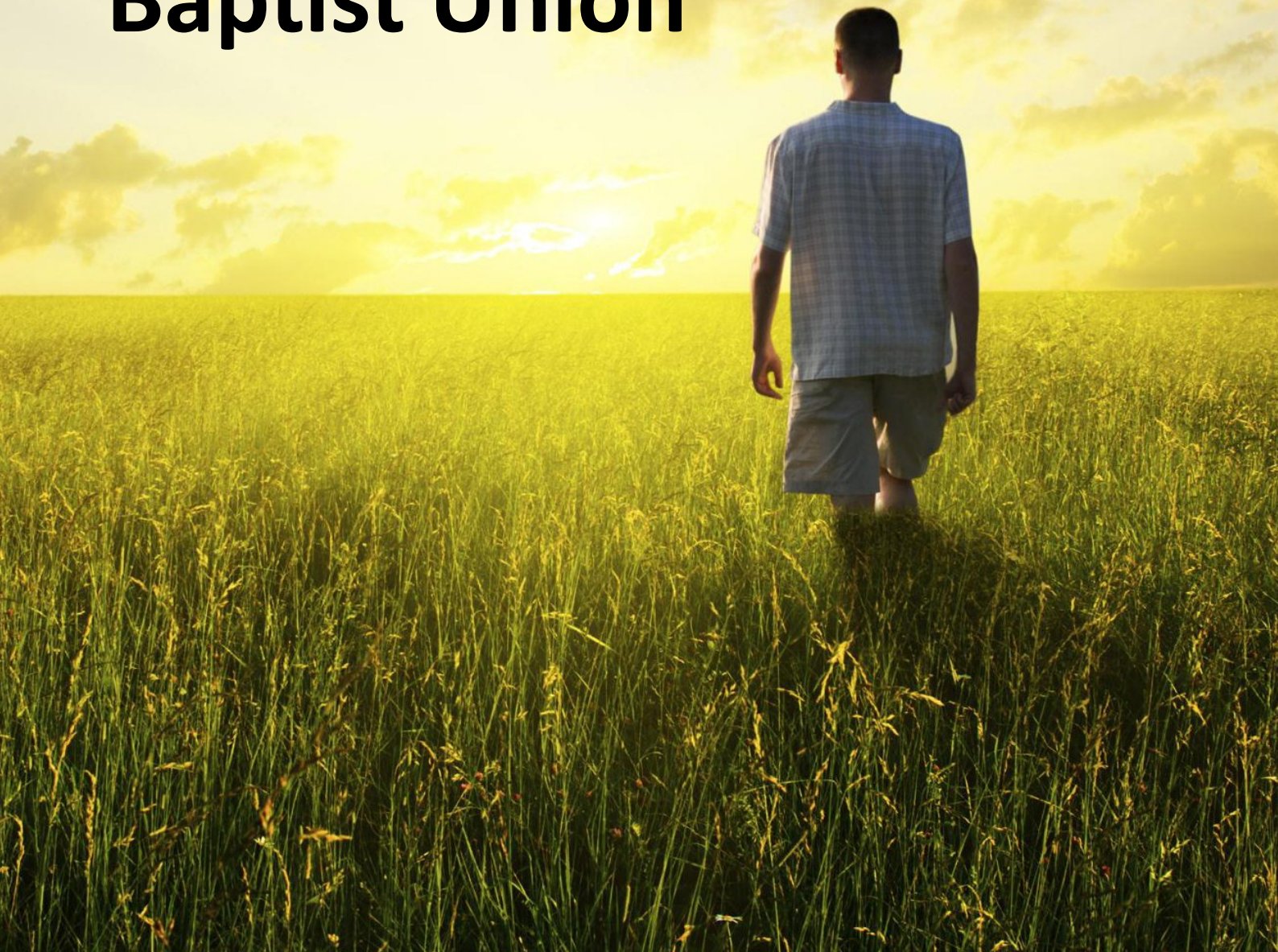


WORKING TOGETHER, SEEKING THE FUTURE

.....Listening to God and to one another

Our Vision for the Future of the Baptist Union





Introduction

The Futures Process was initiated by the Baptist Union Council at its meeting in November 2011 in response to an increasingly likely and significant budget deficit. While it was something that could not be ignored, this was seen as an opportunity to seriously reflect on what our key priorities should be in the decades ahead. Baptist Christians in the UK have been responsible and generous in their giving to the work of God's Kingdom beyond their local church, and it is vital to be equally responsible in the way that those resources are used. This booklet has been prepared to accompany presentations and discussions at the Baptist Assembly, to offer an update of the process so far. In seeking to offer a thorough and open account, there is an inevitable element of repetition, as it traces the development and refinement of various elements and ideas. For the sake of completeness it seems right to compile the narrative in this way, and the reader is invited to recognise and appreciate this.

It is important to re-state what has been true from the outset; while this process was initiated by a **financial reality**, it has never been **financially driven**. BUGB has operated a defined system of financial monitoring for many years. The Union has significant, but not vast, reserves and there is inevitable ebb and flow in finances, meaning that some years will generate a deficit, which is offset by surpluses in others. There are however key financial markers which if triggered, initiate a more significant and intentional alert and review. There have been a couple of occasions in recent years, when a projected shortfall has triggered such a response. Action has not gone further because in each case the final deficit has been significantly less than anticipated. The present review process is the consequence of that longstanding system of responsible financial oversight.

During 2011, the projected deficit reached the level where further action was needed. The standing procedure is to bear the deficit in the first year using existing reserves, while taking significant action to avoid the Union being placed in a long-term, unsustainable financial position. In any such circumstances, there is a balance to be struck between acting with undue haste and severity, and exercising responsible stewardship over the resources that we have. The financial procedures now being followed were designed to create that balance. The Union intends to operate with a significant projected deficit in 2012, while taking serious and responsible steps to explore how this might be reduced in the years ahead.

It is important to recognise that these events have not come about in an economic vacuum. Significantly reduced interest rates have seriously affected the Union's income from reserves, while an on-going economic downturn means that it would be irresponsible to simply assume that existing churches can perpetually fund any shortfall. Indeed one key concern in this process is to ensure that local churches remain financially sustainable by not placing upon them undue financial burdens in respect of the Union, Associations and Home Mission appeal. We also have to recognise that the world economic situation has adversely impacted Baptist pension funds, which is a situation over which there is significantly less flexibility. The concern of the Futures Process is not to make cuts for the sake of it, or to simply protect the interests of any existing element in our shared life. It is to seek as widespread and thorough a consultation as possible, ensuring that we use the shared resources that God has placed in our hands as responsibly and effectively as possible. The key concern is to best enable Baptists in the UK to invest in the mission of God, whether that is by direct financing of local churches through Home Mission grants, or by providing Regional and National support structures that equip and support them in their calling. Neither can exist in isolation from the other – these are not competing but complementary concerns.

Listening to God and to one another

Taking account of financial realities is not an alternative or side-track from seeking the mind of Christ for his people, rather we have asked what God might be saying through these circumstances. Many interpretations have been attached to this, the most prevalent of which are summarised below:

Theological: Rooted in the belief that God provides for the needs of his people, the current financial situation could be interpreted in the light of this; a lack of provision can be seen to signal the shortcomings of our present situation. The Futures review is therefore an opportunity to explore whether we have failed to be good stewards of that which has been entrusted to us, and whether we are investing our resources in pursuits that no longer align with the purposes of God's Kingdom.

Organisational: The Futures review has not been embarked upon in a situational vacuum. Several initiatives like the Presidency Review; Roles and Tasks Review; and the Association Funding Review are the more recent expressions of an inherent recognition that our ways of working have yet to become fully what we aspire for them. We have to acknowledge that the difficulty has often not been our failure to identify the need for change, but that our present ways of working do not seem capable of implementing it. The present financial situation has provided a renewed impetus and increased priority to addressing what we have at least in part already recognised.

Strategic: Questions have been asked about how our present financial systems operate, and in particular how we have managed to develop budgetary needs which seem so significantly beyond our capacity to meet them. This has caused us to acknowledge that there has not always been sufficient coherence between the setting of strategy and recognising the financial implications of that strategy. The deficit has exposed the need to explore ways of working that forge a much stronger connection between the two.

Income Generation: Although a six-figure deficit is significant, it is not beyond the means of Baptists in the UK to eliminate it. (It would in fact only require an increase in giving of £5 per person per year). However, we recognise that voluntary giving depends upon those who support the Union being confident that resources are being well managed, and put to effective use in pursuing the ends that have motivated the giving in the first place. Our deficit therefore can be seen as a message from the wider Baptist Community that our present ways of operating do not align with their own vision and priorities.

Any future way of working needs to embrace these realities and demonstrate that:

It is capable of continually evaluating itself against the purposes and priorities of God's Kingdom.

It has built into itself the capability of review, evaluation and implementation of change.

It has an effective management structure that properly fuses strategic and budgetary planning.

It demonstrates itself to God's people as effective and strategic in enabling and innovating their engagement in the mission of His Kingdom.

Initial reflections of BU Council (Nov 2011)

The Council at which this process began was asked to consider four key questions:

- (i) How is the local church best served by the wider Baptist community so that the mission of God is furthered?
- (ii) What principles should guide this journey?
- (iii) What must we do together as Baptists?
- (iv) What could we/ should we stop doing together as Baptists?

The answers to these questions (particularly 1 & 4) were collated and formed the backbone of a broader online survey to which all Baptist Christians were invited to respond. The following were identified as the key priorities for the future:

- **Effective formation and support of accredited ministers**
- **Equipping and supporting non-ministerial church leaders and officers**
- **Fostering effective and supportive relationships between churches and a sense of identity beyond the local**
- **Providing accessible support to churches in situations of crisis and difficulty**
- **Inspiring local churches for their engagement in mission**
- **Enabling pioneer and strategic mission initiatives**
- **Provision of legal and technical expertise in key areas of church life**
- **Development of mission resources for the local church**
- **The provision of a wider voice, for instance a “national or regional Baptist perspective”**
- **Encouraging ecumenical relationships and mission engagement**
- **Pastoral and professional support in times of difficulty or crisis**
- **Arrangement of grants to local churches for mission and ministry**

Over 1600 people responded to the survey. The priorities that Council had identified were largely confirmed, but the survey also allowed space for further reflections and responses. In particular a final open question created opportunity for up to 500 word submissions on any aspect of the Futures Process and vision. Responses to this, and some of the other questions, became the framework for the next stages of working. A particular concern was to identify common themes and resonances that occurred, and be open to unexpected and fresh ideas that those more closely engaged in our shared life may not have considered.

The online survey was always perceived as an initial stage in a much fuller process of consultation, deliberation and discernment. Many Associations facilitated discussions through their councils, ministers conferences and other specially convened gatherings. Meetings were held with colleges, representative groups within the Union, and the discussions were further enhanced through the independently established “Beyond 400” website, which provided a wealth of ideas and insights. A Futures mailbox has provided further opportunity for individual or representative submissions, all of which have been considered and received a personal response.

Key Messages from the wider consultation

Composition of the Futures Group: Concern was expressed that the constitution of the Futures Group was ‘*too insular*’, ‘*comprising only the powers that be*’, ‘*no outsiders*’ etc. This is an accepted criticism, though every effort has been made throughout to ensure that the Futures Group enables a far wider process of consultation and does not become bound by its own thinking. The criticism is unavoidable, and we would simply ask that the eventual proposals are judged on their merit rather than seeking to cast judgement on those who have been responsible for their compilation. Many respondents were concerned to see radical thinking, and the general consensus was that the financial shortfall should be addressed through more prudent expenditure rather than increased giving. It is important though to recognise that our key task is to enable the local church to become a radical expression of God’s Kingdom, not to give undue focus to the structures that support it.

Movement not denomination: There were a significant number of references to the nature of the organisation of which we are a part; in particular many desired for it to be a dynamic movement. It is difficult to define what was precisely meant by these comments, but it is likely to revolve around issues of vision, shared purpose and inspiration. Phrases like ‘*more responsive*’ and ‘*lighter on our feet*’ were common.

The term ‘denomination’ frequently appeared to be an implicit criticism of ‘structures’ and whilst the need for

some structures is acknowledged, this was not perceived as where the majority of resources should be placed. The survey stated that one-third of Home Mission expenditure was applied in each of National Resource, Regional structures and local churches. More than a few voiced concern that the amount available for church grants was so relatively small.

There was though a recognised need for national leadership, suggesting that respondents want to retain '*vision from within*' and '*a voice to the outside world*'.

Reduce the National Resource: There was a prevailing call to reduce the size of the National Resource. This needs to be read alongside the statistical data that people want a nationally accredited ministry to remain, along with nationally -located expertise in areas such as finance, legal support, HR, buildings etc. There was nonetheless a call for central organisation to reduce in size; the Mission Department and Faith & Unity were mentioned on a number of occasions as areas where savings could be made.

Associations too large: There were some comments that Associations are currently too large. This may refer not especially to the size of region but to the degree to which Associations have managed, or not managed, to connect pastorally and strategically with ministers and churches. Some negative comments about Associations were forthcoming, with respondents feeling they have little or no contact with them.

BMS World Mission: A significant number of comments raised questions about the working relationship between BMS and BUGB. There was no clear voice of how this should develop; greater collaboration was spoken of more than merger, though both options were mentioned.

Colleges: A number of respondents raised the issue of whether five colleges can be justified, and whilst its true that college financing is outside of the Union's direct remit, there remains a perception that this needs to be considered. In some cases this was more a matter of asking whether the colleges could make a greater contribution to the life of the Union, rather than reducing their number. While there is some possibility of this, it has to be recognised that every college also has an operating deficit, so there are considerations around their capacity to take on a significantly increased workload.

Assembly and Council: Other comments touched on the need to reform Assembly to become more deliberative in style, and that Council seems too remote, not representative of the churches or simply non-responsive. One practical suggestion was for a BU Council website.

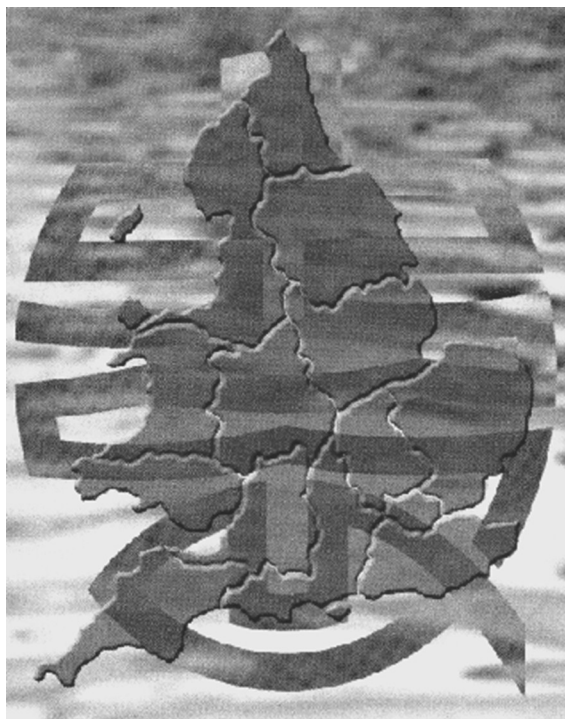
Baptist Identity: A significant number of respondents questioned whether there is a need for a Baptist identity at all. This may be recognition of the contemporary disenchantment with institutions, but sometimes the voice is for us to merge with other denominations, or recognise the value of better local inter-church (ecumenical) links. This is perhaps a symptom of a stronger call that also emerged, which was to revisit the principle of interdependence and ask whether this has been lost over the years.



A Theological Overview

These important reflections went through a process of refinement, and alongside this the colleges offered a theological perspective on the present situation which is summarised as follows:

1. Although the place in which we are now found might appropriately be described as a 'crisis', this need not imply that it is the consequence of human failing or divine displeasure. There are many positive signs, but a proper response to 'crisis' must always be to re-examine ourselves and our priorities. The financial shaking of the Western world in which we are implicated has made its impact upon us, and adjustments in line with perceived priorities are inescapable. The challenge is to turn what is inevitably a painful process to some degree of good.
2. In such a situation there is wisdom in retracing our steps. The 1998 document *Relating and Resourcing* laid great stress upon the renewal of relationship. This was seen as prior to and foundational for the practical reforms on which our work in the first decade of the 21st Century has been founded.
3. *Relating and Resourcing* founded much of its reasoning on a previous report *Transforming Superintendency* which argues that our experience of God as Trinity means that relating is part of the nature of God, and that God 'goes out' in love to others. On the basis of this, it affirms that Christian fellowship shows itself in the relationship between one congregation and another, and that this mutuality is an essential mark of the Church. This leads the writers of the report to call for an understanding of the Union as 'a movement of God rather than an institution of our own making'. Mutuality and relationship in the service of mission commend themselves as hallmarks of our future life.
4. We have gone some way towards a recovery of such mutuality, but this is an on-going task requiring constant reaffirmation, improvement and renewal. The present 'crisis' is an opportunity to re-embrace the need for drawing closer to each other, this needs to be high on the agenda. The challenge of the moment could incite us to do the opposite; it could be harmful to move forward if our responses lack mutual regard and support. It is a personal and common responsibility to be at our best in the challenges we face.
5. If the Baptist Union is to remain as the vehicle through which Baptist churches, associations and colleges support one another in their life and mission, those activities which foster relationship and mutual support in mission must be safeguarded in so far as financial stringencies allow. There are also technical services which the Union is bound to offer to churches legally and financially. The safeguarding of these two elements may offer itself as the basis of the review process.
6. Strengthened mutuality might also open up resources on a voluntary and participatory basis that are otherwise in danger of being lost. To what degree might the good will and dedication of people across the Union be called upon as an alternative to using services that have previously been offered on a professional basis? The present 'crisis' might therefore highlight the value of the relational substructure without which the Union would not otherwise exist; drawing upon it might also strengthen it.



Building on these Foundations

As various responses were considered, consultations took place and previous initiatives were re-visited, it became increasingly apparent that a key task was not so much to determine a new vision for the future, but ask searching questions as to why previous aspirations and commitments had never been realised. Some of these questions are reflected in later sections.

Relating and Resourcing makes clear that the essence of relating (associating) is not churches relating to some central body (association or union) but *'consists of churches relating co-operatively and directly to each other'* (2.3). The report called for a new start in associating, with churches encouraged to form local clusters or networks. It goes on to recommend that resourcing would be better achieved through the reorganization of our churches into larger regional associations. This latter goal has been accomplished. However, it is fair to ask whether we have really been as successful as we had hoped in encouraging new levels of relating at the local level. It is possible that we will need to make radical changes to our decision making processes if this is to become a reality.

In seeking to summarise a welter of responses, submissions and existing policy and values, BU Council affirmed that the Union should understand its vision as to:

'Grow healthy churches in relationship for mission'

This is a more succinct version of a longer statement that speaks of:

'Growing and nurturing healthy communities of missionary disciples in covenant relationship with one another in order to enable them to participate in the mission of God.'

Grow has been chosen because it suggests an organic process and so recognizes that this is an activity of God in which we participate rather than something within human power and control.

Healthy is intended to qualify our aspirations for the kinds of churches involved in our networks. We do not wish to grow congregations, large or small, that are dysfunctional or abusive. One of the ways we hope to achieve this is by maintaining a commitment to trained and accredited ministry while increasing our efforts to equip local leaders.

Churches is a significant word for a variety of reasons. First of all we are, and are likely to remain, a Union of churches, associations and colleges in which the colleges and associations exist to support the life and the mission of the churches which therefore have a degree of primacy. This does not mean that the local church is the sole or even necessarily the best agency for God's mission or that the goal of all mission is to increase the membership of our existing churches. There is room for initiative, for agencies that are a ministry of networks of churches, and for new forms of congregation and community which, for a variety of reasons, may be reluctant to call themselves churches.

In relationship expresses the considerable importance we wish to place on the churches of the Union understanding themselves to belong together, and indeed, in different ways, with churches of other traditions. Traditionally, we have spoken of this relationship as *interdependency*. One of the key ways this is expressed is through *associating* and we hope to enhance this by encouraging churches to form local networks which will have a degree of responsibility.

Mission is the final word, and this is perhaps the most significant. One of the purposes of churches is mission. Indeed we would assert that it is an essential characteristic. Without mission there is no church. However, we are conscious that many of our current churches are not really equipped to engage in all the kinds of mission called for by the social and cultural conditions of which we are a part. Sometimes this is better done by churches acting together to employ key workers. This is something we hope to promote. Our most significant expression of all this is probably the Home Mission Fund. We suspect that this may need a radical review covering both the criteria used to make decisions and the decision making processes themselves which can seem remote.

'The vision of a renewed Union that is being advocated builds on the best of our traditions, is rooted in the theology and the aspirations that were articulated during the 1990s and is an expression of the longings discerned in the recent consultation process. It is also consistent with the current strapline 'Encouraging missionary disciples'.

Imagining a new future

These are important principles and conclusions, but while they provide a vital starting point, they leave unanswered the crucial question - what do such communities of disciples need from a national Union, in order to fulfil this purpose? How should that Union be structured and organised? What should it do and what should it not do? Where are its resources best placed to achieve these ends?

The Futures Group sought to encapsulate this through nine foundational questions.

What **culture** will reflect and enhance our vision?

The arguments above implicitly recognise that re-structuring alone will not achieve the changes that many aspire to. We have to change the way we work and re-define some of the inherited attitudes, assumptions and patterns of behaviour that seem to epitomise our Union. Even where we already have mechanisms that are intended to offer support, somehow rather than enabling and releasing talent and vision, they appear to constrain and control. Wherever anyone believes themselves to fit in the Baptist community, there is often a struggle to resist an 'us and them' attitude.

How can we develop **relational interdependence** to undergird this vision?

Many have echoed the importance of mutuality, and comments in the survey indicate that we seem to have lost some of the associating and shared journeys of churches in the past. Association is not always synonymous with associating. Perhaps, as in the world around us, independence has become paramount and we need to find ways to enable the relational interdependence we need in order to be the church of God: mutual support, both pastorally and in mission initiatives, sharing of ideas and resources, being part of a family that is bigger than the community we regularly worship with, but extends sideways to others. It is perhaps also about mutual accountability – looking for best practice and welcoming peer review.

All of this is epitomised by a quote from Julie Aylward on the Beyond 400 website:

"I long for the day when covenanting together actually means that we value our interdependence more than our independence, our responsibilities more than our rights."

How can we work together better with **local leaders** to fulfil this vision?

While there might at times be significant support available from our Baptist structures, the well-being and effectiveness of a local church will depend far more on the actions and activities of its own leaders than anything the Union might do. Engaging local leaders needs to be a defining element in a Baptist Union for the future. By this we mean leadership in all its forms and not simply, or even primarily, accredited ministers. Words have been chosen carefully here – all too often it is imagined that this is a one way process – the Union is the provider, the local leaders are the recipients. But for the Union to be at its best, it needs to benefit from the insight, talents and energy of everyone within it, being the means by which their collective endeavours and aspirations are harnessed to become a greater whole. The insights, talents and energy of everyone need to be valued, inspiring them to share more widely across the Union. They in turn will grow through their participation in the mission of God through the ministry of the wider church.

How can we **enable local mission** to fulfil our vision?

Enabling, inspiring, facilitating, equipping, empowering, releasing are all words that have been used about the role of the wider organisation in relation to local mission. The task of the Union is to actively encourage local initiatives and develop a culture that implies 'yes' to new ideas; there is a balance to be struck between looking to exert undue control whilst still providing an oversight. There is a strong desire to become a Union in which people are able to grasp opportunities and go with what they sense a calling to do, without fear of being constrained by the organisation of which they are part.

What kind of **organisational structure** will enable this vision?

Earlier it was stated that a change of structure alone will not achieve the sort of reform that is being aspired to. But this does not mean that structures might not need to change too. Structures need to serve the vision outlined above – it cannot be defined by them. But we also recognise that alongside and within those structures, there needs to be effective leadership, and so we offer the question: **what structure and leadership is needed to fulfil our vision** of a new future? The term ‘flatter structure’ has become increasingly used, expressing by this an aspiration for the various organisations and groups within the Union to become an integrated whole. Within this, there is a clear commitment to develop a visible model of collaborative and collegiate leadership that is not seen as representing any component group within our Baptist community, but genuinely and visibly speaking for every part of it.

What kind of **decision making processes** will serve this vision?

Very much related to the last question is that of the appropriate decision making processes to facilitate the vision. There is much work to be done on this but some core principles would be:

That our models of governance and oversight support the vision of the other 8 elements and do not control or constrain them.

We seek to create mechanisms that can make decisions that respond quickly to change and opportunity and yet are considered and thought through.

We develop an instinct of trust in people who have asked to do something. If we believe God has called them to lead us, we should allow them to do so.

We should identify the most appropriate place for decisions to be made and enable this to happen. Wherever possible, this should be as near as is practical to the local church.

How do we **share our financial resources** together in this vision?

One of the clear messages that came out of the survey was an affirmation of the need for a Home Mission grants system. There was significant reflection on how it could be operated better, but the basic principle of sharing and spreading resources for mutual benefit and effective mission was strongly endorsed. We also have to recognise that Home Mission is not the only means through which the Baptist community shares its resources. We need to explore the most appropriate mechanisms to encourage generous sharing and strategic investment in mission.

How can the relationships with **BMS and colleges** strengthen this vision?

A significant number of comments emerged about the relationship between BUGB and BMS World Mission and whether there was potential for a more co-ordinated or integrated approach. Although there was no clear direction offered, comments were made about duplication, the potential of merging financial / communication / administrative functions, the benefits of sharing resources more, and quite a few about the positive impact of doing more together at Assembly. This is clearly something that is worthy of more consideration, both in terms of practical internal benefits, but also for how it might model a more integrated approach to our life and mission.

Equally, questions were also asked about the role colleges might play in our shared life in the future. There is an obvious need to recognise that both BMS and the colleges have their own internal governance structures that would need to be engaged in any on-going conversation. This is not a decision that can be made on their behalf.

What other **collaborations and partnerships** would strengthen this vision?

Another key message that came out of the survey was to question whether more of what we currently provide could be done more effectively by working with and/or through strategic partners. Particular mention was made of working more closely with other Christian denominations, but these were by no means the only examples offered. We have to be realistic and recognise that such partnerships are unlikely to be scoped and defined in time for November, but this does not mean we should not embark on significant explorations and discussions. We may also want to argue that there are some aspects of our Baptist identity that necessitate a uniquely Baptist approach. If this is true, the case needs to be well made and exposed to the scrutiny of the wider Baptist community.

Affirming our values

Before thinking about STRUCTURES and STRATEGIES, it was felt important to define and encapsulate the key VISION and VALUES that had emerged. These were offered to the meeting of Baptist Union Council in March 2012 and agreed in principle. These are offered to the wider Baptist community as the basis against which to measure and evaluate the emerging plans and proposals.

In many respects what follows is a re-statement of what has already been outlined. But it reflects the process of refinement and clarification that has taken place. In particular, some of the concerns above were recognised as defining values of **who we are** whereas other have more to do with how we choose to be **organised and relate**. Our values are rooted in our Biblical faith and also reflect some of the original Baptist covenants that continue to define our identity.

They declare important aspects of our faith and doctrine, but they are more than a statement of belief, we recognise that they have to be embodied and modelled within our life and structures. Our aspiration is that in the future, these could be deduced through observing the way we operate together. They may yet be subject to further refinement, but in their latest form declare:

We believe Jesus Christ is before all things, and in Him all things hold together. We believe he is the head of the body, the church; he is the beginning and the firstborn from among the dead, and that in everything he has supremacy. (Colossians 1:15-19)

Therefore we will strive to become a Union that places Jesus at its centre and its head; we will work to encourage and enable local churches to recognise His supremacy, and seek to serve him and fulfil his mission.

We believe that in Christ, God is reconciling all things, and calls us into all the world as proclaimers of his Gospel, and those who seek His Kingdom and pray for its coming. (Matt 6:10, 33; 28:19; 1 John 1:1-3)

Therefore we will develop a missional culture and work for this to become widespread and deeply embedded in church life. We desire a Union that encourages innovation and initiative, that celebrates, resources and supports the ministries of pioneers, risk takers and those with established ministries through which God continues to work.

We believe God pours out His Spirit on all flesh, in whom there is no division between male and female, Jew and Greek; slave and free. He has called us to be a Body in which every part matters. (Acts 2:17; Galatians 3:28)

Therefore we will develop models of deliberation that value voices from both the margins and the centre that together reflect the heart of a movement. In every area we will pay particular attention to racial, gender and disability justice.

We believe in Christ's declared intent to build His Church as God's key instrument of mission. We believe that in every place and context where two or three gather in the name of Christ, He is in the midst. (Matt 16:18)

Therefore we will develop our shared life with its primary focus to support, serve and nurture local expressions of church in all their forms.

We believe the Church is the Body of Christ and local communities of Christians are called to walk together in love and to watch over one another in ways known and ways yet to be known.

Therefore we will encourage and challenge local churches to work and walk together, for the sake of our shared identity, as a testimony to our oneness in Christ and as a means of sharing in our common mission.

We believe God calls, and will continue to call, women and men to service and ministry within His Church and the world, so that the Body of Christ may be built up until we all reach unity in the faith and in the knowledge of the Son of God and become mature, attaining to the whole measure of the fullness of Christ. (Ephesians 4:11-13)

Therefore we will continue in the recognition, formation and accreditation of women and men in Baptist Ministry, recognising the need to evaluate continually and develop our approach to recognise the leading of God's Spirit and the circumstances in which we are called to minister.

Organisational Principles

Alongside our values, Council has also affirmed some basic organisational principles. Whatever shape or form the Baptist Union might take in the future, there is now an established commitment that these values and principles will define its ethos and purpose.

Capacity for on-going reform

Many have called for change that is bold and radical, but we need also to recognise the **scale** of such intentions, and that the precise **nature** of such change is not universally shared. As new structures and ways of working emerge, it may be important not so much to consider whether every issue has been addressed from the outset, but that we have established a situation where there is clear **capacity for appropriate reform** as things go forward. It will be important to determine what changes need to take place immediately, those that should be addressed over a period of time, and to set some parameters to ensure that these are not overlooked.

Flexibility and responsive to change

Baptists come together in a variety of contexts, and we engage in the mission of God in a world of continuous change. In the light of this, we need a Union that can travel lightly and is not a fixed structure. In particular we need to be able to adapt at two levels :

Macro level: There is a common call to shift from being an *institution* to a *network*; this is at least in part a reflection of changing patterns of working in society in general. There is a need to be capable of tracking, evaluating and where appropriate adapting to equivalent shifts and realisations as they emerge.

Local Level: There are also regional variations and a variety of expressions of local church within our Union. It needs to be able to represent and engage with this diversity.

Financially sustainable

There is a need not simply to achieve a measure of cost saving in the here and now, but to develop a model that has effective financial review and overview built in, forging a clear connection between strategic development and financial planning. This includes a recognition that our ways of working and our key activities need to inspire local Baptists to want to invest in them. Within this, we affirm a very clear desire to continue with the national Home Mission appeal, as a key expression of our shared life.

A changed organisational culture

Many have expressed a belief that our present ways of working do not encourage and support innovation and pioneering as much as they should. In reality, they are more responsive than they appear, but operate in a way that seems to communicate something different. We have also come to recognise that many of the changes to which we now aspire, were anticipated in previous re-structuring. All of this highlights that we need to think, not just about the shape of things in the future, but the way things are done.

We will seek to be an organisation that is less controlling and more geared to developing and releasing the gifts of all. But we also recognise that a good deal also depends upon the instincts and attitudes that prevail within local church communities. In particular we want to ask what it means to develop a Missional culture and how we nurture an instinct within local Baptist churches to relate and walk in covenant with one another. This is something that needs to be intentionally encouraged and modelled in every aspect of our shared life.

Identifiable, accountable leadership

Leadership is a necessary element in any organisation; our justifiable resistance to hierarchical or unaccountable leadership, should not induce us to simply avoid it. If we have a shared vision, we will need those who can take us forward with clarity and confidence to realise it. If there is a clear perception of where leadership responsibility lies, it becomes easier to construct and maintain appropriate accountability structures around it. In particular we want a common recognition of leadership that brings together local, regional and national expressions of Baptist life in common purpose.

Clearly defined centre of strategy

While there will always be national, regional, local and trans-local expressions of Baptist identity, we believe that there is a need to centre our leadership and strategy at one recognised level, defining other structures and initiatives from this basis. This will require careful discernment as we seek to identify where the heart of our common life and identity should lie.

Local decision making wherever possible

As Baptists, we believe in the importance of local church, discerning in community the mind and purpose of Christ through its shared life. We have also committed as a Union to place the support of local churches, working together in the mission of God at the centre of all that we do and organise. It follows then that we should seek to keep decision making and resource sharing as close to the local as we can; only doing things more centrally when there is clear benefit and advantage from doing so.

Recognising and giving due regard to what already exists

While it is important not to be constrained in our imagination by present structures and ways of working, they do have to be taken into account when it comes to the implementation of change. We need an approach that is capable of being what we aspire to, but is also able to get us to that point from where we are now, in an appropriate way. This will mean bringing some activities and services to an end, or subjecting them to significant change - the need for a different future, does not mean that these have not served us well in days gone by; we must honour and respect this. As part of this, we need to recognise and explore the potential that exists through forging new working partnerships with BMS World Mission, our Baptist colleges and other ecumenical partners.

Developing a structure for our shared life

It is from this basis that we sought to consider the precise structure of the Union for the future. This is very much a work in progress, and a number of models continue to be considered. With a key desire that it should be **lighter and flatter**, three broad possibilities emerged.

A Centralised Union: One approach would obviously be to significantly reduce investment in Association life, concentrating our shared resources and activities on a single centre. Regional staff and structures would largely operate as agents of that centre, and local churches would relate directly to it. This is a workable option but would require a significant re-think and departure from foundational principles, such as those outlined in *Relating and Resourcing*, that currently prevail.

A Devolved Union: The obvious opposite is to dismantle any central structures, and for the Union to be defined as a consortium of the existing Regional Associations. While some shared service functions might continue to be offered nationally, this would be prescribed and operated by the Associations. There would be no recognised expression of national leadership or distinct identity. Associations would be required to largely replicate what is currently offered nationally, if still required, at a regional level.

A Provincial Union: Another approach might be to develop a merger of the above. This would involve creating (say) six larger regional hubs that draw together resources and structures that currently exist either through Associations or the National Resource. These would be equivalent to one another and together become the Baptist Union of Great Britain.

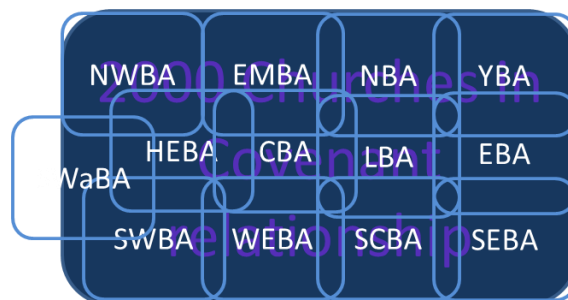
None of these models seemed to offer an adequate template for our shared life but they were offered to BU Council in March 2012 alongside a fourth **preferred** model. Council was given the opportunity to affirm or challenge the broad direction of thinking, and also to develop and offer any alternative approaches that it might devise. This process resulted in a further two models being outlined. One of these was not taken forward but some of its key principles were captured and commended for future thinking. This included a call to make formal representation to BMS World Mission with a view to exploring the possibilities and potential of a much deeper and tangible working partnership. The other was taken forward, and the Futures Group was tasked with developing this alongside its own preferred model. It was recognised that this might result in one model becoming increasingly recognised as the most appropriate, or indeed that some kind of amalgamation of the two might become possible.

What follows seeks to draw out the common components of these two, and to present them in the light of the thinking that has been outlined so far.



We begin with the core vision that the task of the Union is to equip and support local churches, engaging together in the mission of God. This has been recognised as the defining centre of all that we do.

We recognise that the local church is part of the mission of God but that God's work of reconciling all of creation exists above and beyond the Church. For this reason we have depicted those churches as existing within the mission of God.



Through *Relating and Resourcing*, there was a significant initiative to draw these churches together into 13 Regional Associations. These were identified as the key expressions of our shared life and the means through which local Baptist churches embody their commitment to “walk together, watching over each other in love”.

The South Wales Association is depicted as existing in part outside of the Union of BUGB churches, in an attempt to represent diagrammatically the significant, developing relationship between itself and the Baptist Union of Wales. This is a welcome element within these Futures discussions.

The key question is what expressions of overall shared identity, organisation and leadership these churches need. This has been identified as consisting of three core elements.

Specialist Support

Firstly a need was recognised for some specialist tasks to be undertaken on behalf of the entire Baptist community. These have been structured as three core teams, reflecting the key priorities expressed by BU council, the Futures consultation and other discussions and submissions:

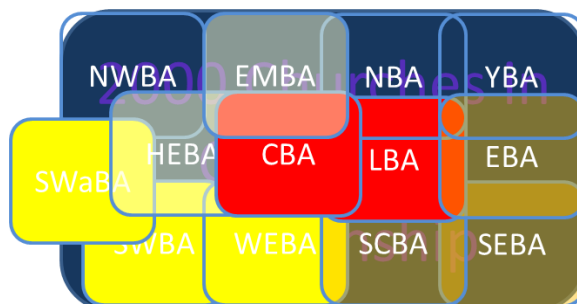
Ministry – maintaining a system of ministry accreditation and formation, and developing support for a variety of local church leaders.

Church and society – one key call was for there to be a “national voice” for Baptists in the UK. We developed this basic element to recognise the need for some degree of representation to civic society and ecumenical partners; to maintain some sense of national identity and shared values and beliefs, and to incorporate any aspects of mission that are best given national expression.

Shared Services – we recognise too that there are many valuable services offered to churches in the areas of legal and financial advice, publications and communication and of course the need to provide a basic administration to maintain the work of the Union itself.

Association Partnerships

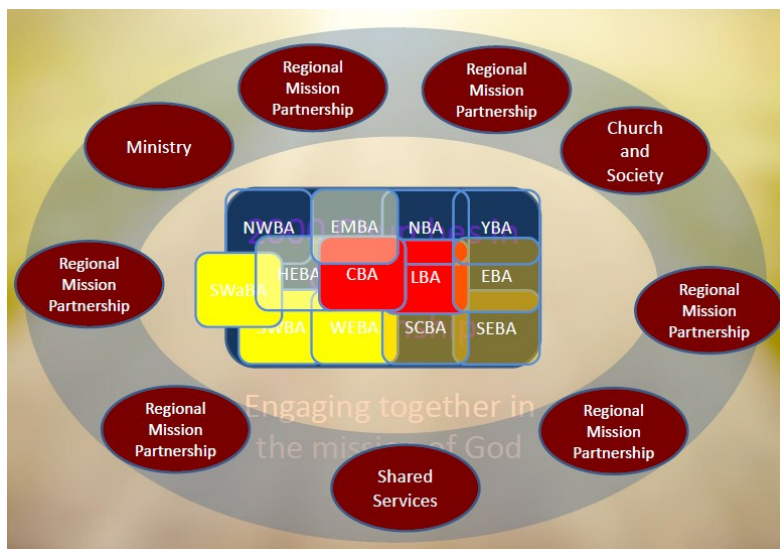
There is a growing recognition of the benefit and possibility of Associations working together in a more formal and intentional way. This has potential to become the means through which some key expressions of our shared life are operated and enabled in the future. It provides an environment that is locally responsive and relates directly to local churches but in which accountability and oversight can be mutually offered by partner Associations. One key element in the emerging proposals is that Home Mission resources could be shared and allocated through these partnerships.



There are many existing expressions of this but we want to explore how these can develop further, and perhaps be more recognised in the ways in which we are organised nationally. Associations have generally responded warmly to this as a principle, though there is significant discussion as to the precise nature, role and formal status of these partnerships.

(The partnerships represented in the accompanying diagram should be seen as examples rather than proposals.)

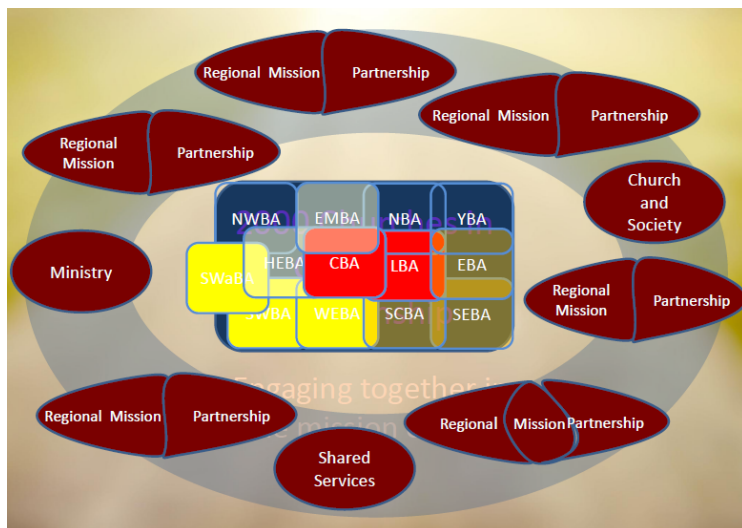
Integrated National Leadership



The third element is the recognition of a national leadership team in which the leaders of the three specialist teams work as equals with regional counterparts. This is a leadership that must remain defined and accountable to the values and principles outlined earlier. This includes issues of representation, accountability and subsidiarity. This is seen as crucial to the flatter structure that is being aspired to.

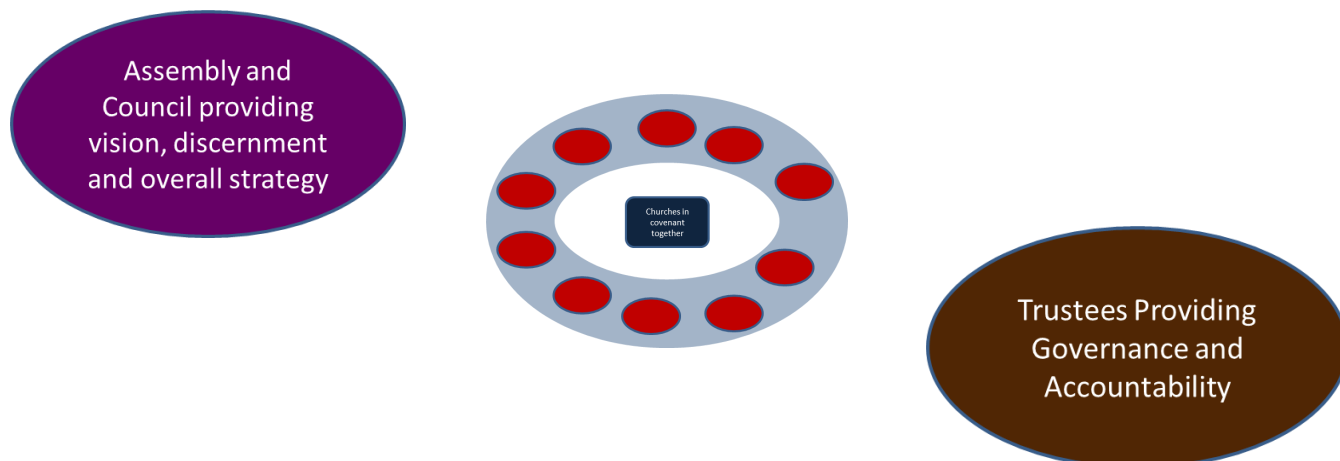
One of the stated organisational principles is that we have to take account of where we are now. There is a strong aspiration that the ideal would be to appoint regional leaders as mutually recognised representatives of each partnership. There is though, equal recognition that this might not be appropriate particularly in the immediate, and might need to be more a matter of anticipated transition. The reality, at least initially, may well need to more resemble the diagram opposite in which each Association directly appoints a Regional Team Leader.

It is this variation of perspective that largely distinguishes the two models now being considered.



There is clearly more work to be done but as our Union gathers in Assembly, this is the point that has been reached. Our prayer is that the deliberations and reflections of Assembly might put further flesh on these bones as we seek to move forward.

Whatever approach eventually emerges, it is universally recognised that there is a vital place for Assembly, BU Council and Trustees. Together they will offer governance and oversight, set strategies and priorities, and provide the benefit of a wider and more representative presence within our shared structures.



Cost and Stewardship

While we have been careful not to become financially driven, the inevitable question has to be asked as to whether these patterns of working will achieve the kind of cost savings that appear necessary. There is an obvious degree of sensitivity, particularly while plans remain fluid but careful, thorough and independently verified scrutiny of our finances has been made in the light of these proposed changes, that indicate this to be possible without affecting the proportion of our giving that is directed into local churches. What is perhaps more important, is that this is seen as an operational approach that has the capacity for informed and responsive financial review without losing sight of that primary purpose to

‘Grow healthy churches in relationship for mission’

