

28 September 2022

Dear Friends in our NSW & ACT Baptist Association,

We write to express our deep concern about the *Recommendations from Assembly Council* coming to the 12 November Assembly. (For the background to these recommendations – *please see the attached appendix.*)

In the past we, as Baptists, have found ways to be faithfully Christian and faithfully Baptist while navigating difficult issues. Our NSW and ACT Association has used the gift of our Baptist ecclesiology to work through societal issues such as remarriage after divorce and the role of women without disaffiliating churches that disagree. On 12 November, however, the Association will consider a process to disaffiliate churches and ministers based on another societal issue (same sex marriage) —something we have never done before, and something that will do untold damage to our Association.

It is important to distinguish that this vote is not just about same sex marriage. Many who will vote against this motion hold traditional views of marriage but also hold in high value our capacity as an Association of churches to be inclusive of others (ministers and churches) who hold differing views.

In this letter, Baptist voices give perspectives on why we must not allow this issue to damage our witness to Christ, our unity in the Spirit and our Association.

These motions contradict our Baptist values.

*Rev Ken Clendinning (accredited minister) - I have always valued our heritage which is why I am a Baptist by conviction. This heritage originated around such foundational beliefs as the Lordship of Christ, authority of Scripture, freedom of conscience and the autonomy of the local church. In the past I have also treasured an association with fellow Baptist churches who share our foundational beliefs and values and who can collaborate and support each other. Like any family, under freedom of conscience, Baptists may have diverse perspectives on social issues while still holding to those foundational beliefs. **To disaffiliate churches and ministers on the basis of non-foundational beliefs would be a denial of the very values upon which we have been founded.***

These motions will divide and damage our Association.

Rev Dr Viv Grice (accredited minister) – *These motions draw our focus and energy away from the centre that has long united us as an Association in mission, mutual support and evangelism, namely Jesus and the gospel, as expressed in the Basic Doctrines of the Association. Instead, they push us towards boundaries that can tend to divide us. **They also fail to seriously consider the pastoral and personal damage that will be (and already has been) inflicted upon ministers, churches and individuals in them.** Whatever view we hold regarding same-sex marriage, I believe there ought to be room for a generous spaciousness in our movement. Requiring ministers and churches to affirm these Position Statements will, I believe, be so divisive that it will likely result in an actual split of the Association*

These motions impact our mission — now and into the future.

Will Small (church planter) - For my entire life thus far, Baptist churches have played a key role in my formation. These spaces helped develop my voice, and in them I have shared it. I have written evangelistic spoken word poems for Crossover; I produced the Forming Church podcast for Gen1K; I have been a local pastor and church planter within this movement. I have sought to exercise my creative gifts to advocate for hospitable expressions of faith that journeys to the margins, as Jesus did. This path would naturally lead me to pursuing ordination in this movement and affiliation for our church plant. However, this vote could eliminate these options for me. **The voice I found within this movement would no longer have a place in it.** I urge you to vote against these needlessly divisive motions, and the way they will silence voices like mine and damage our witness to many on the margins, whom Christ loves.

These motions hurt people in our churches.

Rev Phil Waugh (accredited minister) - I am deeply distressed by the lack of pastoral concern this process demonstrates. It is a regular feature of pastoral life now to be contacted by parents who have children working through LGBTIQ issues. These great parents seek to wisely counsel their kids, also a part of our churches, in how to live lives that honour God and find their place in life. How does it impact our pastoral care when we debate this cold and formal motion every five years? Many will indicate their displeasure at this motion – for a whole range of reasons – including myself. **Whatever the outcome of the vote, the lasting outcome will be the message that these kids are not welcome.** Please leave the local church to deal with these matters independently and wisely.

Martin (LGBTIQ Baptist) - Like other Baptists, I know I have been saved by faith. I live out that salvation in my baptism, deep love of Jesus, commitment to scripture and the Great Commission. Where I differ is, that for all of my life, my sexual orientation hasn't been heterosexual. When other Baptists learn of this, the response has rarely been a desire to listen to my story or understand my faith journey. Instead, ***I've usually been shunned, rebuked, or condemned.*** Many LGBTIQ Baptists leave our churches. In some cases, Baptists have committed suicide as a result of the deep anguish and rejection. A rejecting stance also diminishes Baptist ministry to the wider community. Every time we close the door to LGBTIQ people, we don't show the love of Jesus who sat with, ate with and called as disciples those on the margins.

These motions will cause conflict in our churches.

Gill Fletcher (registered clinical counselor) - Voting for disaffiliation of churches and ministers requires a high level of understanding about the significant complexity of the topic, and the maturity to work through differences of opinion in a respectful and caring way. I hold grave fears that little, if any, education and consultation has been undertaken in churches to ensure people are fully informed of what is at stake here. What will happen when a minister and their congregation have differences of opinion on how to vote (both now and in the future)? ***What processes are in place to enable conflicts to be resolved in a way that does not cause harm to individuals and the reputation of the local church,*** not to mention the very real possibility of a significant split in the Association?

Rev Dr Christine Redwood (accredited minister) - I find it extraordinary that we are about to vote and say marriage is core to what it means to be Baptist. I find it extraordinary because I am a woman who is a lead pastor in a Baptist church in NSW. Our movement has no clear position statement that affirms women in pastoral leadership. I have learned to partner with other Baptists who don't believe women should be lead pastors. ***It is not easy, but I am proof we can live with profound differences.*** If these motions are passed, I will give up my accreditation. I fear other women will as well.

These motions make no effort to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace.

Rev Belinda Groves (accredited minister) – I met a colleague, who – until recently – had worked in other denominations, and he said to me, “It’s great to be a Baptist again – part of such a broad church.” And – until recently – I would have agreed! Conservative Evangelicals, Charismatics, Progressives – each of these expressions of Baptist faith have enriched mine. But these motions rob us of that breadth. They ignore the gift of our Baptist heritage that equips us to have difficult conversations, as we have in the past, and remain in fellowship. ***They disdain our unique Baptist witness that unity can exist without uniformity; that what ultimately unites us is faith in and commitment to the Lordship of Jesus Christ.***

Unless Assembly Council brings a new motion to the 12 November Assembly, the only way to prevent the harm these motions will do to our Association, our churches, and our witness is to vote against them.

If any of the views shared in this letter have raised your concern about Assembly making a decision of this magnitude, we urge you to send a full number of delegates to Assembly and to vote against it, because once the process is in place it will be almost impossible to revoke.

Sincerely,

***Ken, Viv, Will, Phil, Martin, Gill, Christine, Belinda
(and other concerned Baptists)***

Appendix

The NSW and ACT Baptist Association was formed in 1870 (as the Baptist Union of NSW) with a one-point doctrinal statement and an Act of Parliament of 1919 provided a firmer legal basis for it. In 1919 the Association had a simple eight-point statement of beliefs to which members were required to subscribe.

In 1979, the Association adopted a more detailed statement of beliefs and in the early 2000s it adopted a statement of values which was later amended to include a 'value' that marriage is between a man and a woman. The 1979 statement of beliefs and the 'marriage value' are theologically and socially conservative and many churches and accredited ministers were not comfortable with them. Crucially, *churches who were already members of the association were never required to subscribe to the 1979 statement of beliefs or to the values. Accredited ministers were required to 'respond' to the 1979 statement of beliefs but not to affirm them.* This is in accordance with the principle that the Association is not a denomination. Baptists are not hierarchical and local churches are autonomous.

In 2017 the Assembly Council began a process of exploring possible 'affiliation agreements' which could, among other things, require all churches to hold to the 1979 statement of beliefs and the values. In 2019 five churches put forward a motion that strengthened this push to impose greater uniformity about theological and social issues on the Association. Some key points in this history are set out below.

The Assembly Council has foreshadowed a motion to the 12 November 2022 Assembly that will, among other things, provide that churches will be expelled from the Association if they indicate that they do not (i) affirm that marriage is a covenant relationship ordained by God as a lifelong faithful union of one man and one woman and (ii) support the 1979 statement of beliefs. Similarly, accredited ministers who do not affirm that marriage is a covenant relationship ordained by God as a lifelong faithful union of one man and one woman or who change their views on the 1979 statement of beliefs will be discredited.

September 2018	The Assembly Council presented a 'possible affiliation agreement framework', which was discussed at the September 2018 Assembly. The framework included a requirement that churches affirm the Association's core values, including that marriage is between a man and a woman.
May 2019	The Assembly Council proposed further discussion of the proposed affiliation framework over a 12-month period, which would include appointing a Taskforce to develop resources on freedom of conscience.
June 2019	Five churches (Chatswood, Wollongong Castle Hill, Campbelltown and Newton) provided Assembly Council with a notice of motions. The motions, if passed, would effectively require churches and ministers that did not affirm the core values to be expelled from the association (for churches) or discredited (for ministers). A key concern of these churches was churches or ministers not holding that marriage is only between a man and a woman.
February 2021	<p>A special assembly meeting voted in favour of motions (in slightly amended form) brought by the - now four - churches. Churches would be required to sign a statement affirming the core values (including that marriage is between a man and a woman) every five years on pain of expulsion. Ministers would be required to sign a statement affirming the core values (including that marriage is between a man and a woman) every year on pain of discreditation.</p> <p>More than a third of delegates voted against the motions.</p>
August 2022	Assembly Council convened a forum to discuss draft proposals for implementing the motions passed at the special assembly of February 2021.
12 November 2022	Assembly will vote on motions brought by Assembly Council to implement the motions passed at the special assembly of February 2021.