of Baptist life. In times of genuine renewal the Associations have played a crucial part because they have expressed that fundamental relating that is a feature of the people of the triune God.

We would not disguise from our Union the fact that we experienced particular difficulties in reflecting on the settlement process. We remain aware that no one system is going to suit all situations. We have been mindful of the present difficulties as they are experienced by Churches and ministers and that the recommendations for this moment will be changed in different circumstances. Hence our recommendations about reviewing the process and, crucially, the necessary collaborative nature of such reviews. There are issues of power and responsibility here for us all to face, Superintendents, Ministers and local

Churches. We cannot and would not seek a system so tight that there was no space in which the Holy Spirit might fly and, in all of this, there is no escaping the basis of trust, an issue to which I shall return.

We hope our comments on our ecumenical responsibilities and privileges and the relationship between the Superintendents and the Colleges are clear. On the question of the Superintendents and the structures of the Union we do urge the Baptist Union Council to consider what we have called a Mission and Ministry Forum. We are concerned that the wisdom and experience that is expressed in the Superintendent's Board is not being fully brought into active engagement with other corporate aspects of the Union's life in Didcot and beyond. We have suggested one form the Forum might take but we are more concerned with the principle of partnership we are describing than the details themselves. We argue that the close, not to say closed, life of the Board needs to be available to contribute in a wider forum as well as in the Baptist Union Council.

We believe that, in ways to which we draw attention, quality pastoral care must be given to the Superintendents and their families. We have examined the work of those presently and recently in office and thank God for the depth of commitment and sacrifice they have shown. They need all the encouragement and support, the pastoral and spiritual care we can give. There are many themes and details of this report to which I have not drawn attention. Again, we plead that Council and all concerned Baptists read the text carefully and read it whole. We claim to have taken the radical approach by going back to the doctrine of God and God's purposes in Christ of which our calling as the Church is but a part. However, I want to conclude with three brief comments.

First, I want to return to the theme of trust. We have found ourselves in the group reflecting on the theology and experience of trust. Those who trust one another do so because they both acknowledge a claim made upon them that is, in the language of theology, transcendent. We trust and can trust because we both are responding to the gracious call of the Christlike God. Not to trust would amount to saying we are not one in Him. Our Union, arising out of our ecclesiology, requires trust, between ministers, churches, superintendents, Associations, Council and Assembly. Trust makes possible partnership. Without it there is no relating at personal and spiritual levels. God, we believe, trusts us with a share in his mission. So, in Christ, we see the risk, the vulnerability, which goes with trust. We are not only called to trust God but to live in trust of each other. We pray that by the Spirit we may be enabled so to do for where there is no trust there is no life in God.

Second, we have tried to be true to Baptist principles in working through our responsibility to reflect on superintendency. We hope this is evident in the text and in the approaches it recommends. We have tried not to be prescriptive in ways that would compromise our convictions. We are not a denomination that "hands things down". We have tried to resist in the text any language that suggests levels of church life, as if an Association were higher than a church, or a Superintendent more elevated than a deacon, or a minister above a church member. We have tried to draw upon Baptist insights to enunciate important principles and we look to the membership of the Union to draw out the implications in whatever ways they believe will help them best fulfil God's calling. Responsibility, like trust, is something to be shared. Thus we have tried to picture patterns of partnership between local, regional and national in the life of the Union.

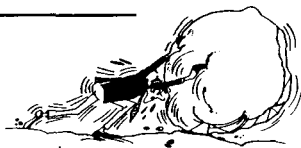
Finally, we offer our work to the judgement of the Union. We are grateful for being given the privilege of making this contribution at a time when so much creative and important reflection and consultation goes on among us. There have been times in our discussions when we have known an excitement, a quickening of the spirit, as we have glimpsed new relationships, new possibilities, new visions. It is not for us to say whether this is of God or not but there have been moments when we have felt we have stood at the brink of further adventure. The kind of renewal we seek, and for which we have often prayed, is both an organisational and spiritual matter. We offer our report in that spirit.

**Brian Haymes.**

**Brian Haymes is President of the Bristol Baptist College. He chaired the General Superintendency Review Group. This article has been adapted from the introductory speech given by Dr Haymes to the Baptist Union Council at its meeting at Bristol, in November 1996.**

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## **AGEING STRUCTURES AND UNDYING CONVICTIONS**



### **No confidence in the status quo**

The Denominational Consultation proved to be a remarkable weekend. On the Saturday, many of the small discussion groups became increasingly adventurous in their proposals. Many called for new national and regional structures, built around the centrality of mission. It was perhaps the first official denominational gathering to give voice to a resounding vote of no confidence in the existing structures. The game is almost up for the Union and

Associations as we know them. Without fundamental reform, the remaining credibility of these institutions will drain away as we near the millennium.

The Sunday plenary session was marked by substantial backtracking. Having sounded the trumpet for radical advance, the delegates began to hasten into retreat. The safety zone for the denominational status quo is characterised by predictability and procrastination. David Coffey has called for two Council meetings and one Assembly to complete the tasks of denominational review. A much more likely and less appetizing outcome is apparent: a protracted review process, keeping countless committees in full employment for five years or more. That would be like moving deck-chairs on the Titanic. The time is past for minor reforms introduced at leisure: the state of the nation, the moral degradation and the spiritual vacuum, demands urgent action. If Sir John Harvey Jones examined the annual accounts of the Union and the Colleges he would inevitably conclude that the financial fragility of these institutions similarly demonstrates the need for urgent and systematic reform.

### **A crisis of irrelevance**

The Denominational Consultation was clearly marked by a desire to work together effectively for the sake of the advance of the Kingdom. Even before the consultation exposed a fundamental lack of confidence in the existing structures, in recent years we should note that only one third of Baptist churches have bothered to send delegates to our annual Assembly. Some presumably don't send delegates because they can't afford to, but many seem to have given up such participation as an activity with little or no relevance to local church life. The same is true of association life for an increasing number of churches. For many Baptist churches who are not on home mission or seeking a new minister, if the annual assembly did not happen, and the union and associations were wound up, the impact on local church life and mission would be minimal. This doesn't necessarily mean that Baptist churches are isolationist. In fact, Baptists attend national conferences and Bible weeks in their droves - the largest annual gathering of Baptists is at Spring Harvest.

### **Committed to a vision not an institution**

Pastors of evangelical Baptist churches will be very familiar with the distinctive and revolutionary impact of evangelical ecumenism. While a significant proportion of participants at the denominational consultation were able to describe themselves as "died in the wool Baptists", they are becoming an endangered species. Our churches are increasingly filled with believers whose commitment is not to a denominational identity but to the vision and values of a trans-denominational brand of church. When they move to a new area, their first thought is not to find another church with the same

denominational label, but rather a church with similar evangelical convictions, a similar worship style and a similar vision. Post-modernism is making everyone reluctant to buy into long established institutions. Evangelical ecumenism means that an increasing majority of believers have now become post-denominational. Their hearts and minds will be captivated not by tinkering with the committee structures of an existing institution, but by offering a credible, adventurous and compelling vision for reaching the nation with the glorious Gospel of Christ.

### **Baptist options**

There is more than one possible outcome to the present debate, and so it is helpful to identify the main options.

a) Baptists could conclude that the best course of action is to work for gradual and incremental reforms without rocking the boat. This is the status quo option, working through the existing committee structures. Its merit and failing is caution: minimal risks means the danger of little loss and the prospect of little gain. Such a process is inevitably slow: can the present sense of the need for urgent reform come to terms with five years of committee-centred denominational review? The phrase “turkeys voting for Christmas” inevitably comes to mind...

b) Baptists could conclude that the purpose of the Union is essentially minimalist: an administrative, low-key backup structure, with no aspirations to provide a more ambitious framework of vision and cohesion. Some Baptists have recently been commending this approach and would find it very amenable. Others would feel obliged to interpret it as a green light to seek vision and direction elsewhere. If this proved to be the final outcome of our denominational review, it would certainly clear the air, but for many it would be disappointing in the extreme.

c) Baptists could give official sanction to a period of experiment in creating alternative models of associating, building relational networks, both regional and national, and developing a wider vision with which local churches can connect. Such approaches could in due course be transformed into replacement of official structures, if they win the approval of sufficient local churches. The obvious danger of this approach is that some may opt for the new while others remain loyal to the old: innovations that are intended to reform the Union and Associations could end up creating an alternative Baptist Union. Such experiments cannot be prohibited, but we need to decide whether to give them official encouragement.

d) Baptists could embrace root and branch reform. There was considerable support at the Consultation for rapid and extensive reform. Many called for the immediate closure of every denominational committee that does not serve

the priority of mission, other than those that are a legal requirement. Many also called for a new Alliance of Baptist Christians and Churches, where membership of this missionary movement entails a relational and financial commitment to the fulfilment of a national evangelistic vision and strategy.

### **A mission centred movement**

What might it mean to shape a denomination around the priority of mission? There must be an adequate foundation of common convictions, an agreed understanding of the missionary task and a willingness to accept genuine initiatives of regional and national leadership.

1) Convictions. The vast majority of Baptists are evangelicals and many churches have been eagerly joining the Evangelical Alliance. Despite the claim that Baptists are anti-credal, the overwhelming majority of Baptists would have no difficulty in identifying with a National Association of Evangelical Baptist churches, signing up to the Evangelical Alliance basis of faith.

2) The missionary task. The Great Commission has not expired, and so we are still called to go into all the world and make disciples. Despite the suggestions of some good intentioned liberals, our biblical mandate is, with due respect, courtesy and sensitivity, to call upon members of all world religions to turn to Christ and be born again and the immediate consequence of saving faith is the baptism of every new believer. Biblical mission is always global and not merely local. It is also holistic: we need to affirm both the priority of evangelism and the necessity of social action, demonstrating the love of God in acts of compassion and in working for justice for the oppressed.

A good example of the inadequacy of the present institution is the complete inability to establish a national church planting strategy. The failure to establish a numerical goal is merely symptomatic of a much more crucial underlying failure: a complete and enduring inability to establish and communicate a national vision and strategy for mission, evangelism and church planting. These observations should not for one moment be interpreted as a criticism of any individuals, for I have the highest regard for those who have been seeking to serve the denomination in national leadership. My own conclusion is that the problem is the institution and not the personnel, whose vision has been continually constrained and diluted by the prevarications and hesitations of institutional inertia. The committee laden structures of the Union and Associations are driven by ecclesiastical and not evangelistic priorities - maintaining the denomination more or less as we know it, rather than doing all in our power to win the nations for Christ. The inability to set a credible vision is endemic: if we want such a vision, we need to face the reality that it cannot be delivered by the present institutional structures.

3) Believing in leaders. British Baptist culture tends to be instinctively wary of trans-local leadership. In some quarters there has been a sustained insistence that we want a national secretary, not a national leader. Because of an anti-leadership tradition, our General Secretary does not even preach at the annual Assembly. As a result, although many Baptist leaders have trans-local leadership roles as individuals and in various Christian organisations, as a denomination we have the unusual distinctive of being less than the sum of our parts. We fail to recognize, support, draw together and benefit from the many regional and national leaders already available among us.

As a result of the recent review, the superintendents are set to become pastors to local church pastors, which is indisputably an invaluable and essential role. But this development will explicitly remove our superintendents from the apostolic dimensions of ministry, in terms of vision, direction and inspiration. So where will our national apostolic leadership come from? Will Baptists be able to look to a national team of leaders who can establish and articulate a national mission strategy? Such a leadership team is not remotely like a traditional committee. We would need to identify key trans-local leaders from across the country, bringing them together for regular days of prayer, mutual support and vision building. Such a team would need to work in mutual submission, both in terms of the mission strategy and in terms of their own diaries, releasing time from other commitments for the sake of co-ordinated national mission and envisioning.

### **How far can we go?**

Baptists are quite different from most other historic denominations, because we hold much more lightly to our structures and institutions. The Union as we know it is a very recent expression of a much older conviction: the Christian church has dimensions that are more than local, expressed in wider networks of relationships, resourcing and vision. Our instinctive reaction should not be to conserve the institution but rather to preserve and find relevant new expression for our underlying convictions. Our regional and national structures are essentially provisional rather than intrinsic to an unchanging doctrine of the church. The present institutions are a cultural expression of our core values rather than essential to baptistic convictions. If the present institutions have passed their cultural sell-by date, we need to find the courage to explore creative alternatives more likely to be credible and effective in the 21st century. The institution needs an urgent transfusion of vision and dynamism. Our people will not rally to the sound of an uncertain trumpet.

Do we have the courage to reinvent an ageing denomination as a contemporary missionary movement? Do we aspire to ecclesiastical respectability, or will we reassert ourselves at the radical cutting edge of



contemporary evangelicalism, taking the unchanging Gospel to the generations of the 21st Century? Do we have the courage and will to break free from the quicksand of institutionalism? The answers to these questions will determine the outcome of the Denominational Review and the future of the Union.

ROB WARNER NOVEMBER 1996

**Rob is a Minister-at-large of Queen's Road Baptist Church, Wimbledon. He serves as co-chair of Mainstream.**

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## **AFTER ALL, IT'S ONLY THE BU!**



### **INTRODUCTION**

The Baptist Union Of Great Britain is of course a merely provisional institution. It is a means to an end and must never become an end in itself. It exists to enable those churches which belong to it better to fulfil the eternal priority of worshipping God and their temporal priority of mission. I say "of course" because I doubt that any would argue with the statement when put in quite so bald a fashion. None the less it does need saying. It needs saying because any institution, like the BU, which has been around for well over a hundred years can take on the aura of permanency. It can actually catch you out and get you treating it as if it were of ultimate rather than utilitarian value. Furthermore, emotional attachment and a sense of personal significance derived from one's place in such an institution can lead those with positions of power in the institution to resist necessary change for all the wrong reasons.

At a time when we are considering institutional reform we would all do well to remind ourselves of these facts. But what of Swanwick?

### **ON RADICAL REFORM AND INSTITUTIONAL INERTIA**

There were times at Swanwick when I found myself encouraged that things were being kept in perspective - for example there was a real ground swell of desire for radical change to enable more effective mission. And there were times when I feared that while what we need is radical surgery, we will only be able to deliver a palliative. There seemed for instance to be a very clear sense of the need to renew our patterns of co-operating beyond the local church. Few were prepared to argue against the contention that associations are not working as effective means of associating. I was encouraged. However, when I suggested in my small discussion group that, in order to get something that works, our best strategy would be to ditch the present

associations and districts to make room for something more fitting to arise in their place, I didn't get a very positive response.

Now this may be entirely co-incidental, but my group included four association secretaries! (all of whom, let it be said, were very nice people). It could of course be that my ideas are far too way out and wacky to be worth considering and I am prepared to be convinced - honest! On the other hand I couldn't help but fear that what I was encountering was only a foretaste of the kind institutional inertia and over caution that could rob us of any chance of getting the Union ready to serve the churches effectively as they work and pray for the coming of the Kingdom and the glory of God in the world of the twenty first century. Being asked to write this article gives me an opportunity to try again to get myself heard.

### **ON NOT FORGETTING THE CONTEXT**

It is so easy when looking at the inner workings of any organisation to become so enmeshed with the details that we forget the context. We can't afford to, so please bear with me while I take a look around before looking within.

#### *The Theological Context*

The church has two priorities: an eternal priority - to love, honour and glorify God and a temporal priority - to work and pray for the coming of the Kingdom. In other words, worship and mission. These priorities are summed up in the affirmation of Jesus concerning the greatest commandment. This sets the theological context for any consideration of reform, of the Union. Any motivation for the reform process or any attempt to analyse the outcome of such a process that does not give absolute priority to these two foci of church life must be thoroughly suspect. It is not enough to have a more efficient system for its own sake. It is not enough to save money for its own sake. It is not enough to renew Baptist identity for its own sake.

One of our problems is that we grossly underestimate the distance between the values of denominational life and the values of people in the pews - let alone people who wouldn't be seen dead in a pew. Some kind of institutional form is, of course, necessary but we kid ourselves if we think that talk of renewing Baptist identity or re-jigging Home Mission rules matters a toss to the vast majority of our folk. Many of them I would suggest are far better than we are at keeping their eye on the ball. The question we must be asking is, "What kind of union will better equip the churches to glorify God and to engage in mission?"

#### *The Ecclesiastical Context*

We live in an age when denominational allegiance matters less and less not only amongst church members but also amongst many ministers and certainly

in the eyes of the world. While much official talk stresses the importance of ecumenism what is often in mind is the official brand that involves commitment to inter-church co-operation from a base of denominational loyalty. This is light years away from where most people are at. One of the most significant facts of late twentieth century church life in the UK is what the sociologist of religion A.D. Gilbert calls *shadow ecumenism* - a desire for and practise of informal co-operation on the part of normal church goers which arises precisely because denominations are seen by most of them to be unimportant. What matters to most is that another church is serving the same community and of a flavour that they can relate to.<sup>1</sup>

I offer no critical observation. I simply note that it as an unmistakable and deeply significant reality which most denominations have noticed but few have come to terms with. This, in part, sets the ecclesiastical context for being church. Any approach to reforming the union that does not take this reality into account is whistling into the wind, and I suspect missing one of the most important things that the Spirit is saying to the churches today.

#### *The Cultural Context*

We live in a society which is in process of rapid change and according to many on the verge of a fundamental cultural paradigm shift. Late modernity increasingly rejects Christianity in favour of individualistic, materialistic, practical atheism. Early Postmodernity rejects all absolutes and but is open to spirituality in general. Both these cultural worlds which we currently straddle have within them that which is hostile to the gospel and that which is friendly towards it. Neither cultural world however appears to have much time for the Church as an institution. This helps sets the cultural context for being Church - a context in which we are asking questions about the shape of one institutional expression of the Church. A context that will shape how people worship and how we must conduct mission.

### **ASSOCIATIONS AND ASSOCIATING - A MODEST PROPOSAL**

Associations aren't working and I suspect that this is largely because they are based on geography rather than shared ethos and because they are institutional in form rather than arising out of voluntary relationships. I believe it would be better to ditch the idea of geographically based associations altogether rather than struggling yet again to make them work, battling in vain to develop a shared vision out of a geographical, institutional given. Such a vision would inevitably be of the lowest common denominator variety and be highly unlikely to inspire commitment.<sup>2</sup> If the ground were cleared, churches could be positively encouraged to find one another on the basis of shared ethos, shared vision and freely chosen relationships<sup>3</sup> In the days when we were a persecuted minority seen by the world, or at least by the established

church, as dangerous radicals it may have been feasible to draw a line on a map and ask all Baptists in the enclosed area to associate together. Today, when we are seen (to the extent that we are noticed at all!) simply as an irrelevant harmless minority such a hope is forlorn indeed.

No doubt the need for relationship to be at the heart of the new patterns of associating would mean that most, if not all would still have a regional identity, but there is a world of difference between allowing churches to find one another in such a way and at such a distance that they can manage meaningful relationships and being bound by a line on a map to churches where relationships may not naturally happen and being kept from others where fruitful co-operation might easily develop.<sup>4</sup>

### **ON LETTING A THOUSAND FLOWERS BLOOM**

Having found one another such churches would be in much more meaningful and viable associations. It would then be up to such newly formed associations to develop their own patterns of ministry and supporting apparatus. Ideally such new associations would comprise groupings of churches big enough to be able to support trans-local leadership together with adequate administrative support, which could then develop a team of ministries on the Ephesians 4 model. At the same time they should be small enough to enable meaningful communication and a sense of identity based on relationships. Perhaps I am talking about groupings of say 25 or so churches or groupings of churches whose membership adds up to say 1,500. But I would not want to be prescriptive, preferring to clear the ground and then to allow a thousand flowers to bloom.

Since, by and large, the only other people with the inclination to associate regionally within the denomination are ministers and other church leaders then perhaps the main purpose of regional associating should be the equipping, envisioning and enabling of leaders so that they in turn might be more effective in leading their churches in worship and mission. Furthermore, if it is true that in most places, most meaningful co-operation takes place across denominations and not within them (or indeed if this should be the case) then perhaps what we should be doing is actively encouraging this to happen. A simplified denominational structure comprising only union and associations would free people up to put time and energy into local worship and mission.

### **CONCLUSION**

Now I realise that this vision is much more of a Rolf Harris painting than an architect's blue print. The brush strokes are very broad indeed and there is much important detail that has simply not been dealt with.<sup>5</sup> But such is the nature of 2,000 word article. The question is, "Is it a vision that is worth pursuing?" If so then let's find away of working out those details. No doubt

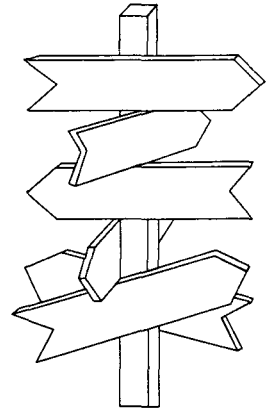
it would all be very messy - at least for a while and perhaps for a very long while. No doubt there would be a marked lack of uniformity and organisational neatness but I suspect there would also be much more life: life that was primarily relational, life that could focus on mission and worship, life that would leave time for other parts of the Church life that would be flexible enough to respond to our rapidly changing world.

- 1 Rather than denominations there would appear to be two main, broad issues around which people form allegiances, work to build church communities and form an opinion about churches, whether a church is orthodox / evangelical or unorthodox / liberal in its doctrine and whether a church worships in a formal / traditional or informal / contemporary style.
- 2 People will no longer associate on the basis of Baptist identity - renewed or otherwise - the renewal of such an identity may or may not be important but we must surely recognise that it is likely to remain the pursuit of an elite whose motives will frankly seem obscure in the extreme to the vast majority of those who belong to our churches let alone to the world at large. By all means let us continue the process, but let us not fondly imagine that renewed denominational identity will ever provide an adequate rallying call for normal Christians. People will associate on the basis of shared ethos and shared vision fleshed out in real relationships.
- 3 The existence of the Old Baptist Union as a none geographical association within the Union is an interesting precedent, if not quite an accurate example of what I am talking about.
- 4 It may well be argued that there is nothing at the moment to prevent us developing patterns of associating beyond official union structures. Technically this is true but the constraints of time mean that it is hardly practical to put time and energy into both the unofficial and the official. Furthermore, to ignore the official structures so as to pursue a more effective alternative is to raise suspicion on the part of those still committed to what already exists. The time has surely come for us not only to encourage the development of new patterns of associating but to recognise that if we believe this to be a genuine need then we must clear the way for it to happen without guilt and recriminations by setting aside that which is widely recognised not to be working.
- 5 For instance one consequence would be the need for an enlarged national office to take on more of the unexciting but necessary administrative functions thus freeing the local church for its two primary objectives of worship and mission.

**Glen Marshall is the Minister of Wakefield Baptist Church and, with Rob Warner, serves as the co-chair of Mainstream.**

# Where do you think you are going?

“Quo Vadis?” is the question and, after several phone calls and referrals to reference books, I discovered not the answer, but the meaning of the question. As I waited for my dad to search his memory for some fragments of long-ago Latin lessons, I couldn't help reflecting that it's not surprising that many people have little time for the church. Not only do we attempt to give answers to questions which no-one is asking, but we also ask questions that are meaningless to the majority of people on the Clapham omnibus.



But back to the subject in hand. “Whither goest thou?” was the eventual translation arrived at. Or, more colloquially, “Where do you think you are going?” Legend has it that this was the question addressed to the apostle Peter as he struggled with the cost of keeping faith with his Lord. It is the question addressed in these present days to the Baptist Union as the central leadership, apparently uncertain of the way forward, have thrown the debate open to the whole denomination. Maybe the underlying issue is as crucial to us Baptists now as it was to Peter then. Do we keep faith with the ways and wisdom of our God, as revealed in his Word and applied by his Spirit? Or do we throw in our lot with many other groups in western society and climb on the bandwagon of dependency on modern management methods and marketing techniques in the effort to further our cause? The use of the recent denominational consultation as a management consultancy exercise suggests we choose the latter way.

While I enjoyed the weekend, the drawing of pictures and the filling in of hexagons did seem a trivial pursuit in the face of the enormous challenge which the next millennium will present to the denomination. Nero fiddling while Rome burned was a possible comparison. Surely what we have to get back to is the pursuit and practice of a genuine spirituality by which our trust is firmly placed in the Lord, and in his resourcing. A genuine spirituality with an integrity recognised by all, a spirituality which is distinctive and discerning, a spirituality that deals with the actual realities of life today, and is not hidden behind the virtual reality that is often mistaken for the real thing.

Some weeks ago in reading through Genesis I came across a verse which suggests a way forward. Genesis 26: 18 reads, “Isaac re-opened the wells that had been dug in the time of his father, Abraham, which the Philistines had

stopped up after Abraham had died. And he gave them the same names which his father had given them." Isaac had been asked to move away from where he had been living and he had a problem with finding an adequate water supply. But he was saved from having to go too far by re-opening old wells from the previous generation. They were already in place, they just had to be brought back into active operation. Then his family could continue to live and to flourish in that area.

In doing this Isaac was practising a principle of looking back in order to move forward. He drew on the same resources that his father's generation had used, and found an adequate supply for his needs. This is a principle that has come alive in our own church experience this year and I think it can be applied on a broader level as well. The first "re-opened well" was the Baptist Union Declaration of Principle. One of the booklets sent out before the consultation contained a discussion of the Declaration by the Principals of the four English Baptist colleges. Having never really thought about it before, the different viewpoints made interesting reading. But it was brought alive during an evening service when I preached on the three aspects of the Declaration and they seemed to give the church a new understanding of what we were really about as Baptists. We were reminded that we are a local fellowship directly under the authority of the living Christ, and are answerable to Him for what we are and what we do together. That thought brought new significance to our church meeting the following week, a time during which the Lord clearly called us to set aside a day each month for fasting and prayer. An old well was re-opened and we have received a fresh supply of the Lord's grace in our fellowship life.

Other areas of the Declaration are equally pertinent. The issue of baptism was raised in a recent edition of the Baptist Times. The implication was that although the number of baptisms is falling, people are still being won to Christ, so there's no problem. Does the practice of baptism no longer hold a central place in our denominational life? It has always been a distinctive feature, and we must not displace it because of concern about falling numbers. The third feature of the Declaration concerns the importance of sharing our faith and witnessing to the Gospel. It is to be hoped that the in-phrase of "holistic mission" has not blunted the cutting edge of the Gospel. It was a cause of some concern that in the Bible studies produced as a lead-in to the consultation there was no mention of God as Redeemer or Deliverer. The God of the studies was one of love and mission, but apparently not one who has dealt with the thorny issue of our sin and sinfulness. Our basic need is of a Saviour, not a sandwich, although I am well aware that the giving of the latter might open the way to an acknowledgement of the former.

Our reflections upon the Declaration and upon the doctrines on which it is based were thus a source of encouragement to us. It was good to be reminded of the Lord's authority and power, and of our part in proclaiming the Gospel through life and word. The Gospel that tells us that we are a sinful and fallen race, but in Christ is a Saviour who offers forgiveness and renewal. It was disappointing that at the consultation this was given such little attention, because an opportunity was missed to warm our souls. The whole area of soul care should be what we're about today, because that is the means by which we grow and develop in our spirituality. During this year our church has been looking at some of the traditional "soul care" practices and is working to try to make them a normal part of church life. They include confession of sin, anointing, fasting, various types of prayer, tithing, meditation on the Word and the importance of meeting together. With some of these it has been a case of old wells being re-opened to become a source of blessing and of growth.

This is the direction which one small fellowship in the Union is wanting to take. The way of trying to keep faith with God's ways at a time when there is much confusion and debate about what those ways really are. We live in a difficult age in terms of church and denominational life. Many people are indifferent to the things of God, many are ignorant of the most basic Biblical truth. Converts are hard to come by and faithful commitment to regular church activities is not available in abundance. Many people barely have time for themselves or their families, let alone for the church. That is the reality of the age in which we live and it is hardly surprising that statistics show a decline in terms of baptisms and members. What matters is that we can face that reality and develop a strategy as to our response to it. A strategy that comes out of mature spiritual reflection and prayer, not one that copies what the rest of the world is doing. It is important to get the response to the present situation right, because if we throw in our lot with the wrong crowd then a lot of good things can be lost. It is no good clinging on to the latest trend, no good making a big noise and clamour about whipping up enthusiasm for passing bandwagons. Rather, we need to turn to our God, individually and corporately, and seek His face and then His guidance. Maybe at times we need to leave our agendas open, and corporately turn to God in prayer - not just asking for His blessing on the meeting, but seeking His mind on the particular issue. That could lead to a few surprises! There are many ways in which we could move more in the direction that Peter finally went. There may be a cost, but at least we will have done our part in keeping the faith handed on to us by those who have gone the same way before.

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## Editorial - The Growing Seed.

In trying to pull together several of the insights on the Denominational Consultation in this Editorial I would like to make three suggestions .... to all with ears to hear.

### 1) The London Assembly.

Could we use the London Assembly this year to much better effect by actually discussing together the Superintendency Report and the Denominational Consultation at it? And I mean really discuss in as thorough and well administered a way as we were all encouraged to debate the Inter Church Process. I am not alone I know in being impressed with some of the small group exercises the external facilitators guided us through at Swanwick and Bristol but in then becoming frankly embarrassed at the subsequent attempts to process those insights through Council's preferred ways of working, resolutions and all. In my view, much has already been lost in the process. The value of the Assembly discussing these issues fully of course is that this should add to the credibility and sense of ownership in our Union of these ideas and initiatives. *This means our booking to be present at the London Assembly to contribute to these debates of course. Especially but not only for Tuesday April 29th's programme.* My prayers are very much with the Denominational Consultation Reference Group who have the task of preparing the ground for the March Council. Please God this process will then flow into a helpful and exciting presentation for debate and discussion at the London Assembly.

### 2) Association Reform.

Before the proposed new task group on Association life group begins another major review in the life of our Union please can we stop and think? It concerns me as one who gave with others over two years full and demanding work to the General Superintendency Review Group (GSRG) that, in March, it is possible that a Task Group on Associations might be set up *before* the full implications of the Superintendency Report have been debated and decided. The point of the GSRG, which considered this option for over 2 years, *not* recommending an Association Task Group at this time was the view that parts of our Union are review-weary at present. Also that, if adopted, our report could be in and of itself the necessary catalyst for significant renewal and reform in Association life. Having personally over two years changed my view on this and having therefore accepted this new approach to Association reform, it comes hard to see new initiatives under way before meaningful discussion has even taken place. The temptation to just refer the decision



about Associations taking more responsibility in caring for churches on to a new Task Group will I am sure be a strong one. This will in practice undermine a significant part of the Superintendency Report and leave the Superintendents in uncertainty about their future role for at least three more years. Do we really want that?

Given that some of us have argued for significant Association reform for at least a generation it is surely vital that we now get the overall framework right before embarking - perhaps - on another long process of consultation and review.

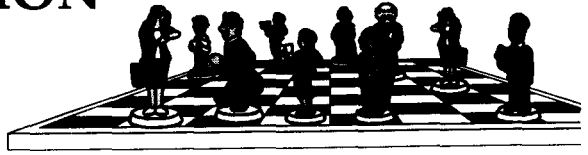
### **3) Timing and Mark 4: 26-9.**

Which brings me onto timing. *Did you know that some seeds can survive as long as 3000 years before germinating?* Or so Encarta informs me! Some seeds, such as those of the willow, are *viable* for only a few days after falling from the parent tree. Other seeds are viable for years — for example, seeds of the Oriental lotus have been known to germinate 3,000 years after dispersal. Each species of plant has its specific period of viability; seeds sown after the period of optimum viability may produce weak plants or may not germinate. Many seeds require a so - called resting period after falling from the parent plant before they are able to germinate into new plants. Among the members of the orchid family, the seeds complete their maturation during this resting period. In other plants, chemical changes take place during the resting period that make the seed ready for germination. Still other seeds have extremely tough seed coats that must soften or decay before water and oxygen can enter the seed to take part in the growth of the embryo, or before the growing embryo is capable of bursting through the seed coat. Plant growers who wish to shorten the period of seed dormancy in seeds with undeveloped embryos can often do little to hasten the process.

Germination does not take place unless the seed has been transported to a favourable environment by one of the agencies of seed dispersal. The primary conditions of a favourable environment are adequate water and oxygen, and a suitable temperature. Different species of plants germinate best in different temperatures; as a rule, extremely cold or extremely warm temperatures do not favour germination. Some seeds also require adequate exposure to light before germinating. Perhaps there is a parable for the Denominational Consultation process here?

**Michael I Bochenski is Minister of Dagnall Street Baptist Church, St Albans, Hertfordshire. He is a co-opted member of the Baptist Union Council and the incoming Chairperson of the Baptist Ministers' Fellowship.**

# CONSULTATION ON HUMAN SEXUALITY



## **Introduction:**

The starting place for our discussion is the recognition that our focus is upon Christ, the image of the invisible God (Col.1:15). My colleague at Regent's Park College, Oxford Tim Bradshaw and others have written:

The fulfilment of all creation is found in Christ (Eph.1:23; Col.1:15-19). Our own fulfilment, therefore, is not merely a private one but a communal, even a cosmic one. Both marriage and singleness in their different ways point forward to this fulfilment in the fellowship of God with his redeemed creation. In neither vocation, then, does fulfilment require or allow the exercise of every power or the satisfaction of every desire that any individual may reasonably have: a life may be fulfilled without occasion to employ the power of sexual expression, just as it may without occasion to exploit the potential for education, parenthood or mobility. .... Both vocations (marriage and singleness) in their different ways give equal expression to the blessing of human friendship, which is sanctified by Christ who calls us his friends (John 15:13-15; cf. Isa. 41:8) and elevated in him to become the fellowship of the Holy Spirit (2 Cor. 13:14). Every aspect of our common life in Christ, friendship included, has a properly exploratory character: understanding our humanity in him, we are freed from human constructs to search out and discover the richness of creation that is opened to us by God's redeeming work. This search finds its fulfilment as it is directed by the hope for the final appearing of Jesus, the Son obedient to the Father who will put all things in subjection to him.<sup>1</sup>

It is important to recognise that human sexuality is an emotive subject, which may raise strong reactions. A useful model to help people to own their personal experiences and feelings has been developed by pastoral counsellor and theologian, Jonathan Adams,<sup>2</sup> based on the work of Joanna Rogers-Macy<sup>3</sup> It uses the following pattern:

- i) introductions - each person shares an unknown fact about themselves
- ii) ice-breaker - milling around trying not to bump into each other
- iii) initial contacts - coming face to face with someone: first time, we try to remember the unknown fact that they shared about themselves; second time, look at them as someone who has told us that they are homosexual; third time, look at them as someone who cares about us

iv) in pairs, at first as speaker and second as listener, using the following starters:

- a. I first heard about homosexuality (or AIDS) .....
- b. At that time I thought .....
- c. What I now feel about homosexuality (or AIDS) .....
- d. From now on I will .....

We are now ready to listen to presentations of well researched information about human sexuality and enter into discussion as a group, because we are those who have owned their own knowledge, thoughts, feelings and intentions. There are no easy answers for us to learn and repeat, rather there are questions to be addressed by us as individuals, and by our church fellowships meeting together.

### **Background information (presented by David Cook)**

We need to understand facts about homosexual activity, and recognise stereotyping. Official statistics suggest that 1.5 in 100 women and 3 in 100 men are homosexuals, but larger numbers are found within a youth setting. This probably reflects gender confusion among young people. Many people question these figures, suggesting that there are hidden numbers.

In the shift to gain influence and seek rights for homosexuals there has been a move from the negative language of "queer" and "bent" to the positive "gay". The result has been that "gay" has become a negative description in the minds of many.

#### **i) What is homosexuality?**

- \* is it a desire or an activity?
- \* is it a stage of development in adolescence?
- \* is it natural or unnatural? - if it is unnatural then everyone is heterosexual; if it is natural then homosexuality is not a perversion but an inversion
- \* is it genetic; part of the creation order; part of fallen creation?

Homosexuality involves a total lifestyle; it is subjective - how people perceive themselves; it has a moral-emotive aspect - if it is natural it is good, but if unnatural it is bad. There are also questions of love, social pressure, and of control - do we have to be sexually active to be whole?

#### **ii) What might the causes be?**

- \* a genetic pre-disposition - but this is only one of a variety of factors that will determine lifestyle  
When people say "God made me this way," does this remove blame or choice?
- \* bad parenting or psychological disorder - problems of dysfunctional

- families
- \* psychosexual problems as a result of a bad sexual experience or sexual abuse
- \* the conditioning or curiosity within an open-minded society
- \* no one cause

It should be noted that the gay community would find talk of causes to be **unacceptable**.

### **iii) Risks**

Statistics suggest that homosexual people are more promiscuous than heterosexuals: an average of 50 partners in a lifetime as opposed to four. Although AIDS has shown a significant decrease amongst the homosexual community, sexually transmitted diseases are on the increase. This may suggest that a further explosion of HIV cases may be seen in the coming years. The answer to the risk factor is the faithful model of one covenantal relationship.

### **iv) Community**

Caring for people with AIDS has been a characteristic of the homosexual community. We see an example of a compassionate community bound together by persecution. The community has also taken a stand against discrimination; for freedom of expression in sexuality; and for a change in education, which conditions young people in a gender specific way.

## **Church, Sexual Expression and Society (David Cook)**

### **i) Questions for the Christian community**

- \* the authority of the Bible - do we pick and choose or do we allow Scripture to judge us?
  - \* interpretation of the Bible
  - \* application of the Bible - to all or to church
  - \* nature of sin - are there degrees of sin?
  - \* recognition of sin - discipline; repentance/confession/renewal and restoration
  - \* church response to homosexual people
  - \* admission of homophobia - lack of love
  - \* should a church member's sexual orientation be public knowledge?
  - \* what is acceptance - person and lifestyle? as they are or as they will be or as they could be?
  - \* what is the possibility of change - healing? - can a homosexual person become heterosexual?

### **ii) Sexual expression**

- \* what is the context of sexual expression?

- \* the distinction between sexuality and genitality - a sexual being; singleness (not defined by married people); expressing care and affection
- \* morality - is it defined by the practice or the participants? for example, is it wrong between two men or two women, while being acceptable between a woman and a man?
- \* how do we understand marriage? - leaving, cleaving, one flesh - does this only apply to heterosexuals?
- \* How do we understand chastity - are there different rules for homosexuals and heterosexuals?
- \* Or are we speaking of celibacy - a call to chastity for homosexuals is a call to celibacy, and celibacy is a calling of God (a spiritual gift)?
- \* Can we have a homosexual marriage or a blessing of such a relationship? If the church is concerned about promiscuity should the church encourage faithful, committed relationships, both heterosexual and homosexual?
- \* What about the nurture of children, adoption of children by homosexual couples, artificial insemination and surrogate mothers?

### iii) Society

- \* we live in an age of political correctness - how far should we go in being politically correct?
- \* tolerance - Baptists have long argued for religious tolerance. How far to we take tolerance - are there limits to acceptable human behaviour?
- \* protection of the vulnerable - who are the vulnerable in society? Should we have a greater responsibility toward the young?
- \* what right do Christians have to impose their morality on others? We need a winsome way of proclaiming God's better way to people outside the church.
- \* Do we have the responsibility to proclaim God's standards?
- \* What does it mean to live in a democratic society? - are there rights, or should we speak of freedom and responsibility?
- \* the problem of relativism, of recognising truth and falsity. What is the nature of an absolute - do we mean universal for all time; can there be exceptions?
- \* Can we proclaim standards and live with failure? - that is, how are we living out love? We need to recognise that much of the New Testament would not exist if the church had not had moral problems!

## **A psychological perspective (presented by Margaret Gill)**

### **i) Introductory remarks**

Yoder said: "Our sexuality is (includes) our ability to show love, warmth,

tenderness and affection in a genuine Christ-like manner. It is a gift from God therefore, to be seen as a valuable treasure." There is a need to distinguish between genital and affectionate; between physical-sexual and the ability to give care and develop relationships. The goal is to give and receive love. The goal is not orgasm but the capacity to love. When sexuality is fully alive it includes: a) relatedness - social; b) physicality - bodily; and c) complementarity - gender. Compassion is a sign of sexual maturity. Our desire as Christians is for the completeness of God within us - sexual desire can therefore be seen as part of our desire for God.

There has been a change in society's view of sex. The classical view was: procreation; contraception as a sin against nature; a suspicion of sexual desire; sexual behaviour as the touchstone of Christian discipleship. A twentieth century view often includes: contraception as a form of stewardship or family management; sexual activity seen as good; relationship rather than procreation; rediscovery of feminine sexuality. The story of Adam and Eve is told by a society that understands complementarity in creation, but does not necessarily make this the only way of relating. Adam and Eve had to be the starting point to produce children. But how the children later related might be an open question.

## **ii) homosexuality**

The pastoral issues include: secrecy; support; lack of understanding; acceptance as church members/church leaders; conflict between sexuality and Christianity; self-hatred or disgust through such conflict, which may lead to hatred of God; attitude of family; anger; guilt; not belonging because of non conforming. This is an issue that threatens to cause deep divisions in the church today. We are dealing with people who are really hurting - not only those expressing a homosexual pattern of life, but also single people and older heterosexuals.

Sexuality is important and we need to be in touch with our sexuality both in its brokenness and in the hope of perfection. Is homosexuality the unforgivable act or pattern of life? What is cultural and what is biblical in the arguments?

Our Christ-like concern should be for those who society and the church refer to as unacceptable. The rejection of people because of the expression of their sexuality is not an option for the followers of Christ.

As individuals we respond on three levels: a) rational/head level - what I think; what the Bible says; b) emotional/compassion - what I feel; my pastoral concern; and c) instinct/gut reaction - what I like; what disgusts me. We need to help the whole church to understand their feelings at all three levels. We may feel torn apart by this issue, and the easy solution will be to opt for "black and white" answers. But we need to find a Christ-like gentleness in our

approach to people.

### **iii) causes**

Homosexuality can be expressed intensely and emotionally without intercourse; genitally; by equals; or as transgenerational (not only paedophilia). There is a spectrum of sexuality and sexual orientation from 100% heterosexual to 100% homosexual. There are said to be a variety of factors that influence sexual orientation, or none. There are (speculative) developmental theories, for example those put forward by Elizabeth Moberly, which suggest a deficit in relationship with the same sex parent, who is not necessarily a bad parent, but is not sufficient for the child. There is also the opposite sex ambivalence - the opposite sex parent not meeting the needs of love in the child, with the result that the child does not trust that sex. Others have recognised a modern socio-cultural factor. Where there is a division between home, that is the location of intimacy, and work, which is characterised by "genderless economics," it has been suggested that homosexuality is a reaction against this polarisation.

### **iv) healing**

- \* is homosexuality a sin, a sickness or an alternative (normal) pattern of life?
- \* are we looking for self-acceptance or change?
- \* is it a matter of getting married and having children, or of finding identity, security and relationship with God?
- \* is it the acceptance and love of close friends?
- \* is it becoming what God meant or wants us to be?

Healing can be expressed as being encountered by God's grace and growing in that grace.

### **v) possibilities for change through counselling**

- \* acceptance and understanding - listening to the person and also to ourselves; understanding the journey of a person
- \* re-framing expectations so that they are realistic
- \* encouragement of strong single sex friendships that do not include genital sexual expression
- \* listen to compulsions and fantasies however bizarre they may seem and ask yourself what lies behind them and what they show of the person
- \* understand specific vulnerabilities such as bereavement, anxiety / stress levels
- \* ensure that counsellors have supervision
- \* knowing how and when to let go of what we have heard - handing over to God
- \* it is important to keep close to the Christ of the Gospel and to his



- concern for the marginalised
- \* it is important to know what resources are available, for example courses in the pastoral care of homosexual people. We need to recognise that our own views will determine what resources we will look for and be prepared to accept - that is, are we looking for change, celibacy, or support and acceptance?
  - \* running support groups may be most valuable
  - \* it is important to check out the expectations of the person, for example are they looking to change, or are they looking for acceptance and support?
  - \* one final note: the time taken to move from homosexual to heterosexual, for those who can change, may be as long as the length of a marriage.

## Conclusions

There are many important questions for the church to address. I should like to highlight those that I believe are significant if we give serious Christ-like attention to this area of pastoral ministry.

### *i) How do we understand the biblical teaching concerning human sexuality?*

What was the nature of the church and society into which the Bible speaks? Is it right to develop our theology from the passages that present prohibitions in human behaviour, or should we consider the broader biblical teaching about human relationships and sexuality? We need to find a theology of personhood, in the image of God; of the expression of our sexuality; and of ways of relating that help to fulfil each person in Christ-like maturity.

### *ii) What is the nature of human society today?*

Has society become more amoral, seeing almost any form of human sexual behaviour as allowable? Do we have a clear understanding of the "causes" or "pre-dispositions" for homosexuality? Are there differences between lesbianism and male homosexuality? I do not believe that we can begin to speak about this area of pastoral encounter until we have asked and sought to answer, these very difficult questions.

### *iii) Whatever the biblical and theological conclusions that we arrive at, we cannot deny our Christian calling to present the love of Christ in all situations.*

How are we to demonstrate the love of Christ? Do we offer spiritual, psychological or physical healing? Do we offer support, acceptance and understanding? As with heterosexual behaviour, will there be aspects of sexual expression that we are unable to condone? How will we as a church community react to requests for church membership, proposals for election to positions of leadership, or offers of help with work amongst children from

homosexual men and women? How will we support those Christians, who, although being attracted to the same sex, have chosen to live a celibate lifestyle?

We would be unwise to leave these questions unaddressed. There is a need for teaching, preaching, prayerful discussion, analysis and research. I believe that each fellowship needs to find time to think and pray about these pastoral issues, as do our Associations ..... and our Union.

- 1 Tim Bradshaw, Michael Banner, Markus Bockmuehl, Oliver O'Donovan, Ann Holt, William Persson & David Wright, *The St Andrew's Day Statement - An examination of the Theological Principles affecting the Homosexuality Debate* (Church of England Evangelical Council, 1995; available from PO Box 96, Crowborough, TN6 1ZG)
- 2 Jonathan Adams, *An Approach to Group Discussion about AIDS* (Wallsend, A&W Training Network, 1993)
- 3 Joanna Rogers-Macy, *Despair and Personal Power in a Nuclear Age* (New York, Orbis, 1982)

**John Weaver**

**November 1996**

**John is the Tutor in Pastoral Studies at Regent's Park College, Oxford. He chaired the September 1996 Consultation on Human Sexuality at which David Cook and Margaret Gill spoke. This paper is his personal report on its key issues and questions.**

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## HOMOSEXUALITY

### Introduction

The recent celebration of gay and lesbian people in Southwark Cathedral and the parallel vigils, prayers and fasting of Reform and its supporters witnesses to the strength of feelings and the chasm between different views of homosexuality within the Church. In another recent gathering, people working with homosexuals and dealing with the issues of sexual identity and expression which face young and old alike, explored these questions from an evangelical perspective.

There is no doubt that the Church has been guilty of ignorance and fear of homosexual people. It has supported attitudes of discrimination and prejudice. Such prejudice is most commonly expressed in false "facts" ("all homosexuals are paedophiles"), cruel humour and language ("bent", "queer"), and the stereotyping of male and female homosexual people. Ignorance about homosexuality partly relates to confusion over the number of homosexual people in society (estimates range from two to ten percent), and the nature of homosexuality: Is it a disposition or a practice, an attitude or an activity? Is it a phase everyone passes through with some folk getting "stuck" at that stage

or are only some people “affected”? Many within the homosexual world are keen to distinguish between *inverts* and *perverts*. Inverts are solely and exclusively attracted to the same sex. Perverts are attracted to the opposite sex but, because of circumstances or curiosity, engage in sexual activity with the same sex. It is unclear whether homosexuality has always existed and does exist everywhere, including the animal kingdom, or is simply an unnatural aberration.

The causes of homosexuality are equally unclear. Genetic, biochemical, psychological and psycho-sexual experiences are all propounded as the basis of homosexual desire and activity. While it is uncertain exactly what causes homosexuality, homosexual people argue that the cause is irrelevant to accepting them as the people they are. All of us should be hesitant about explanations of human being which reduce us to our genetic or psychological makeup without any remainder or are entirely deterministic leaving no room for human freedom, choice and responsibility.

Genital homosexual behaviour is a risky business. Problems of promiscuity, sexually transmitted diseases, and HIV and AIDS are not unique to the “gay” scene but are worrying features of much of that setting. The contrast of loving, faithful, committed homosexual unions seem rarer and more fragile.

The homosexual community is very much a community. It cares for its own in its help line advice centres, social life and, most strikingly, the support offered in the buddying scheme for those who are HIV positive or have AIDS.

Like the Church, the “gay” community can become a “ghetto”. Their ghetto mentality is reinforced by persecution and prejudice from the heterosexual community. They share a common platform of demands including equal treatment in the workplace, social freedom to express sexual affection in public and school literature portraying “gay” relationships as an equally valid alternative to traditional family roles.

### Moral Issues

For Christians the moral framework for responding to homosexual people begins with the Bible and its authority. Either we sit under the authority of Scripture, or we set up some other standard like modern understanding by which to judge Scripture. The debate over authority then leads to disagreement over the interpretation of key passages in the Bible, as well as “silence” in the teaching of Jesus and what this might or might not signify in relation to patterns of human relating. No matter how hard commentators try, it is clear the Bible condemns homosexual practice. Church tradition has supported that interpretation. Even those who don't like the conclusion have a hard time escaping from its inevitability. But interpretation and application are not the same. How to apply the teaching of the Bible also leads to radical disagree-

ment over the judgment of what is binding from the Bible for today and how that is to be expressed and enacted in the Church and society at large.

Part of the problem is the Church's obsession with sexual sin while apparently overlooking the fact that we are all sinners and that all sin is equally serious in the eyes of God. In Corinth it seems that formerly practising homosexuals were part of the Christian fellowship. Sin requires confession, repentance and the desire to live a renewed, different life and life-style. What then is the Church to do if it claims to love the sinner and hate sin? What discipline is appropriate for all shortcomings, and how is that to be exercised in the Christian fellowship? Does it mean debarring someone from the Lord's table and/or suspending or withdrawing membership?

In exploring the moral issue of homosexual behaviour, the degree to which that knowledge should be made public is important. Should the whole church be informed of any sexual behaviour which raises issues of discipline? The homosexual person and community plead for acceptance. Christians claim to offer the love and acceptance of Jesus but does this mean that we accept people as they are how they will be? Does this imply being committed to and taking seriously the person with or without tacit approval of the choices, practices and behaviour of the person?

There are theological questions of what exactly the Church is offering homosexual people. Some claim to provide healing with people witnessing to the change in their own life. But does this healing help people to cope with their sexual desires so that they remain homosexual by inclination but are non-practising? Alternatively, are we changing people from a homosexual to a heterosexual orientation?

### The Context for Moral Reflection

Christians need to be clear about some fundamentals in reflecting on any and all forms of sexual behaviour. What is the appropriate context for sexual/genital expression? Can and should we distinguish between sexuality and genitality?

Jesus was a man and a sexual being. That does not imply that He was ever genitally active. To be male or female is far, far more than the genitalia we have. The Bible expresses God's will for sexual/genital expression to take place in marriage. It also recognises with brutal frankness the way human beings fail to live according to that standard.

Jesus did live out God's standards. He was both chaste and celibate. All of us are called to be chaste, but not all of us are called to give up married life for the sake of the Gospel. The problem for the Church is in trying to help homosexual and heterosexual people live chastely. If part of the Church's

desire and God's will is to restrain and limit evil, some argue that the Church should support faithful relationships between people of the same sex, recognising that the alternative of promiscuous behaviour is a far greater evil. This leads to arguing in favour of some kind of blessing or recognition of gay unions. It seems that this is not quite "gay" marriage, because our traditional understanding of marriage is of a union between male and female. Many homosexuals are exceedingly doubtful if they should follow the model of marriage given the level of breakdown and abuse which happens within marriage. Once an "official" recognition has been given to same-sex unions, then the having of children, either by adoption, artificial insemination or surrogacy, is clearly on the agenda.

### The Church and Society

We are besieged by a society of political correctness where everything is tolerated, except those who believe in absolute, universal, moral principles. Religion in general and Christianity in particular are subject to intolerant abuse. This contradiction in the "liberal" mentality needs to be publicly nailed and refuted.

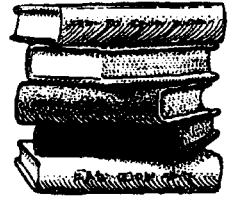
Christians are concerned to protect the vulnerable. We want to proclaim and live out God's standards but not to inflict our morality on others. Living in a democracy we are free to present God's truth as winsomely and effectively as we are able. In a setting of moral relativism, where anything is everything is acceptable, we need to stand for God's standards, remembering that they are His standards, not ours, and that they judge all of us, not just others. We proclaim God's will and way as sinners seeking to be obedient to God's revelation. Of course, we will fall short, and the Church will behave scandalously. That neither removes the truth and validity of God's standards nor means that we cease trying to live the life of Christ and to have His mind on all matters, including sexual behaviour. It is how we respond to failure and show the hope of forgiveness, redemption and renewal in our lives that give us a moral basis for sharing God's power and love with others.

**David Cook, Director, Whitefield Institute Fellow and Chaplain, Green College, Oxford.**

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# Review article.

Margaret Gill, *Free to Love: sexuality and pastoral care* (London, Harper-Collins, 1994) 266 pp. i-xviii  
£8.99 ISBN 0-551-02789-4



This volume is one in a series of Handbooks of Pastoral Care edited by Marlene Cohen and published by Harper Collins. Marlene Cohen states that the demand for pastoral care and counselling in churches is increasing rapidly and that often clergy and leaders are not equipped to meet the need. The books in this series are designed to address some of the gaps left in theological training. She recognises that religious professionals, who are under pressure to function as counsellors but know that their skills and knowledge lie in other areas, may take refuge in various defence mechanisms, even dogmatism. She maintains that understanding the Bible and understanding the complexities of clinical practice and diagnosis are not the same thing. "Making a faulty diagnosis, especially when God and biblical authority are somehow implicated, is the cause of much damage." A call to be a pastor does not necessarily mean the possession of counselling skills.

Margaret Gill brings her expertise as a doctor working in psychosexual medicine together with counselling skills and deep personal spirituality into her discussion of sexuality and pastoral care. For some in the church her position will be too liberal, while for others too narrow, which indicates that she is probably giving us a balanced view. The author describes the book as being about both sexuality and spirituality and quotes Richard Rohr in stating that at its core, sexuality is an expression of the spirit. The author deals with almost every area of sexuality that the reader will be aware of, and many others in addition. She takes time to warn counsellors of the effects of sexual counselling upon themselves as well as on the counsellee. Her own sensitivity in counselling care shines through in every aspect of the case studies and discussion. She stresses the need of unconditional acceptance in pastoral care, which she says is not a static quality, but by its very reflection of Christ's love for us, has about it a "drawing" quality of momentum and forward movement.

She continues: 'Our response to Christ's covenant love for us is long to be more like him and a willingness to be challenged and changed in the process. So it is with the unconditional acceptance offered by Christians in the power of God.' (page 214) Having expressed this important attitude Gill then helpfully defines boundaries and gives clear guidelines for when to refer

people and steer them toward professional help. Much of her advice and reflection is biblically based and develops out of, and into, a depth of spirituality. The author laments the church's tendency to separate sexuality and spirituality, body and soul. She says that God has forever made human flesh the privileged place of the divine encounter, but the church has for centuries separated what God has joined together, leaving the Gospel "disembodied." She challenges church leaders, saying that: '....a frequent complaint about church teaching is that it does not connect with our everyday human experience. That experience is located in our bodies and expressed in large part through our sexuality. The holding together of sexuality and spirituality is an ongoing demanding process, challenging us constantly.' (page 231)

Almost every page of this book has an example drawn from actual cases with which Margaret Gill has been involved. The insights that are presented, through both success and failure, grounds the whole book in reality. This is a balanced and insight-full work that will benefit all pastors in the care of their congregations. But, be warned, reading the book will not be enough; it will need to be accompanied by some straight teaching and preaching from such passages as Genesis 2:22-25; Song of Songs; Hosea 1-3; Matthew 19:1-15; John 4:16-26; 8:1-11; 1 Corinthians 6:12-7:40; and Ephesians 5:21-33.

**This review by John Weaver first appeared in *Regent's Reviews*, a bi-annual guide to recent publications in theology written by the tutors of Regent's Park College, Oxford. We are grateful for permission to include it here.**

REGENT'S STUDY GUIDES 5



## *Theology from Three Worlds*

Liberation and Evangelization  
for the New Europe

Michael I. Bochenski

**For publication.....  
April 1997**

Among the many books written on the theme of 'liberation theology', this study is unusual in several ways. First, it sets out to transfer some key principles of liberation theology, as they emerged in Latin America, into the very different context of Europe today. Second, in conversation with the Bible, it aims to make clear the links between liberation and evangelism, two concepts that are often fostered in quite separate theological camps. Finally, it asks the Church to face the challenges of the 'New Europe' developing with the European Union and the collapse of old-style communism. This study is wide-ranging, informative, deeply biblical and always passionate. It will be of interest not only to Europeans, but also to North Americans who want to understand what is happening in the Europe with which they will be increasingly involved as the new century proceeds. All readers will be helped to understand how the local church, wherever it is in the world, can develop an evangelism which is truly liberating.

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### The author

The Revd Michael Bochenski is a Baptist minister who studied Social and Political Sciences at Queens' College, Cambridge and Theology at Regent's Park College, Oxford. He is the Senior Minister of Dagnall Street Baptist Church, St Albans. His previous pastorates were in Cowley, Oxford and Blackburn, Lancashire.

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