

# A theological overview of NWBA.

*This paper has been prepared in response to a request from the NWBA AGM in September 2018 that we offer an outline of the “Baptist theology that underpins” the proposed changes to the operations of NWBA.*

## The place of the local church

At the heart of our identity as Baptists is a conviction that the local church is a full expression of the body of Christ when and as it gathers together. One of the defining Scriptures through which we express this is the words of Jesus recorded in Matthew 18:20

*“ . . . where two or three gather in my name, there am I with them.”*

It is the living Christ, present with gathered believers, that we believe authenticates our identity as the “Body of Christ”. One echo of this reality can be seen in the experience of Peter when visiting the house of Cornelius. Those who came together had no historic or structural connection with the Early Church, yet the Believers who witnessed their coming together recognised God’s presence:

*The Jewish believers who had come with Peter were astonished that the gift of the Holy Spirit had been poured out even on Gentiles. For they heard them speaking in tongues and praising God. Then Peter said, ‘Surely no one can stand in the way of their being baptised with water. They have received the Holy Spirit just as we have.’ So he ordered that they be baptised in the name of Jesus Christ. [Acts 10:45-48]*

We believe that when a local church gathers in the name of Christ, it is fully “the Church” in that location. Being “Christ’s church” does not depend upon membership of NWBA, the Baptist Union or any other ecclesial body. This is also reflected in our Baptist Declaration of Principle:

*That our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ, God manifest in the flesh, is the sole and absolute authority in all matters pertaining to faith and practice, as revealed in the Holy Scriptures, and that each Church has liberty, under the guidance of the Holy Spirit, to interpret and administer His laws.*

## The role of Associations

While all of the above is true, Baptists have always seen themselves as part of a greater whole. While recognising that we were not compelled to be part of any earthly structure, we have always freely chosen to work in covenant together. This was expressed by many early Baptists as a commitment to “walk together and watch over one another in love.”

It is this covenant principle, rather than the structures of Associations that is paramount. Yet we are also a Gospel people; we believe that God’s love was made known through Jesus; a living and visible manifestation of “the Word become flesh” [John 1:14]. It is the task of a Baptist Association to be a tangible expression of that covenant relationship, acting to enable and embody the commitment of our local churches to work together in Gospel partnership.

While this must always be our defining principle, as much as it is possible, the Association seeks to operate within the statutory regulations and frameworks that prevail. Our structures are therefore designed to serve a number of key purposes:

To maintain a legitimate and effective organisation through which local Baptist churches can express their wider, shared identity within the North Western area.

To be able to act as a catalyst in bringing churches together for support, fellowship and direction.

To provide the structures through which we engage with other Christian denominations and networks, as an expression of our shared identity in Christ.

To provide oversight and management for the staff and volunteer team, as they seek to provide relevant expertise and support for churches.

To enable NWBA churches to engage with other Baptist congregations in the UK and beyond by intentionally relating to other Regional Associations and the Baptist Union of Great Britain.

To enable local Baptist congregations to do together those things that are best done together and to support local Baptist congregations in doing for themselves those things that are best done locally.

## How is this theologically underpinned?

We might express the theological underpinning of our Association as embracing four key principles:

**Constraint:** Our understanding of the role and status of the local church constrains the work of the Association to focus on operational matters, and to engage with churches relationally and not hierarchically. The Association does not and cannot exercise authority over churches, except to enable those churches to engage in covenant with one another. A key element in our new structures is a greater emphasis on churches being supported through mutual relationship and partnering with local congregations in the appointment of staff, as an expression of that church's commitment to the wider Baptist community. This is a reflection of the words of Jesus:

*'You know that those who are regarded as rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and their high officials exercise authority over them. Not so with you. Instead, whoever wants to become great among you must be your servant, and whoever wants to be first must be slave of all. [Mark 10:42-44]*

**Liberty:** The operational aspects of NWBA represent a very small proportion of who we are as a community of over 150 churches. As outlined above, the task of trustees and officers, and the scope of our governing documents is limited to this aspect of NWBA's identity. Formal meetings and structures will always be kept to a minimum and serve to enable these wider expressions of our shared identity. NWBA has a proactive role in bringing churches together to seek God's purpose for our shared life, and in enabling this discerned purpose to become reality. This is a reflection of our call to be a Spirit-led people, echoed in the words of the risen Christ to the churches of Asia Minor:

*Whoever has ears, let them hear what the Spirit says to the churches. [Rev 2:7]*

**Order:** For all that the above is true, NWBA is required to operate in a way that satisfies the statutory requirements for an organisation of this nature, and so long as these principles are not compromised, we should seek to comply with all relevant regulations. This is the key task of the trustee body, and just as its authority is rightly constrained by our theological principles, it should take seriously this statutory role. We believe that this is no less a theologically defined principle, echoed in the words of Romans 13:

*Let everyone be subject to the governing authorities . . . . Give to everyone what you owe them: if you owe taxes, pay taxes; if revenue, then revenue; if respect, then respect; if honour, then honour. [Romans 13:1,7]*

**Representation:** There are some aspects of NWBA's work that do carry a degree of authority over local churches. However this is limited to acting on behalf of other bodies, that would be theologically defined by our churches' engagement with those bodies. This would include:

**Ministerial Recognition:** NWBA is invited by the Baptist Union of Great Britain to operate a process of Ministerial Recognition and mentoring for Newly Accredited Ministers on its behalf. This operates under the oversight of the Baptist Union, and NWBA has a role within that to represent local churches and ministers, as a reflection of our non-hierarchical understanding of wider authority.

**Home Mission distribution:** NWBA trustees have ultimate oversight of the distribution of an appropriate proportion of the national giving to Baptist Home Mission. The trustees give an account of this to the Baptist Assembly through the BU's annual Report and to our own churches through our own Annual General Meeting. Home Mission is a voluntary scheme, and in giving to it, local churches express their assent to its operational structures.

**Trustee:** Historically, local churches have invited NWBA to act as a trustee of their premises or other key capital assets. While much of this is now undertaken by the Baptist Union Corporation, this remains a potential legitimate role of NWBA. The theological basis for this is that any such appointment is made by the local church acting freely and independently of the Association. It is a further expression of the Covenant identity outlined above.

## Forum and AGM

While all of the above is true, we operate a further level of accountability that we believe is appropriate and theologically defined. NWBA trustees publicly and openly give an account of their work to a gathering of local churches at least annually. In recent years, in an attempt to make this more accessible, we have encouraged the second Spring gathering to be arranged and organised by local networks. While not every network has chosen to take this up, the opportunity for it to happen is an important expression of our commitment to operate under the direction and oversight of our member churches. We believe this reflects the New Testament practice evident in the gathering in Jerusalem recorded in Acts 15. While this finds expression in ways that inevitably vary with context, our over-riding desire is to administer our shared life in a way that *"seems good to the Holy Spirit and to us"*. [Acts 15:28]