

The Faith and Unity Executive Committee
Doctrine and Worship Committee

**The Nature of the Assembly
and the Council of the
Baptist Union of Great Britain**



THE BAPTIST UNION
OF GREAT BRITAIN

The Nature of the Assembly and the Council of the Baptist Union of Great Britain

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Foreword

When Keith Jones and I attended the twelve Area Listening Days in 1991, an exercise which will be repeated in the early part of 1995, we heard a cross-section of views on the future direction of the Baptist Union. Repeatedly we heard the plea that the Union should initiate a long overdue theological examination of its life and structures.

We have a strong doctrine of the local church which needs to be preserved and cherished, and a fresh generation of 'new' Baptists need to be initiated into a deeper commitment to these truths. But there is life beyond the local church and we need to face the challenging comment of Dr H Wheeler Robinson:

In some matters the independence of the local church is a valuable safeguard of the Christian liberties. But it can easily become a form of selfishness alien to the Spirit of the Body of Christ and far from the teaching and example of the New Testament.

This document is commended by the Baptist Union Council in the hope that this generation of Churches, Associations and Colleges will explore the central issue of how we wish to organise ourselves in covenant fellowship, ministry and mission beyond the local church.

Why bother with an exercise that may appear at first sight to be a diversion from the central task of spreading the good news of the gospel? Because we need to become more like the Church Jesus Christ intended. This is not done in isolation from our friends in other denominations. Together we are involved in the task of making the Church more effective in offering a picture to a broken world of what God means by community in Christ.

I have said on numerous occasions that the best long-term contribution Baptists can make in the Decade of Evangelism is to renew

our understanding of what it means to be the Church of Jesus Christ, and then express this with spiritually dynamic models of the church.

As one who has served as a local pastor, I am aware that the issues of this paper are not always top of the agenda items for the local church but I hope that during the coming months you will set time aside for discussion. We need your insight and contribution. May I suggest you note the following:

1. Please send me your comments and findings not later than 31 December 1994.
2. The Green Paper on the Restructuring of the Baptist Union Council should be read in conjunction with this document.

We are a people who belong to the rock and the river tradition. There are gospel truths which are a rock-solid foundation of our faith and we are called to guard them as a precious heritage. But we are also a people who are open to the swift river currents of God's dynamic activity among us, the God who makes all things new.

I believe this is a rock and river debate and I offer you the encouragement of one of my predecessors, Dr E A Payne,

The final court of appeal for Baptist has been neither to church pronouncements, nor to history and tradition as such, but to the conscience of the church inspired by the Spirit of God as a result of the study of the Bible.

David Coffey
General Secretary

I. Towards a theology of union

1. Three helpful concepts

The Church has its origin in the call of God, summoning people to share in his own mission in the world. Among the concepts which Biblical writers use to explore God's purpose in so forming his Church are those of *covenant*, *fellowship* (*koinonia*) and *body*, and we shall find these especially helpful in seeking to understand the theological basis of union between Christian churches in general, and Baptist churches in particular.

God takes the initiative in calling people into *covenant* loyalty to him, promising to bless them so that they may be a blessing to others (Gen 12:1-3, 17:1-8); they are not chosen as his covenant people for their own sake or as a matter of privilege, but so that God may use them to invite all into fullness of life. Beginning from Abraham, the Old Testament story traces the history of God's calling and the obedience or tragic lack of response of his people to it. Finally in the person of Jesus Christ God's Word is made incarnate and is perfectly united with human obedience; through his life, atoning death, resurrection and sending of the Spirit at Pentecost Christ forms the new covenant community of the Church.

Seeing displayed the relationship between Christ the true Son and his heavenly Father in the power of the Spirit, we understand that the life into which God calls all creation is nothing less than a sharing in the fellowship (*koinonia*) which he enjoys within his own triune being. The Church is thus a foretaste of this eternal communion of love, and bears witness to it in a broken world. But it can only share in God's mission in this way because it is indwelt by the same Holy Spirit who empowered Christ in his ministry; so the Church is the *Body* of Christ in the world, making visible the personality of the risen Christ as Christ served others through his physical body during his earthly life. Touching the hands of the Church, people touch Christ and are transformed by him, accepted into the fellowship that exists between Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Yet the mission of God is larger than the Church, as the Kingdom of God (the rule of God) is larger than the Church, and the Church must always make it its aim to cooperate with the work of healing and justice that God himself is doing in the world.

2. Local and wider church

The Church as the community of the new covenant, as the sign of God's triune fellowship and as the Body of Christ, exists, according to the New Testament, on various levels of society. It has local, regional and universal form. A local company of Christians may be called 'the Body of Christ', being assured of the presence of Christ in their midst and manifesting gifts of the Spirit as members of the body of which he is head (1 Cor 12:27). Yet the body of Christ in its proper sense must be the whole Church throughout time and space; it is universal because Christ is the universal Lord and head of the whole cosmos (Eph 1:22-23; Col 1:15-18). Moreover, this universal Church must be made visible (and not just remain an invisible, spiritual reality) since one point of calling the Church the 'Body' of Christ is to express the reality that the Church makes Christ *manifest* in the world. Again, a local group of Christians enjoys fellowship together (Acts 2:42), and yet this

fellowship is based on a communion in which God himself exists, and which he desires to create in human society as a whole as he extends his Kingdom (John 17:21, Rom 11:32-36). A local community of believers gathers around the table of the Lord to celebrate its covenant relationship with Christ and with each other (1 Cor 11:25); yet the cross of Jesus has power to draw all things together into a new agreement and harmony (Col 1:20; Rom 8:19-21), bringing to completion in redemption the covenant that God has already made in creation with 'every living thing' (Gen 9:9-12).

The description of the Council of Jerusalem in Acts 15 gives a practical demonstration of the nature of the church as existing on local and wider levels. As Luke speaks of the decisions which are made by the gathering together of local congregations in a general meeting, he says that it seems good to 'the whole church' (v 22); but then the word 'church' is used in a more local way when he says that the result of the Council's decisions was to strengthen 'the churches' in various regions (v 41).

3. The local Baptist congregation

Baptists have always affirmed the local congregation as being bound together in *covenant*, as the place where the *Body of Christ* becomes visible, and as an expression of *koinonia*. In particular this means that every local congregation has the privilege and the responsibility of discovering the mind of Christ for his body in that place as it gathers in Church Meeting. But Baptists have also always had a strong understanding of the inter-dependence of congregations. From the beginning of Baptist life, churches have gathered together in associations, and all three concepts of Body, fellowship and covenant are used in early Baptist confessions to describe wider assemblies than the local one.

As Baptists have thought about the reasons for associating together, they have have stressed such aspects as mission, mutual support,

discipline, teaching and guidance. We may say that since people in any society are part of social groups of varying sizes - local, regional, national, international - it is necessary that Christ should *embody* himself in the world through his members at various levels of human socialization. In mission, for example, there is a witness to the Gospel to be made to regional structures of government as well as local ones, and actions for justice to be taken at both levels. In local, regional and national groupings Christ gathers his people into *covenant* loyalty and establishes a *fellowship* which is a sign of hope for the healing of human community.

4. Mutual commitment

Baptists through the years have found the concept of covenant to be particularly illuminating for the nature of the Church, and this will be a significant thread throughout this report. 'Covenant' stresses the initiative of God in making relationship with humankind through Jesus Christ; covenant between God and his human partners-in-mission is not a bargaining between equals, but a divine gift. Nevertheless, it must include the response of the disciple in faith and obedience; so Baptists have found the expression of personal allegiance to Christ as Lord to be an essential part of baptism, while not neglecting the gift of God's grace to be received there. Furthermore, 'covenant' expresses the mutual commitment of church members to each other as covenant partners with God, so that early Baptist churches wrote church covenants in which they promised to 'walk together and to watch over one another...'

These or similar phrases make clear that the heart of covenant is not actually a document, although early Baptists did write confessions of faith and these were sometimes attached to covenants. Covenant itself is essentially a mutual and binding relation, and at its centre is the activity of God which cannot be completely reduced to a written form. There is certainly a need for written forms of the covenant suitable for a particular place and time (see below II 2), but these forms will always be temporary and penultimate.

The two interwoven dimensions of covenant (with God and with each other) are epitomised in the familiar Baptist phrase 'the gathered church'. The personal faith and responsible discipleship which every church member is called to exercise are indicated in the idea of 'our gathering together'; but '*our*' gathering is always secondary and dependent upon something else - the initiative of Christ in gathering his disciples, to which we can only respond. As the statement, *The Baptist Doctrine of the Church* (1948) puts it:

... churches are gathered by the will of God and live by the indwelling of his Spirit. They do not have their origin, primarily, in human resolution... Membership [is] not a private option...

It follows from a biblical understanding of Church as covenant, fellowship and Body that there is also no option about local churches being part of a wider fellowship of churches. They *are gathered* together by Christ. This reality is well expressed by an early Baptist Confession:

... though we be distinct in respect of our particular bodies, for conveniency sake, being as many as can well meet together in one place, yet are all one in communion, holding Jesus Christ to be our head and Lord... and although the particular congregations be distinct and several bodies, every one a compact and knit city in itself; yet are they all to walk by the same rule, and by all means convenient to have the counsel and help one of another in all needful affairs of the church, as members of one body in the common faith under Christ their only head.

(The 'London' Baptist Confession, 1644; extracts from the introduction and chapter xlvii)

5. Groupings

The idea of covenant also helps to answer a question which has sometimes perplexed Baptists. It is easy to understand, theologically, why Christ should gather *all* his disciples together for fellowship and mission in any particular geographical area - for example in Britain. But it is not so obvious why Christ should call together *Baptist* Christians alone in any area. Baptists have usually found concepts of the local church on the one hand and the Church Universal on the other easier to affirm than intermediate structures, since they have disavowed notions of a state church or regions allotted as spheres of influence to particular denominations. Here a theology of covenant is helpful, since this holds together what Christ is doing in making himself present in the world through his body, and what his *members* do voluntarily in partnership together.

When we consider the way that Christ embodies himself in any geographical area, we are also concerned with *human factors* such as social dynamics, the sharing of confessional insights and a willingness to work together in mission. We have to cope with the reality of the brokenness of the Body of Christ through human history. All this is true in the local and the universal dimensions of the Church, but it is particularly helpful to remember it as we think about the forming of intermediate or regional structures. As Baptists we can use phrases like 'agreeing to walk together and watch over each other' without making undue or grandiose proposals about the nature of our covenant relationship. Recognising the all too human aspects of covenant, we can take covenant loyalty seriously without making *exclusive* claims to embody the presence of Christ. Moreover, Christ is apparently humble enough to work through the denominational groupings that have come about, imperfect though they are. This divine humility, however, must not be abused as justifying the *status quo*; Christ surely feels pain at the present incomplete state of his Church, a pain that we share as we pray and work for unity.

6. Assemblies of churches

Since the Church is the very Body of Christ in the world, it cannot be constituted, but is rather manifested, when Christians come together in one place. Perhaps we should distinguish between a *church* (the local congregation), *the Church* (universal) and *being church* when we are together in wider union. Baptists have traditionally - though not always in their Confessions - avoided the term 'church' for intermediate levels of covenant and fellowship; the term has been heard as having threatening overtones of a fixed hierarchy. But we should affirm the nature of assemblies of churches as being *ecclesial* (as 'being church'); that is, they have covenant responsibilities for making decisions and prophetic criticisms, for exercising oversight (*episkope*) and for sponsoring mission, no less than local bodies have them, although not in the same way. This makes it quite appropriate to celebrate the Eucharist together *in* Assembly and *as* an Assembly. Baptism should also be understood as an event which, while taking place in a local community, has implications which go beyond the local scene and are universal in terms of church membership and therefore service to the world. Baptists have not served themselves well in sometimes diminishing baptism to an isolated and individual act.

7. Like a church meeting?

This also means that it is possible to extend the principle of the 'church meeting' and its decision-making function beyond the immediate local level. Baptists understand the local church to be a 'local manifestation of the one Church of God on earth and in heaven' (*The Baptist Doctrine of the Church* 3(a)). The universal Church is not a mere sum total of local churches, but it exists already as the whole Body of Christ and local churches derive from the whole. However, because the reality of covenant, fellowship and Body is present in the local congregation, this can be taken as a 'key' to the nature of the whole Church. The local fellowship of

believers will be the model for extending fellowship beyond the immediate local level. Thus the regional Association of churches can be readily understood by analogy with a local church meeting. Churches send representatives who gather in a kind of 'meeting of church meetings', where they seek to find the mind of Christ just as does the local congregation.

However, the analogy is not quite so neat and self-evident when we come to participate in a union of churches at *national* level, since such a union has to take into itself the associating both of local churches and of associations of churches. In the image of a local church meeting, a national assembly must by nature be 'deliberative', seeking to find the mind and purpose of Christ for the servant church, but the *way* in which such an assembly reflects a church meeting is bound to be complex. This has implications for the present dual structure of Assembly and Council as it has developed in the Baptist Union of Great Britain during the last 150 years (see section II below).

8. The aim - to find the Mind of Christ

Whatever structure is adopted, the testing within the local congregation of decisions made in assemblies limits any making of a Baptist hierarchy. Regional and national assemblies should be recognised as covenant gatherings, expressions of *koinonia* (communion) and a making visible of the Body of Christ. But the local congregation is *also* characterised by covenant, communion and the actualising of the Body of Christ, though as a manifestation of the one Universal Church. Since this is so, while decisions made in wider assembly have implications for the local church, they cannot displace its own exercise of responsibility.

The aim of both the local church meeting *and* of assemblies of Churches is to find the Mind of Christ. The local church meeting is not an attempt by various power blocks to carry through their

policies and defeat opponents or rival programmes. Though it is right to take democratic votes on critical issues as a way of safeguarding freedom and of valuing the contribution of every member, the heart of the matter is not winning votes; it is to find the Mind of Christ who is present in the midst of his disciples (Matt 18:19-20). If this is the aim, then a local congregation will understand that it does not have all the resources and gifts for finding that Mind, as the local church is not the whole Body of Christ. In a spiritual, rather than a strictly legal sense, Baptist churches are not properly to be called 'independent', since they have always believed that they need the help of other churches in fellowship to discover the purpose of Christ for many matters of life and mission. But since the local church *is* a manifestation of the Body of Christ, it retains the freedom and responsibility to receive and test what is proposed to be the purpose of Christ by churches gathered together. It cannot find all the purposes of Christ on its own, but it remains free to recognise whether the Mind of Christ has indeed been found on any issue. Nevertheless, while it has this freedom, it must have good reason for going against the consensus of the wider community; it will trust that churches in covenant together have genuinely been searching to find the will of their Lord.

This mutual dependence in receiving guidance means that Association is not just a matter of small churches receiving support from the larger ones (though that is an important part of fellowship); the largest local church still needs to receive insight from others in discovering what the mission of God entails for it in the world of today. That insight may come from what appears to be the weakest, most dependent congregation.

9. Even wider groupings

Churches of the Baptist Union of Great Britain belong to wider groupings of churches than their Association and the Union; there

is membership of ecumenical bodies (notably Churches Together in England, the Council of Churches for Britain and Ireland, the Free Church Federal Council, the World Council of Churches) and there is the wider fellowship of the Baptist 'family' in the European Baptist Federation (EBF) and the Baptist World Alliance (BWA); some local churches also belong to other kind of 'alliances' which are not incompatible with their Baptist principles. All this gives a local church a vision of the Church Universal, a glimpse into the reality of the whole Body of Christ in the world. Through such fellowship it finds mutual support, a sharing in mission (including world movements for peace, justice and care of the environment) and clearer insight into the Mind of Christ. Because a local congregation realises it is not omniscient to discover the purposes of Christ for salvation, healing and righteousness in our world, or even in its immediate neighbourhood, there is plenty of reason to listen to others.

But for all this, we suggest that *at the moment* there is a difference between these circles of fellowship and the 'ecclesial' bonds that exist in Baptist Association and Baptist Union. For these other alliances (even the EBF and the BWA) to be 'ecclesial', there would need to be clearer marks of covenanting together. Such marks would include:

- a) some means of involving local churches in the appointment of representatives to assemblies, and some means of giving local churches a voice in corporate decisions, so that the principle of the church meeting would be seen to be truly extended into a wider covenantal relationship; with regard to world-wide Baptist fellowship, this would have financial implications, demanding that richer national bodies make it possible for the poorer to be realistically involved;
- b) a commitment made by local churches to give weight to the decision of the larger body, and to offer it trust;

- c) some way for local churches to be involved in recognising and appointing *episkope* (or spiritual oversight) belonging to the wider fellowship, an *episkope* embodied in certain persons as well as in the meeting of the fellowship itself; of course, in the Baptist understanding of *episkope*, spiritual leadership can never be imposed but can only have an authority won through service (see further IV.1 below).

Human communities can, however, point beyond their own limits, and the grace of God breaks through all human barriers. We must recognise that some wider circles of fellowship (such as the BWA) can show fragmentary manifestations of 'being church', and can exercise *episkope* in a momentary way. In such acts as defending the oppressed and working for religious liberty there is a partial display of what a wider covenant might be like. Such signs give hope that some of these circles of fellowship (*koinonia*) will become truly covenanted churches, while it will be right for others to remain voluntary organisations, grouping together for specific purposes. Already here and now, of course, different ecclesial bodies can recognise each other as 'being church', even when they are not yet in visible unity.

II. The relationship between the Assembly and the Council of the Baptist Union

1. Two expressions of covenant relationship

In the light of the theological understanding set out above, we turn to the existing situation within the Baptist Union. It has sometimes been suggested that Council relates to the Assembly as a Deacons' meeting relates to a Church Meeting, but no such simple analogy can be drawn. Rather, Assembly and Council both reflect, though in different forms, the aim and nature of a Church Meeting. They should be regarded as two expressions of covenant relationship between the churches, two ways of creating trust and mutual commitment, two valid ways of finding the mind of Christ in his Body the Church. The whole union of 'churches, Associations and Colleges' which makes up the Baptist Union, and through which Christ makes himself visible as his body, is represented in both the Assembly and the Council; but neither structure must be simply *equated* with the Union.

According to the present Constitution of the Baptist Union, members of Council are not elected by Assembly as deacons are elected by a Church meeting. Rather, the Constitution places the two bodies side-by-side. It is, of course, true that the *particular* structures we

have of Assembly and Council are not the *only* way that churches together might express the realities of covenant. There is nothing absolute about the forms. There is an element here of working (inductively) with what we have been given through tradition and the developments of history. But we can certainly make the bodies work more effectively (deductively) to accord with the principles we hold to as Baptists. All structures must be offered to God to use, and must be open to God's leading.

2. The nature of covenant

Members of the Union are thus bound together in covenant, a bond expressed and realised in gathering together in two kinds of conciliar meetings. As we have seen, the primary meaning of 'covenant' is not a written document but a relationship, initiated by God and completed by people's commitment to God and to each other. The heart of the covenant bond is relationship, in the *koinonia* of God's own life. The Union is not therefore *primarily* made through assent to a written covenant. However, as a secondary matter all covenants have a written form, which seeks to express the nature of the bond in language suitable for a particular time and place. The *Declaration of Principle* of the Baptist Union should be understood in this way as the written form of the covenant into which churches, associations and colleges have entered together; as the Constitution expresses it, the *Declaration* is the 'basis' of the Union. It is neither a full confession of faith nor a full statement of Christian doctrine, but simply provides a basis for 'walking together' in covenant. This is to acknowledge the 'sole and absolute authority' of Christ as revealed in the holy scriptures, to find the mind of Christ in meeting together, to seal our discipleship in the baptism of believers, and to share in God's mission in the world.

We recommend, therefore, that the *Declaration of Principle* should be given a higher profile in Baptist church life and in the training of ministers in our colleges. Its nature as the basis for

covenant needs to be understood, and its content needs to be explained.

3. Historical developments

The way that fellowship in this covenant is expressed in Assembly and Council has developed during the history of the Union to reach its present two-fold form. The Council of the Baptist Union had its origin as a 'General Committee' of the Assembly (1873) with 50 members out of 60 elected by the Assembly, but by 1904 it was thought that there should be a stronger relationship between the Council and the Associations, and the result was a mixture of representatives from the Associations together with 45 members elected by the Assembly and 15 co-opted by Council. In the constitutional review of 1968 the Council was made more clearly like a 'synod', weighted to representatives of the Associations but still including 30 members of the previous year's Assembly co-opted by the Council; no members are now elected directly by the Assembly. Thus, partly through historical contingencies, partly through occasional theological reflection, partly through pragmatism, and motivated throughout by a desire to be guided by the Holy Spirit, the Council has emerged as a body which provides for local churches to be represented mainly *through their Associations*. On the other hand, local churches have *direct* representation through their delegates to the Assembly.

Baptists respect tradition as a keeping faith with past communities of believers and witnesses. But they are not bound by tradition, and believe that 'the Lord has yet more light and truth to break forth from his word'. Baptist understanding of the Church thus has room for development, and it is no less 'Baptist' for the principle of the church meeting to be extended into the national form of Council than Assembly; whether through Association representatives, or directly by representatives of every local church, delegates gather to find the mind of Christ and then to commend their decisions to be tested and accepted through the local church meeting.

At the same time we may also expect development in the very form of our associating together. This report assumes that there will continue to be regional associations of local churches to be represented in the national forums of Council and Assembly, since the nature of the Church as the Body of Christ means that Christ desires to embody himself in every area of human society (I.3); but in using the term 'Association' the report does *not* assume that this covenantal grouping will necessarily continue to have the same form, organization or size as Associations at present (see V.6).

4. An untidy situation

In fact, the situation is not as neat as the distinction between Assembly and Council made above implies. While the members of Assembly are drawn *mainly* from local churches and members of Council *mainly* from Associations, the constitution of both is untidy.

- a) With regard to the Council, Association representatives form the largest group of members; but there is a variety of other members including the Officers of the Union, the Area Superintendents, and representatives from the colleges, the BMS, certain Baptist organizations, and the Baptist Unions of Wales and Scotland. Furthermore, the way that Associations provide representation to the Council varies a good deal in practice. Some Associations arrange for their representatives to be elected directly from the churches, while in others Council members are elected through Association councils, which may or may not include representatives from all the churches. Recently, through *The Structures Report 1992*, the Baptist Union Council has urged Associations to ensure that local churches are involved in the choice of Council members, whatever method of election is adopted.

- b) The Union as expressed in the Assembly is not only a union of the churches, but of Associations, Colleges, the Federation of Lay Ministries, certain other Baptist Organizations and even (at present) individual persons. Delegates and ministers from local churches will normally form the largest group of representative members; but all members of Council and the officers of the Union are included as well as representatives from colleges, Associations and Associations of Lay Preachers. There are also 'Personal' members and 'Associate' members. Thus ministers on the accredited list who are not representatives of local churches still have a vote as associate members. All ministers in pastoral charge of churches which are members of the Union have a vote as representative members, even if they are not accredited.

As we consider the make-up of Council and Assembly, we realise that *some* untidiness is both inevitable and appropriate when we are dealing with human communities, where relationships must be prior to regulations. But it is also right to aim for some consistency with theological understanding of church and covenant, as we aim to do later in this report.

5. The question of authority

While recognising that Assembly and Council provide two ways of embodying covenant and finding the mind of Christ, we cannot avoid making a judgement about the relative authorities of Council and Assembly.

The present Constitution of the Baptist Union seems ambiguous on this issue. While Clause V states that 'The Union shall act *by* the Assembly and *through* the Council', this clause is headed 'Operations', and Clause VIII uses the same word when it states that 'The operations of the Union shall be conducted *by* a Council.' There seems then to be no particular definition of authority embodied in the terms 'by' and 'through'.

We must therefore resolve this question another way than by mere exegesis of the Constitution. We must ask how we can most effectively create the trust and mutual commitment that are essential for covenanting together. The Assembly is a more *comprehensive* expression of the Union than the Council, including direct representation from the local churches as well as from Associations and Colleges, thus mirroring the three main constituent parts of the Union (as well as other interests). In its comprehensiveness, it seems to have more potential than the Council for creating trust across all the churches, and so embodying the covenant. In reality, we must recognise that any particular Assembly may be less *representative* than the Council, depending for example upon its geographical location, whether churches can afford to send delegates, and the proportionate difference in participation between local and distant churches. However, Assembly has the character of being more comprehensive than Council, and the potential to be at least as representative.

The Council cannot be simply accountable to the Assembly, or it would lose its own character of being an expression of covenant. However, it is certainly accountable to the churches of the Union *through* the Assembly; so it should give an account of its stewardship to the churches by means of its report to Assembly, and *through* the Assembly be called to account by them. The relation between Assembly and Council therefore embodies a balance; the Council has its own covenantal character, its own way of representing the churches and its own authority, but Assembly has a certain authority which derives from being a more comprehensive expression of the Union. What this means in practice is worked out in section III below.

6. A balance of trust

The relationship between Council and Assembly is a balance of mutual trust, and while this would be impracticable in a 'pyramidal'

form of church government, it belongs to a wider Baptist view of the nature of authority, which can only be won by service and not imposed. The Assembly must not lose its fundamental character of deliberation and decision-making; it should have the responsibility of being able to ask Council to think again about some issues arising from Council's Report, and of finally taking for itself some decisions for which the creation of widespread trust and acceptance is essential (see further below, III.4). At the same time, Assembly will give weight to the decisions of the Council, remembering that these express the corporate mind of the Associations of churches, or - more correctly - of the churches gathered together in Association. When the Assembly trusts the Council with many executive decisions, and understands that it need not debate all the issues involved, this is because it recognises that Council is a forum where the purpose of Christ for the churches can be found.

Council gathered together will therefore need to spend time on issues of strategy and planning, rather than leaving this deliberation entirely to its sub-committees, because the Assembly will need to know how this body as a whole has discerned the mind of Christ. The Council should also retain its responsibility, within the balance of trust, of drawing up the agenda for the Assembly; so it will continue to take the initiative in determining which matters it can deal with itself, and which must be put before the whole Assembly for decision. However, it can of course be called to account for these choices by discussion in the Assembly, and by Assembly members submitting resolutions and amendments to be debated, giving due notice (see below, III.4). It may seem at first sight that the Council has the more powerful voice in this relationship, as it has the authority to determine *which* resolutions submitted should be debated. But the Union will only work at all if there is trust and mutual acceptance, and so the Council has the obligation to create this trust through listening and responding to the voice of the Assembly, whatever power it might have for unilateral decision. If

Council refuses to allow matters to be discussed that Assembly persistently wishes to debate, it will only destroy trust, damage the Union and therefore hurt itself.

The need for trust and mutual acceptance is no less critical in the reception by the local churches of decisions made at Assembly and Council level. Such decisions cannot be imposed 'downwards', but must be tested and accepted at the local level. At the same time, churches should listen carefully to decisions of Assembly and Council, and give weight to the reasons given, since they believe that these bodies express covenantal unity, and that individual local churches need fellowship with others in order to discover the purpose of Christ.

7. A continuing commitment to assemble together

Trust, and a willingness to search for the mind of Christ together, will be increased if churches remember that their commitment to assemble together continues between the actual occasions of Assembly. Even if new delegates are chosen for each meeting, churches remain committed to being in association and in wider union as they live in covenant. This continuing commitment is actualised in the continuing existence of Council not only between Assemblies, but between its own meetings through the ongoing work of its committees.

It is all too easily assumed that the local church representatives in the Assembly actually represent the mind of the churches. It is a sad fact that church meetings may either ignore or effectively disown their delegates. If the Assembly is to be deliberative, the local churches must 'own' it by continuing commitment to meeting together in assembly, and by discussing assembly issues seriously in church meeting.

8. The voice of Associations

The Assembly gives opportunity for direct representation from the churches within the life of the Union. However, the Assembly reflects the Union in also listening to the voices of the Associations (and the Colleges, though necessarily to a lesser extent). Thus the Associations must have a real input into the Assembly. It might seem that the Baptist congregational principle would be supported by laying stress on representation of individual churches in the national Assembly, making an immediate contact between local church meeting and wider Union. But since the aim of the congregational principle is to 'find the mind of Christ', and the Association has been seeking to do this on behalf of the churches within its region, this corporate mind cannot then be ignored and decisions be made only on the basis of the views of individual local churches whose representatives are meeting at national level.

This listening to Associations as well as to local churches could be secured by discussion of significant issues (including 'public issues') beforehand in Associations so that single churches will come as members of their Association and not just individualistically. But it must also be achieved by listening to the mind of BU *Council*; the Council is a corporate expression of the mind of the Associations, and thus the Assembly must give considerable weight to the decisions about strategy that are made there.

III. Meetings of the Assembly and Council

Since the Union has a two-fold expression of its covenant relationship, in Assembly and Council, this should be affirmed and more consistently adopted.

1. Listening to one another in Assembly

The need for churches to *listen* to one another in Assembly in order to find the mind of Christ rules out the use of postal ballots in the case of matters to be debated in Assembly, where votes would be registered without taking part in the search for God's purpose together. Meeting together has the nature of an event, a 'happening' when God comes to his people to make his aims known. This means likewise that representatives from the churches should not be mandated beforehand to vote in a certain way, and that the term 'delegate' in the Constitution should not be taken to imply any process of mandating. Indeed, it seems reasonable to suppose that those who wrote the Constitution understood 'delegate' in the normal dictionary sense of 'an elected representative'.

2. Recent changes to the Assembly

In the light of a covenantal understanding of the Baptist Union, it is essential that 'Assembly' be understood as referring to meetings in which those who are bound together in covenant seek the purpose of Christ for the life of the churches and the health of society, in order to make Christ visible in his Body in the world and to bring all human life into the *koinonia* which God intends. These meetings are what are called 'sessions of the Assembly' in the Constitution, and they are clearly intended to be deliberative. In recent years, however, these kinds of meetings have become only one part of what is called 'The Baptist Assembly' and are designated separately as 'Annual Business Meeting(s) of the Baptist Union'. Instead of the Assembly including some 'open meetings' to which all are invited, the Assembly has become a general Baptist conference or gathering in which some meetings for representative members of a Business Meeting are included. While it is right that the Assembly should be a time for inspiration and celebration as well as for deliberation, the balance seems to have swung too much away from the latter.

Perhaps the change of character of the Assembly has been characterised by the change of name to 'The *Baptist* Assembly' instead of 'The Assembly of *the Baptist Union*'. It is surely right, and long over-due, to bring the Baptist Union and the Baptist Missionary Society more closely together, since they share in the one mission of God and there is a very considerable overlap of Baptist identity and membership between them. We hope that nothing in this Report will discourage or jeopardise the growing partnership between these two bodies, symbolized now in a sharing of national offices. The relationship opens the horizons of every local church to the mission of God throughout the world of which it is a part. However, there is inevitably a problem in bringing together a voluntary body (the BMS) and an ecclesial body (the Baptist Union) into one 'Assembly'. The BMS also has

the same formal relation to the Baptist Unions of Scotland and Wales as it does to the Baptist Union of Great Britain, and has developed its own relations to overseas unions and conventions through its strategy of world partnership. Clearly, the concept of a 'Baptist Assembly' which incorporates the 'Annual Meetings of the Baptist Union and the Baptist Missionary Society' cannot be the same kind of meeting as an 'Assembly of the Baptist Union'. The result may be a loss of understanding among the churches as to what an *ecclesial* Assembly is, with a consequent loss of understanding of covenant obligations and privileges. Moreover, the concept of an 'Annual Business Meeting of the Baptist Union' (as a session in the Assembly) is not one which the Constitution envisages, and theologically it begs the question of the expression of the Union in the Council alongside the Assembly.

We recommend that the *Annual Assembly of the Baptist Union* be restored, and that this take place as part of an *Annual Baptist Congress*. The *Baptist Congress* (replacing the name 'Baptist Assembly') would include the *Annual Members Meeting of the Baptist Missionary Society* whenever the BMS wished to meet with the Baptist Union of Great Britain, but also in some years other Baptist Unions in Great Britain and even other Baptist Unions in Europe could be invited to hold their meetings as part of the Congress. Open meetings for celebration, devotion, promotion and some public resolutions would be shared between all Baptist delegates present; but meetings of the *Assembly* would clearly be for those bound in covenant as a Union of churches, Associations and Colleges, to explore the meaning and operations of this Union in the world of today.

There would, of course, be a 'special relationship' between the Baptist Union and the BMS in the Congress, probably reflected in a continuing Joint Planning Committee for the Congress. But the involvement within the Congress itself of other Baptist Unions with which the BMS is in partnership might open up ways of moving towards wider 'ecclesial' bonds in due time (see I. 9 above).

3. Time and space

Time and space is needed to give opportunity for the covenant relationship of the Union to be actualised. Longer periods should be allotted to critical issues to be debated in Assembly, for example perhaps a whole day for the review of the *Inter-Church Process*. The 'Public Resolutions' debate should be allowed more sessions on the timetable, as those gathered seek to speak a prophetic word to the principalities and powers of our society. At least one of these sessions should be included within the *Assembly* of the Baptist Union itself, so that churches gathered in covenant as well as in the wider congress of Baptists should find a common mind on important social issues.

Since programme time will be shared with other Baptist groups, and especially with the BMS, at the Annual Congress in the Spring, a second shorter Assembly could be introduced in some years in the Autumn. This could take place over a weekend, either preceding or following the Autumn meeting of the Council.

4. Annual Report of Council

The Constitution does not explicitly provide for the Assembly to consider a Report of the Council, or even for the Council to make a Report at all, and so does not explicitly define its powers when a Report has been presented. However, over the years the Council has properly given a Report of its stewardship to Assembly and the Assembly has been asked to 'approve' or 'adopt' it. The way that the Report should be received and dealt with can therefore only arise out of the wider theological understanding of the relation of Assembly to Council, as developed above.

Given the balance of trust and the more comprehensive character of the Assembly as described above, it seems right for Assembly to be given time and opportunity to debate the Annual Report of the

Council. A major part of Assembly should be deliberative consideration of the work of Council, and discussion of large matters of policy, strategy and priorities. We believe that the spiritual leaders of the Union (especially the General and Deputy General Secretary together with the President) should highlight important matters from the Report in order to guide the open discussion of Assembly. We also think that some issues, arising from the Report, which affect the whole direction of the life and mission of the Union should regularly be embodied in formal resolutions, at the discretion and choice of Council, in order to test the mind of Assembly and give opportunity for responses to be expressed (see point 4(c) immediately below). This is, of course, already the case with resolutions concerning 'Public Issues'.

Without a mood of confrontation, the Assembly ought to be able, by some means, to ask Council to reflect further on issues that arise from the Report, and to ask that certain matters be placed before it again at a later Assembly. It may be the case that the Constitution does not allow for matters in the Report to be formally referred back to Council during the process of debate, as has been argued in recent years, because of the general rule about due notice for motions and the right of Council to determine what resolutions should be included in the agenda (Bye-Laws III.2). But means must nevertheless be provided for a real contribution to be made by members of Assembly in discussion of the report. Possible ways of doing this within the present Bye-Laws might be:

- a) informal requests and comments from the Assembly and an expression of 'the mood of the meeting' rather than formal motions;
- b) resolutions sent to the General Secretary in due time for the next meeting of Assembly (subject to acceptance by Council; Bye-laws III.2), which would be an especially suitable procedure if there were another Assembly as early as the Autumn;

- c) proposals, sent beforehand in due time, for amendment of resolutions to be put to Assembly on behalf of Council by the spiritual leadership of the Union in their guiding of discussion (cf. Bye-laws III.4);
- d) the exceptional use of the President's discretion as Chairperson in allowing urgent matters not on the agenda to be debated (Bye-Laws III.5).

If none of these means prove to be an adequate way for the churches acting through Assembly to call Council to account for its stewardship, consideration will have to be given to amending the Constitution in order to set out explicitly how the Report of the Council is to be received. Any such re-drafting should, however, keep in mind that the relationship between Council and Assembly is a balance of trust between two ways of embodying covenant, and not the mere subordination of one body to another.

IV. Spiritual leadership in the Baptist Union

1. A team

In the Baptist understanding of Church, wherever there is fellowship (*koinonia*) there is need for pastoral oversight (*episkope*). It is not the case that *episkope* creates *koinonia*, but rather, a fellowship exists first and calls for spiritual leadership. Leadership assigned to persons can never be coercive, and while ministers are to be granted the spiritual authority that comes through trust won by serving, they will always be open to testing and calling to account by the whole fellowship. Thus, in the local church 'oversight' is exercised corporately through church meeting, and personally through the minister(s); in Association it has corporate form in the gathering together of representatives from the churches, and personal form in the Area Superintendent and other 'Association ministers'. This Report has largely been discussing the corporate form of *episkope* at the national level, in the dual form of Assembly and Council; but this *episkope* also takes personal form in the General Secretary, the President and the Deputy General Secretary of the Baptist Union, who form a 'team ministry' with others set aside from and by the churches.

It must be admitted that at present there is lack of clarity about the membership of this 'team ministry' at the level of the Union. It may be that others who head up departments of the Union should be more widely recognised by the churches as exercising 'pastoral oversight' and so be *inducted* at Assembly into an essentially pastoral rather than management office. At the moment General Superintendents also seem to exercise pastoral oversight in the sphere of both the Associations and the Union, as they are staff members of the Union but serve the Associations. What must clearly be avoided is any implication of hierarchy or superiority between these various spheres of *episkope*, in local church, Association and Union. There is no gradation of importance and power, but only a difference in the area of *koinonia*.

2. Additional responsibilities for the President

The President of the Baptist Union should have responsibilities with regard to the meetings of Council and Assembly which are appropriate to his or her induction by the churches into a kind of personal *episkope* or pastoral oversight. These responsibilities should include:

- a) making an annual address to the Assembly;
- b) being part of the Council committee which proposes an agenda for the *Assembly* sessions (ie not necessarily the whole programme of the 'Baptist Congress') which conclude his or her year of office; in this way the President would have an effective voice in deciding which issues should be brought for decision before the whole Assembly, a responsibility arising out of sounding the mood of the churches through presidential visits;
- c) having the right to decide in Assembly meetings whether a matter is of such importance and urgency that it may be debated without being previously included on the agenda;

- d) generally playing an active part in the discussions of the Assembly and Council, sharing with the General Secretary in commending actions and decisions of the Council to the Assembly, with the members giving weight to his or her insights as they would to a spiritual leader in the local congregation;
- e) visiting as many local churches and Associations as is practicable, to listen to their concerns, and to communicate his or her personal vision for the life of the Union and the programmes being developed by the Union. Instead of this being arranged personally as at present, we believe that the Union should arrange such an itinerary with Associations, to ensure that the President visits as wide a section of the denomination as possible.

3. Electing a President

While the General Secretary and the Deputy General Secretary of the Union are a continuing form of spiritual leadership, the President offers a temporary leadership which the churches judge to be a timely contribution in the life of the Union. It is therefore essential that those electing the President should be able to assess whether the gifts and vision of a candidate are those which meet the needs of the moment, and which will give strength to the particular policies and strategies being worked out through the Union at that time.

- a) If a postal election is to remain as a way of finding the mind of the churches on this matter, therefore, candidates should circulate a kind of 'manifesto' or proposal for the way that they intend to offer spiritual leadership in the particular circumstances of the day. Many churches, at the moment, feel that they do not have enough guidance or information to make a responsible decision. It is not inconsistent with our view against postal ballots on

Assembly resolutions (see III.1 above) that the President should continue to be elected through such a ballot, as this matter is being conducted entirely by post, rather than affecting a debate happening in Assembly. However, if it transpires that it is not feasible to give churches the kind of guidance they want and need, an alternative path of election should be followed.

- b) An alternative would be for churches to nominate candidates for the Presidency, and for Council in debate to consider which candidate among those nominated was the right person for this particular time in the life of the Union, in the light of the strategies and projects that Council was developing. Council could then put one name to Assembly for him or her to be confirmed as President.

If the President is to be more than a figurehead, he or she must be elected on the basis of spiritual qualities and experience, and not on basis of gender. For this reason, and despite the desire of the writers of this Report to see more women Presidents, we think that the suggestion of electing both a male and a female President each year would not make a helpful development.

4. Composition of the Union's team

We consider that the General Secretary of the Baptist Union is the senior minister in a pastoral team which offers *episkope* at the national level of the Union. The precise membership of this team needs further consideration in a separate report on the nature of *episkope*, but we suggest that at present it should include the President of the Union, the Deputy General Secretary, General Superintendents, heads of departments of the Union, and others who may be seen as having a national rather than an association or local ministry. A report on *episkope* should consider whether or not General Superintendents should still be held in collegiality with a national ministry team were they to cease in the future to be

staff members of the Union and be appointed directly by Associations (see V.6).

We believe there is an urgent need to find means of bringing the President into more active participation in the national pastoral team than is the case at present.

5. The work of the General Secretaries

The General Secretary and the Deputy General Secretary of the Union are administrators only in the context of being pastoral ministers. As in all ministry of *episkope*, they will be a focus of unity for the Union in so far as they are transmitters and interpreters of the word of God in scripture. They will therefore take opportunities to preach and teach in local churches and conferences of ministers, and where appropriate to administer the Gospel sacraments. They will initiate policies, enable the gifts of others and discern directions for development as a minister would do in a local setting. However, in this report we are essentially concerned with the personal *episkope* which the General Secretary and Deputy General Secretary should offer in the context of Assembly and Council. This should include:

- a) commending policies and strategies to the Council and Assembly (see III. 4 above) in the light of interpreting the word of God for the present day;
- b) preaching and offering scriptural and doctrinal teaching to the Assembly of churches that has set them apart, as faithful guardians and interpreters of the apostolic faith.

V. Proposals for reform of representation

In this section the report aims to set out some guidelines for reform of representation in the light of the two-fold expression of covenantal relationship in Assembly and Council, rather than attempting to re-write the Constitution. If its proposals are accepted, others will need to consider the implications for re-drafting some parts of the present Constitution.

1. Co-option to Council

The question has been raised in recent years as to whether it is appropriate to have some members of the Council co-opted from members of the Assembly, as these have not been elected by the Associations. A significant argument for this present arrangement is the need for the Council to draw upon the wisdom and insight of people for whom room could not be found among the restricted numbers of representatives available to the Associations. An alternative would be to have a certain number of members directly elected by the Assembly, as in the early days of the Council. But the point of co-option is to increase the expertise and representation of the Council, rather than to give Assembly some direct right of election to Council, recognising that Council has its own way of

expressing covenant and finding the mind of Christ for the churches. The purpose of co-option is therefore better served by the choice being made by Council itself, which knows its own needs and gaps and whom might best fill these.

However, in order to reflect the two-fold nature of covenanting together in Union, the varied ways in which members of Assembly can be *nominated* for co-option to Council ought to be more widely known; in particular, local churches might be more explicitly invited to make nominations. With this qualification, it seems helpful for the time being to continue the present situation of co-opting members.

2. Personal Members of the Union

At present the Constitution allows for 'personal members' of the Union and therefore of the Assembly, who represent neither churches, associations or colleges, and yet have a right to vote in the Assembly. We think that this arrangement should cease, as it does not reflect the covenant relationship on which the Assembly is based. We propose instead that there be a category of 'Friends' of the Union, in recognition of generous support offered to the Home Mission Fund, and elected in the way at present described in the Constitution (VII.B). 'Friends' might be granted the privilege of attending meetings of the Assembly properly so called (for this designation, see above III.2), but should not have a vote in the meeting.

3. Associate members

The case of 'associate members' is deeply tied up with the nature of the List of accredited Baptist ministers and Probationer ministers. At present, 'associate members' are defined as accredited ministers no longer in pastoral charge, whether or not because of retirement, retired Deaconesses, and retired missionaries of the Baptist

Missionary Society (VII.C). We believe that it is right to retain the category of 'associate members' for accredited ministers, but only in the context of a proper theological understanding of the list of accredited ministers, and possibly some consequent revision of it. The list should be regarded as a 'covenant document', with its ministers accepting the covenant obligations, disciplines and privileges involved in being a minister within the Baptist Union. Ministers who have retired and whose last office qualified them for inclusion on the List should (as at present) remain on the List and so remain associate members of Assembly for as long as they are members of Baptist churches.

We suggest that in the case of retired members of the Order of Baptist Deaconesses, these be included as an appendix to the List and be regarded as associate members of Assembly in the same way as accredited ministers. With regard to retired missionaries of the Baptist Missionary Society, unless they were also on the list of accredited ministers we suggest that respect and gratitude for their service would be best expressed by their receiving an invitation to attend the Assembly in the same way as 'Friends', that is as non-voting participants. The criterion for membership of the Assembly of the Union must be inclusion within the covenant of the Union, either by representing constituent parts of the Union or by being committed to the personal discipline of accredited ministry in the Union.

4. Unaccredited ministers

When the theological nature of the List of accredited ministers and its conditions of membership have been clarified, it will be consistent with a covenantal understanding of the Union and its List to re-think the place of unaccredited ministers in Assembly. At this point we suggest that unaccredited ministers who are listed in the Baptist Directory as being in pastoral charge of churches in the Union should not be Members of Assembly in their own right,

by virtue of their pastoral office. We suggest that all such unaccredited ministers should have the right to attend Assembly meetings and to speak if they wish, but that they should only be reckoned as members (and so be able to vote) if they are appointed by their churches as one of their delegates, within the permitted number of representatives the churches have. We observe that churches are increasingly appointing a team of ministers, some or all of whom might not be accredited, but all of whom at present can be reckoned as representative members of Assembly.

5. Representatives of other denominations

The covenantal relationship in which members of any particular Christian denomination are bound to each other and to Christ must always bear witness to the wider covenant that Christ makes with his whole Church. The fellowship of any Christian group must point beyond itself to the koinonia that God desires to make with his whole creation, and any local manifestation of the Body of Christ is a making visible of his world-wide Body. It is therefore right that there should be participation in Assembly by members and ministers of other Christian denominations. First, such ministers who are listed in the Baptist Handbook as serving in Local Ecumenical Projects and having pastoral care of Baptist members should continue to be regarded as representative members of Assembly (ie with full voting rights), as long as they are accredited as ordained ministers by their own denomination. Second, six places should be given to representatives of fellow denominations in the *Council of Churches for Britain and Ireland*, who should be allowed to speak in Assembly but not to vote.

6. Further matters for consideration

The questions of size of Council and the manner of representation to it need to be examined in the light of the theological principles outlined in this report. There are also issues concerning categories

of membership of Council beyond those examined in this report. Within the time-scale allotted to it, the Doctrine and Worship Committee has not been able to consider these aspects in sufficient detail to make recommendations. We note that the General Purposes and Finance Executive Committee of the Baptist Union intends to issue a 'Green Paper' on these questions within the next year (implementing paragraph 9 of the Council Document on *The Structures Report 1992* presented at the Council of November 1992). We ask that the General Purposes and Finance Executive Committee should take this present report as a basis for discussion, and should give the Doctrine and Worship Committee some input into preparation of any proposals.

The question of representation from Associations cannot be separated from the structure of Associations themselves. Here we observe that Council has resolved (November 1993) to set up a working group to review the nature of the General Superintendency. It seems clear that in its work the review group will need to consider the nature of *episkope* (pastoral and spiritual oversight) in general, and the relation of *episkope* to various spheres of *koinonia* (fellowship and communion), including the associating of churches together. Some questions about the form and organization of Associations that have been left open in this report will thus inevitably be tackled by this future review, and we ask that the group should take account of the theological principles developed here. We understand our own work to be only one part of a wider enterprise being undertaken at this time by the Baptist Union, to formulate Baptist understanding of the nature of the Church and so to clarify Baptist identity.

Appendix

1. History of the Report

The issue of the ecclesiological nature of the Baptist Union Assembly and Council was referred from *The Structures Report* (1992) to the Doctrine and Worship Committee. The Faith and Unity Executive, meeting in September 1992 therefore asked the Doctrine and Worship Committee to prepare a Report on this matter, and the Committee began its work at its first meeting on 25 September 1992. In discussion of the Structures Report 1992 in Council in November 1992, questions were raised about the nature and function of the Council, and members of Council were assured that consideration was being given to these issues by the Doctrine and Worship Committee. The Committee presented its report to the Faith and Unity Executive at its meeting on 1 February 1994, which resolved to commend the report to Council in March 1994.

2. Members of the Doctrine and Worship Committee involved in preparing this report

Revd Dr Paul S Fiddes (Chairman)
Mrs Faith Bowers (Secretary)

Revd Gethin Abraham-Williams
Revd David R Coffey (ex officio)
Revd Christopher J Ellis
Revd Dr Brian Haymes
Revd Dr Peter A Hicks
Revd Keith G Jones (ex officio)
Revd Douglas McBain
Mr David T Roberts
Revd Nigel G Wright

The Revd David Rowland was also part of the committee for earlier parts of the discussion.