

Dear Friends,

On Sunday at church, we shared the very sad news that Assembly Council had written on Friday (28 March) to tell us they would be recommending the church be disaffiliated at the upcoming May Assembly (on the afternoon of Saturday 3 May). Hamilton Baptist has also received this letter and Assembly Council are still in conversation with Seaforth Baptist.

It was the result we'd been anticipating, but it was a shock to see the words on the page. If you are anything like me there has always been a part of you that cannot believe this is how our Baptist family would treat us.

One of the young adults reflected after the service, *"I feel really sad about what is happening, but I know we are feeling sad for the right reasons!"*

This week also marks the deadline for pastors to submit their *Continuing Ministry Development* forms which for the first time include supplementary questions asking them to state their support, or not, for the Association's Position Statements (particularly the only one that seems to matter – the Position Statement on Marriage).

While it was disheartening to receive the email from Assembly Council, it has been incredibly encouraging to read the statements some of the pastors, connected to Open Baptists, have written to explain why they will not sign.

Here's Mark Beresford's statement (with thanks to Mark for allowing me to share it):

As a Baptist I object to being asked to sign these statements given that they are now being employed in an unprecedented way to limit freedom of theological conversation and conviction within the Baptist Association of NSW & ACT for this generation and future generations. In addition to this I object to the notion of a 'settled position'. At our best we are always in conversation with our unfolding knowledge of scripture, one another, the universe, and the Spirit of God. I do not believe this implies that the most faithful position is to revert to legalism or to not act out of fear. The most faithful position is to listen, learn, and love.

At this point I consider an openness to a broader understanding of marriage that would include same-sex relationships to be helpful to those experiencing same-sex attraction and who are not able to adopt a celibate, nor willing to participate in (or continue in) a promiscuous, lifestyle. I also consider such openness to be conducive to our mission of communicating the radical love demonstrated in the person of Jesus to a broken and hurting world. The current stance of the Association is clearly a hinderance to this call. Although I have never been asked, I believe I would be willing, if acting in a context it was legal, to conduct a same-sex marriage.

This is not a place I have arrived at lightly and has come at some cost. I have examined scripture and am not persuaded that the Greek parallels what the modern term 'homosexual' refers to. I do not believe there is a concept of orientation, let alone one that is understood, in either the ancient world or the biblical texts. In

addition, given what we know of the experience of same-sex oriented people, the shame and secrecy is profoundly damaging. As a school chaplain I was called on too often to counsel after suicide attempts that I have reason to believe related to such shame and rejection - whether perceived or true. Sadly, I am not alone in this. I am no longer willing to defend traditional interpretations of scripture around this issue. Such asking whether there is more (or less) than previously thought in the texts is both faithful to the Bible, and a relatively conservative position on the authority of scripture.

The conversation across our Association over the past few years has confirmed and strengthened my desire to be in a truly Baptist context where the freedom of conscience and independence of the local church is respected and defended. Sadly, I fear the request in this section indicates that this value, which has guided the Association through over 100 years of controversies, is now in grave danger.

And this beautiful statement from Emma Walsh (who has also given me leave to share it) who was at college with me (and David Deal).

I can no longer say that I support the Baptist Association in its current form. Recent changes have left me questioning what remains that is distinctly Baptist. I see a dilution of our teaching, practice, and identity.

Historically, Baptists have shared core theological principles while allowing space for deep theological reflection, discussion, and even disagreement on various theological and social issues—such as divorce, the role of women, or slavery in earlier times. Central to this has been our commitment to liberty of conscience and the autonomy of the local church. These principles have allowed us to hold different theological positions while remaining united in faith.

For example, Baptist churches today hold differing views on women in leadership. While I personally disagree with those who oppose women in leadership, I have always defended their right to hold that position within a Baptist framework.

That is what it means to be Baptist—to allow space for differing convictions while remaining bound together in our shared faith.

Yet today, for the first time, we are being asked to conform to a single settled position on a social issue—in this case, same-sex marriage. This deeply concerns me. Not just because of my current theological understanding regarding same sex marriage but because Baptist theology has never been about rigid, unchanging positions. Rather, it is a faith that grows through prayer, reflection, study, and the guidance of the Holy Spirit. My own theological understanding is not what it was 20 years ago, nor should it be, nor will it be the same in 10 years' time. Faith is a journey of continual growth, learning, and transformation.

The current discussions, decisions, and actions within the Baptist Association do not reflect the Baptist values I was raised with and have upheld for nearly 20 years in ministry. To be truly Baptist means embracing the challenges of faith—even when it

is difficult. It means upholding liberty of conscience and local church autonomy, trusting that the Spirit will move in the space we create for open and faithful discernment.

I remain committed to these Baptist distinctives—not out of nostalgia, but because they reflect a faith that is alive, growing, and responsive to the movement of God.

I was particularly moved by Mark's words, *"the most faithful position is to listen, learn and love."* And how Emma expressed this *"Faith is a journey of continual growth, learning and transformation."* As another pastor on the Open Baptists WhatsApp group commented, *"If it is not, then can it even be called faith?"*

Over the next few weeks, the deacons are planning several opportunities for the church to gather and reflect on this process (over the past 6 years), provide feedback on our approach for the 3 May 2024, and think about how we support ourselves and others during this difficult time. These opportunities will be listed in the bulletin.

As was mentioned in last week's bulletin, people will be able to attend Assembly (as voting and non-voting members) at Hughes Baptist Church live site. We would very much like to have a strong and supportive group from our church there on this day. You can register on the Association website here

– https://brushfire.com/nswactbaptists/thegatheringincorporatingtheannualassemblygather/598465#msdyntrid=ViPGNf_2AuAEmwDRJ2T6lwzpJsxl9o6hg_Q2ddPaPY

Please be aware that you will be asked to agree with these conditions* and if you are a non-voting member you simply indicate in the drop-down menu under 'Appointment to Assembly' – "I confirm I am an Attendee (Non-Voting)."

"Make every effort to keep the unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace," says Ephesians 4:3. We are deeply grieved by what is happening in our Association and we know that the Holy Spirit is grieved alongside us, but we are grieved, to borrow the comment from earlier, for the right reasons - because we regard both our Christian unity and our Baptist freedom of conscience as precious, and as not mutually exclusive.

Grace and peace to you all in this difficult time,

Belinda