

**THE BAPTIST UNION
OF GREAT BRITAIN**

Relating and Resourcing

The Report of the Task Group on Associating



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Preface

It was originally envisaged that the work of the Task Group on Associating might take two years to complete. As it is the work has occupied a period of some nine months from the time of the Group's appointment by the Baptist Union Council to the agreement of a final text for presentation. We have been keenly aware of the pivotal nature of this task. It has been the intention of the Task Group to present a report which is as brief as can be achieved consistent with fulfilling our terms of reference, setting out our recommendations adequately and providing sufficient comment and explanation to demonstrate the thinking that lies behind them. As Council members perennially have more reading to wade through than should be required of mortals, we trust that the brevity of this document will be understood and perhaps even appreciated.

It has been a pleasure to work together as a Task Group. This had been a co-operative and harmonious experience and the Group gladly now submits its recommendations to Council and the wider Union for consideration.

The membership of the Task Group on Associating

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1 INTRODUCTION

- 1:1 In the agreed Statement of the Denominational Consultation that was held in September 1996, as recorded in the Baptist times of 3 October 1996, the renewal of 'associating' emerged as of the greatest priority. The Baptist Union Council was advised by participants to consider the following (voting figures are indicated in brackets):

Associating

For both effective local co-operative mission and quality pastoral care, Associations and Area/Districts need to be replaced by new ways of associating, characterised by:

- *relationships of trust*
- *smaller geographical areas/regions*
- *structures which are lighter and more flexible*
- *resources of information, training and expertise which may imply devolution from national/Union level (277 - 3)*

Some groups recommended Areas of between 30 and 50 churches (278 - 2).

Others recommended increased personnel working as a team at this level (267 - 13).

- 1:2 In a further section headed 'A new Alliance' the following points were also made:

The Baptist Union of Great Britain to become an Alliance of Baptist Churches (240 - 40) characterised by:

- *Light flexible structures (279 - 1)*
- *Fewer tiers (280 - 0 (no areas 266 - 14))*
- *Association Superintendents (appointed locally (258 - 22) and paid locally (224 - 56))*
- *Renewable commitment by Alliance churches (269 - 11)*

The BU Council of March 1996 was emphatic in its dislike of the term 'Alliance', but the remainder of this section must be considered.

- 1:3 In the November 1996 Council of the Baptist Union an initial Task Group was appointed to agree the terms of reference for a *Task Group on Associating* which would 'further the concerns of the Denominational Consultation and the Baptist Union Council for a radical revision of our Associating'. The terms of reference were agreed at the March 1997 Council and a Task Group appointed to be convened by Dr Nigel Wright. The full terms of reference are included in Appendix I. The minutes of the Council in March indicate that the issue of associating was seen to be of urgent and supreme importance, that the Council would not be satisfied if the Task Group's recommendations were not radical, that there may be tension between what Council eventually decided on this matter and what independent associations and churches agreed to do, and that for this reason the recommendations of this Task Group could be the hardest to enact.

- 1:4 In all subsequent discussions it has been clear that the revision of associating is a key factor in implementing the advice of the Denominational Consultation as a whole and that it possesses logical and practical priority in many other areas under consideration.
- 1:5 In preparing the report the Task Group has:
- consulted with area superintendents, association secretaries and other key people within the denomination, including many less involved in the structured life of the Union.
 - investigated experiments of associating which have come to its attention.
 - canvassed other Unions for insights into their current practice and effectiveness in encouraging associating.
 - canvassed other historic denominations and new church networks concerning their current practice.
 - canvassed and received submissions from within the Union by means of letters in the Baptist times and other periodicals and through discussions at the 1997 Assembly.
 - consulted with others charged with taking forward other aspects of the Denominational Consultation.
 - maintained communication with the Denominational Consultation Reference Group.
- 1:6 Throughout the report, the TGA has made the assumption that the Home Mission Fund will continue as a national resource.
- 1:7 This present document contains the report of the Task Group and we commend it to Council.

2 RELATING AND RESOURCING: CRUCIAL DISTINCTIONS AND FOUNDATIONS

- 2:1 The terms of reference invited the Task Group on Associating (TGA) to 'encourage a deeper understanding of the need for Associating, and further experimentation in new patterns of Associating', to 'explore the importance of Associating for promoting the mission of the local church' and to 'consider ways of deepening spirituality through Associating'. Moreover, we were invited to set out what is meant by associating, its basis in 'covenant commitment' to one another and its purposes in 'mission, resourcing, envisioning, inspiring'. An embryonic theology of associating is therefore already present in the terms of reference.
- 2:2 It is as well to formalise at this point a distinction which has already gained currency in this discussion and which is crucial for this report, namely that between *associating* and *association*. By *associating* we mean that spiritual and social reality whereby churches and their pastors relate to each other in committed, intentional relationships for the purposes of mutual support, encouragement and accountability in the service of mission. By *association* we mean those historic institutional and legal agencies which aim to serve, resource and benefit their member churches in the work of mission. This distinction is reflected in the title of this report. *Relating* is of the essence of *associating*, *resourcing* is of the essence of *association*.
- 2:3 To distinguish between these two elements is not to divide them. They exist in mutual interaction. Associations grew out of associating in the first place and are able to provide a framework within which relationships can be built and established. However, it is crucial to affirm that associating/relating has priority. *Associating does not primarily consist of churches relating to a central institutional agency whether this be association or Union. It consists of churches relating co-operatively and directly to each other.* This we sense to be an important statement since a 'good association church' has often been taken to be one which does its duty, especially financially, by the central institutional structures, whatever the quality of its relations to other churches. Moreover, it cannot be assumed that local Baptist churches will necessarily find their primary inter-church relationships with other Baptist congregations. Many will, while many others will find their most natural relationships with churches in other traditions.
- 2:4 The report *Transforming Superintendency* very helpfully began its reflections with the mission of the Triune God and moved from this to affirm the nature of the church as a community sharing in God's mission: a community of persons gathered together in local congregations, and a community of congregations serving the mission of God as the one people of God. To the people of God as a whole, God gives ministries to build up the church as a whole and enable it to fulfil God's mission.
- 2:5 Baptist accounts of the church have been inclined to begin their reflection by stressing the local fellowship of believers gathered together with Christ in the midst. Sharing in the priesthood of all believers and having the mind of Christ imparted to each congregation, the local church has both power and competence to appoint its own leaders and govern its own affairs (See e.g Article 36 of the *London Confession of 1644*). For this reason, all theologies which presumed power over a congregation and

imposed leadership or government upon it were rejected. This instinct remains close to the heart of Baptist identity. It was balanced in early confessions by a willingness to recognise that although no church had the right to impose its will upon any other, churches might in fellowship or by freely associating together be of mutual benefit in 'peace, increase of love and mutual edification', (*Second London Confession*, 1677 and 89, articles 14,15). Furthermore, the discussions surrounding the founding of the Abingdon Association in 1652 require close attention. After affirming that churches should hold 'a firm communion with each other', the argument is advanced that there is the same relationship between one church and another as there is between the members of one church. As each believer should be part of a church for the purpose of mutual support and correction so churches should manifest the same care for each other. (B R White, ed., *Association Records of the Particular Baptists of England, Wales and Ireland to 1660. Part 3: The Abingdon Association*, pp 126-7). The logic here suggests that as membership of a church is a freely chosen act so churches might and should freely choose to join a communion of churches.

- 2:6 It can be claimed with justification that the early Baptist understanding of the relation of particular churches to the wider church is 'independence in regard to power but not in regard to communion' (cp. R C Walton, *The Gathered Community*, London, 1946, pp.89-91). This is the balance we are required to strike: the forming of a fellowship of churches in which power is owned by autonomous congregations but where fellowship is widely and constructively pursued. There are those who hesitate to describe the relations between the churches 'as 'covenantal', but provided this is understood as a free covenant of love in which the participants retain their freedom there should be no objection to the use of the word. Similarly, fears are sometimes expressed about the alleged desire to transform the Union into a 'Church' in which power is centralised. This report in no way supports such a move. But it does recognise that in gathering together as churches and committing ourselves to each other we are giving expression to important aspects of 'being church'. The Body of Christ is not confined to local churches but finds expression in the relations between churches as well as within them.
- 2:7 The Baptist understanding of the local church is rooted in the belief that 'where two or three come together in my name there am I with them' (Matthew 18:20). Belief in the competence of the local church derives from this sense of the presence of Christ among his people. Yet such a belief is often misunderstood. It is not a claim that local churches do not need anything or anybody else. The local church may be competent, but it is scarcely omniscient. And if Christ is present in the local church he is also present in the wider church which is the 'fullness of him who fills everything in every way' (Ephesians 1:23). No local church is complete of itself and does well to seek for that of Christ which is expressed in the wider Body. This impinges upon both mission and spirituality. To fulfil the mission of Christ, churches have to do it together that they may make up for each other's lacks and set forth the whole Christ. To grow into spiritual fullness requires us to tap into the spiritual insights, wisdom and vitality of the wider Body. These considerations provide the spiritual and theological foundations for the rest of the report.
- 2:8 We take the key issue at stake in this report to be the discovery, or re-discovery of a new quality of relationship between congregations. The Statement of the Denominational Consultation referred to 'relationships of trust'. At the end of the day

these can only be found where they are desired and earnestly pursued. We have borne in mind that we stand in a 'voluntarist' tradition: spiritual acts and exercises are only deemed to have value if they are freely willed and entered into. What this report will call for therefore is more than can be achieved by means of constitutional or institutional reform. It requires a work of God and active response from God's people. However, in order to encourage the quality of associating which is being called for, the challenge of institutional change cannot be shirked since association life can both enable and hinder effective associating. As *Transforming Superintendency* indicated, the church is 'a movement of God rather than an institution of our making' (p.13). Institutions are not to be devalued, but they are to be kept flexible in order to serve the purpose of this moment rather than a past one. Accordingly, the report makes recommendations concerning the revision of our relating to one another and of the resourcing agencies which could do much to encourage this into being.

- 2:9 Relating to the broader church of Christ must inevitably reach beyond the boundaries of Baptist churches alone. Relating between churches will include other Baptist congregations but it is inevitable and desirable in the present climate in which denominational boundaries have been blurred that different churches will relate in different combinations according to the realities of their situation. We view this positively. It does mean that there will be no straightforward formula which can be applied across the board of churches in the Baptist Union. Granted the fact of diversity, we do not believe that it is in the interests of churches to have purely nominal ties to the Baptist Union of Great Britain. Even where the primary focus of associating is elsewhere, there will continue to be help and resources, a sense of connectedness and the perspectives of an historic Free Church denomination from which churches might continue to benefit. However, diversities of associating will lead to diverse levels of participation in the life of associations and Union. This is, of course, in principle no different from the present, but should the recommendations of this report be implemented our awareness of it may increase.
- 2:10 The Task Group has been asked to respond to the discussions arising out of *Transforming Superintendency*. Our response chiefly concerns the definition of the primary task of the superintendents. It will be clear from what is recommended that we understand the role of superintendents to be primarily that of leaders in mission with a particular responsibility to ensure that the ministers of the churches are adequately supported and cared for. If associating is to become a renewed and widespread reality the leadership given by the superintendents is a crucial factor. Furthermore, if we are calling the churches to a new quality of associating it becomes imperative that those who are involved at levels of senior leadership within the life of the Union should themselves practise and model a high quality of relating towards one another in the service of the Union's mission.
- 2:11 The TGA was further charged with determining 'a method of annual renewal of commitment between churches, Associations, colleges and the officers and staff of the Union'. As we have discussed this within and beyond the TGA we have become persuaded that an annual renewal of commitment is impracticable and would swiftly become a formality. However, we do believe there is value in a renewal of commitment focused on the millennium and with the initial decade of the new millennium in view. We have given serious consideration to the view that we are living in a 'post-denominational' age and that people are no longer willing to be tied

too closely to a denominational identity. Much more important for many believers in their choice of a church seem to be the vibrancy of worship or the inspiration of the preaching or the style of mission. However, while many believers are no longer denominationalist in approach we judge the more decisive factor to be post-institutionalism. In every aspect of life, centralised and impersonal structures are instinctively distrusted, however unfairly. There is evidence that people do still wish to belong to a movement with a definable ethos, a clear vision and trusted leaders. A vision statement could assist the Union in defining itself as a missionary movement.

3 WHAT WE HAVE FOUND

3:1 Part of the task of the TGA was to 'investigate experiments in reforming our Associating that are already taking place'. This is taken to refer to both experiments in *associating* and the reform of *association*. This has been achieved mainly by consulting with area superintendents and association secretaries and by identifying and canvassing individuals or groups engaged in such experiments. We have also gathered numerous examples of good practice and these are presented in Appendix 2. The following sections summarise the general principles of what we have learnt in the areas first of *relating* and then *resourcing*.

3:2 It would be misleading to suggest that there are large numbers of experiments taking place in the area of relating. Initially we were surprised at how few were brought to our attention. Equally, it would be false to suggest that any of these experiments are advanced or that they are widespread across the spectrum of outlooks in the Union. Sometimes closer levels of associating are being achieved in and through existing association structures; at other times they are being sought independently of, but not in opposition to, association structures. Similar priorities can be found in recent developments in some associations, experimental networks sponsored by *Mainstream*, ecumenical associating whether through *Churches Together* or local evangelical councils, and also in the new church networks that have attracted some Baptists, whether their involvement has been unreserved and long term or tentative and temporary. In new forms of associating people are looking for genuinely supportive relationships giving expression to some or all of the following concerns:

- Many ministers have been seeking a deeper partnership in the Gospel, a greater degree of connectedness with others, so that there are close colleagues to whom they can turn in times of pressure or personal need.
- There is concern for relationships with a kingdom purpose, for comradeship in pursuit of the common mission task.
- There is a sense of solidarity in a larger vision, so that the local church is seen to be playing its part in a vision that is being expressed regionally and/or nationally.
- There is an exploration of ways of strengthening whole church relationships, whether through training days for several teams of elders and deacons, united celebrations across a town or region, or the twinning of churches with diverse social settings, needs and opportunities.
- There is a willingness to identify and seek to benefit from trans-local ministries whether as preachers or trainers, prophets or evangelists, trouble-shooters or vision and strategy consultants. With spiritual grace but without dogmatic authoritarianism, these ministries can speak into, serve and strengthen the life of the local church.

- 3:3 New patterns of associating are emerging as a consequence of biblical reflection on the nature of the church, felt need and the example and stimulus provided from largely non-Baptist sources. They come into being when one or more ministers are prepared to take an initiative and set something in train. The lessons to be derived from this are that grassroots initiatives are essential and are more likely to be effective and to remain healthy if they are viewed by association officers as complementary rather than in opposition to their own work.
- 3:4 In this generation, our current associations have generally not been successful at achieving great depth of relationship between constituent churches. There is in the material we have reviewed a trend towards smaller numbers of churches associating more closely together in clusters or networks based on geography, shared concerns or theological emphases. The essential ingredient is, however, *the will to associate* and at this point it must be declared that in many members within the churches there is little evidence of a strong desire for wider forms of associating than the local church itself. This is the largest single obstacle that has to be overcome in rediscovering effective associating. The desire for associating, where it exists, is mainly generated by ministers who have become aware of their own need for support and stimulus through wider relationships. Those clusters which have emerged are both within and beyond current association boundaries and often they cross denominational boundaries. At the same time it is clear that larger groupings of churches become necessary for the resourcing of different tasks or enterprises. If this, clusters of churches within larger regional groupings, represents the shape of the future there will be a diversity of ways of associating. One of the tasks of our institutional structures will be to hold such diversity together.
- 3:5 To gain a fuller picture of association life, the TGA circulated a questionnaire to all association secretaries. All but two were completed in detail and returned. Appendix 3 contains a summary and interpretation of the results. It can be seen from this survey that all associations understand their task in terms of mission and many are reappraising their effectiveness to this end. Traditional association-wide events are generally poorly supported whereas smaller and more specifically targeted events fare better. District life which reproduces the association model on a smaller scale is widely proving unsuccessful, but there is scope for the clustering or gathering of churches in smaller networks. Relational models of inter-church life are seen to be the shape of the future. Whereas the importance and value of effective administration is recognised, the ministry of association secretaries is often, by their own accounts, weighted towards administrative duties rather than Mission.
- 3:6 It is clear that a considerable burden is laid upon some association secretaries because they also carry trust responsibilities. The trust work for churches in the Union is divided roughly equally between the Baptist Union Corporation and the eight association trust corporations. The potential danger is that the efforts of association trust secretaries are diverted away from focused mission activity into detailed trust work. On the other hand, trust matters provide points of contact between churches and associations which can be pastorally fruitful and which can enable the mission of the churches to advance practically. In the recommendations, we offer possible ways of coping with trust matters in ways which need not divert from mission.

- 3:7 There is a strong case for the reform and streamlining of association life in order that resources and efforts might be concentrated most effectively in the service of both associating and of mission. Appendix 4 summarises the experience of the Sussex Association in adopting new models of operation. While not a blueprint, this is one model of how associations might renew their life. The recommendations of the TGA which follow should be seen constructively as attempting to take into future association structures the best aspects of what is currently being achieved.
- 3:8 The overall vision which emerges from the Task Group's findings is one in which churches are learning to relate to one another in supportive clusters or networks. These will of necessity be limited in size and may diverge in direction, with some finding their nearest support ecumenically and others within largely Baptist groupings. Such networks or clusters will find their place within reformed and streamlined association structures which will be clearly focused upon mission. One of the primary functions of Associations will therefore be to promote, enable and support associating for the advance of our mission.

4 RECOMMENDATIONS AND EXPLANATIONS

The TGA makes the following recommendations. R1 and R2 should be seen as foundational to all the others.

R1 We recognise through church meetings, the Baptist Union Council, Assembly, Association Assemblies and in our college communities that although we possess institutional forms of association we have largely lost the reality of associating. We need as a matter of urgency to rediscover this dimension of the church's life for the sake of our own spiritual health and for the proper fulfilment of the mission to which we are called.

R2 Since this rediscovery can only take place as the churches of the Union desire it and seek it out, we recommend the Council to

- call our churches to a new start in this regard,
- urge them to identify those other churches with which in particular they are able to build mutually supportive relationships, clusters and networks and to take appropriate initiatives to rediscover the reality of associating,
- assure them of our support and encouragement in this process,
- urge them to see the continuing value of larger structures in regional and national forms acting as sources of missionary vision and challenge, and as providing resources, support and the means for remaining connected to one another at wider levels.

Explanation: We have already noted that the rediscovery of effective associating is likely to take a diversity of forms. It will involve for some churches closer forms of ecumenical associating, and for others patterns of associating which cross the boundaries of existing associations. We believe that a viable vision for future patterns of associating will involve smaller clusters of churches working more closely together while belonging to wider networks providing fellowship, accountability, resources and recognition. However, the key to all of this is the will to associate with other churches which can only be generated from within the churches themselves. As we are a Union of churches, associations and colleges, the importance of the colleges is recognised in R1 and they also are invited to explore their part in strengthening relationship both within and beyond their communities. We hope this will be further considered by the Union/Colleges Partnership Task Group.

R3 To enable us more effectively to fulfil our task of serving and supporting effective associating in the service of mission we recommend that existing associations undergo substantive reform, including:

R3:1 the overall recasting of association structures to form 'regional associations'. This will be achieved by merging the existing 29 geographical associations in England and Wales and the 12 Baptist Union 'areas'. We envisage initially approximately 16 regional associations as the outcome. We recommend this taking place by 1 January 2001 at the latest.

Explanation: In this process of recasting the intention is to streamline our existing structures and simplify the number of tiers in our corporate life. We envisage that the process would begin with the existing twelve areas while allowing for some increase from this base where there is an evident demand for it. Finance must also be taken into consideration in assessing the number of regional associations that can be sustained. The number 16 is a guideline and no attempt is made here to determine boundaries or be prescriptive. This must come from the grassroots and we are hereby signalling openness to this possibility. However, regional associations need to be of sufficient size to support a leadership team and where there are large numbers of churches within a cohesive geographical area a larger leadership team may be preferable to dividing up the region. This task can only be accomplished with the co-operation of the associations concerned. We are aware that attempts have been made to coalesce some associations into areas and have not succeeded. However we have been asked to set forward proposals for 'radical revision' and the recasting of associations and areas provides a coherent way forward. Our desire is to retain use of the word 'association' because of its historical and theological background. Non-geographical associations remain unchanged by this recommendation.

R3:2 The primary purpose of each regional association and its staff should be the fulfilling of Christian mission through its member churches, their members and ministers and the enabling of associating for this purpose.

R3:3 Within each of the new regional associations a leadership team should be formed comprising a variety of ministries including visionary, pastoral, evangelistic, and other specialist abilities.

Explanation: We believe the idea of a *leadership team* to be crucial and would envisage at least two full-time such ministries in each association, with others serving in full-time, part-time or voluntary capacities according to the needs and opportunities of the association. We also commend the idea that some churches might release their ministers for some of the time to contribute to the development of associating and the mission of the churches.

R3:4 The title 'area (or general) superintendent' should be replaced by 'regional minister' which should also be used of full-time team members exercising oversight in the areas of mission and pastoral care.

Explanation: If areas no longer exist a change in title is necessary and this is an appropriate moment to discontinue the word 'superintendent'.

R3:5 These teams should be led by a senior regional minister. The teams will have responsibility for leading the association in mission, for general oversight of the churches, for encouraging inter-church associating and for the pastoral care of ministers.

Explanation: By common agreement teams require a clearly designated leader. This recommendation makes the assumption that currently serving superintendents will take this leading role in the first instance. The TGA may be seen to differ from the recommendations of *Transforming Superintendency* (7:5) in that it defines the role of superintendents primarily as leadership in mission. However, the wording of the

recommendation places the superintendent as leader of a team which corporately bears this responsibility. Similarly, the care of the churches and their ministers is borne corporately by the leadership team. We are at one with *Transforming Superintendency* in believing the care of ministers to be of the highest importance. Superintendents may not provide all the first-line support and care that is needed, but as team leaders it is their responsibility to make sure that this care is exercised. We envisage that one of the full-time members of the team would bear this as a particular responsibility. It is also recognised here that there are varying styles of leadership in association life as there are in the local church.

R3:6 Regional ministers should be called, employed and paid locally by the regional associations, once formed, on standard terms agreed across the Union. Regional associations also should have responsibility for job descriptions which in the case of senior regional ministers will be based on a common core agreed across the Union.

Explanation: The trend of these recommendations is towards local ownership and responsibility. Regional ministers are accountable to their regional associations in the first instance and this needs to be embodied in the practicalities of employment. This change in existing practice implies a change to the way in which Home Mission money is refunded. Various possibilities are set out in Appendix 5. However it is clearly desirable that there should be a uniformity of terms and conditions agreed across the Union. It is also essential for job descriptions of senior regional ministers to have a common core, not least because particular responsibilities rest upon them for linking associations with the Union as a whole. Job descriptions of other regional ministers might vary according to local needs. The Baptist Union could act as a paying agency for any association which so desired.

R3:7 Regional ministers should be appointed or (re-appointed) by a confirmatory (not competitive) vote of the churches of the regional associations once formed, as an expression of accountability to those churches. Other team members should be appointed on a part-time, full-time or voluntary basis by procedures agreed within each regional association.

Explanation: The appointments group will contain a majority from within the regional association determined by a vote of the churches; a minority will be appointed by the Union to lend wider perspective to what are nationally significant ministries. Nominations for regional ministers should be confirmed by a majority of those churches voting. It is assumed that current 'superintendents' will complete their present terms of office and, where appropriate, be re-appointed in the above fashion.

R3:8 Regional associations should operate with a minimum of bureaucracy and committees. All existing committees or working groups should be suspended and only those directly necessary to the regional associations' functioning re-established.

R3:9 All districts should be suspended in their present form in favour of smaller clusters and networks of churches associating together.

R3:10 The current practice of appointing association moderators or presidents should be discontinued.

R3.11 In the case of those associations which also act as trust corporations, trust work should be a secondary rather than a primary activity of the association. This should be done either (i) by delegating trust work administration to the Baptist Union Corporation or (ii) by appointing or employing a manager to carry the trust fund work.

Explanation: The above four recommendations aim to simplify and streamline the working of associations and to move from bureaucratic models to more functional and mission-orientated ways of working. A major concern is the amount of time and effort that is taken up in some associations by trust work. This recommendation offers ways in which this may be delegated in order for ministry and mission to be given clear priority.

R3:12 Regional associations should be governed by councils on which all churches are directly represented, and an executive elected by the council. The purpose of such councils would be to advance the mission of the association and to give support and help to the leadership team. The executive would function under the leadership of the senior regional minister.

Explanation: This gives all churches a direct voice in the government of association life and simplifies structures of representation. It could potentially lead to large council meetings but this is desirable if it indicates increased participation. With this new structure Area Pastoral Committees in their present form would cease and their function would be taken over by regional association executives.

R3:13 Assemblies and other association gatherings should be suspended in their present form unless then can clearly be shown to meet the needs of the churches.

Explanation: In the face of widespread evidence that traditional assemblies are not working this recommendation invites alternative strategies (See Appendix 2)

R4 We recommend that the general secretaries, senior regional ministers and heads of Union departments should constitute a national leadership team for the oversight of mission, pastoral care and the encouragement of associating. The national leadership team should be led by the General Secretary and should have freedom to choose its own moderator.

Explanation: Effective associating will not be achieved in the life of the Union if it is not expressed and modelled by those who constitute its senior leadership. Furthermore, some of the recommendations in this report encourage the Union in the direction of institutional de-centralisation. This needs to be compensated for by stronger relationships binding the Union together. The designation of a national leadership team is an extension of what already exists and could be implemented at an early date. The TGA affirms the need for servant leadership in the life of the Union.

R5 We recommend that in the year 2000 plans be brought forward for the radical reform of the Baptist Union Council.

Explanation: Initially the TGA was drawn to the recommendation of *Transforming Superintendency* (13:2) 'that Council considers the creation of a Mission and Ministry Forum' to act as a think tank discussing and surveying 'what is happening in the Churches, with the ministers, and in society'. Within the logic of our own report, it seemed that such a Forum could also provide the means of greater depth of associating between the senior leaders of the Union. However, we have come to find this proposal increasingly problematic. If the Forum were indeed to match our hopes, this could call into question the role of the Baptist Union Council which, arguably, should be a forum for associating in the service of mission. Moreover, *Transforming Superintendency* itself raised concerns about the balance of representation of the Forum. It has concerned us that the Forum might have relatively few members who are in pastoral leadership of congregations and this seems to be at variance with our ethos. We have considered (i) that the recommendations of this present report, if accepted, would themselves require considerable changes in representation to Council; (ii) that there is a widespread feeling that the last review of the composition of Council was insufficiently radical; (iii) that the recommended national leadership team would fulfil some of the work of the proposed Forum. We therefore recommend that, rather than create a Forum in addition to our existing Council and other structures, Council be reformed to meet the needs of the Union more adequately. As such reforms would depend in part on the reception of the present and other reports, we recommend the year 2000 as an appropriate timetable for this.

R6 We recommend the preparation of a covenant for the first decade of the new millennium around which the churches, associations and colleges of our Union might constructively gather and which might be used for the National Baptist Leaders Day in 1999 and for the whole Union in 2000. We recommend that this covenant be in two parts of which the first should be a brief declaration of intent and mutual commitment to be used in acts of worship. The second should be a more extended commentary. Together these documents could contain

- a re-affirmation of our basic Christian beliefs;
- a re-affirmation of our basic Baptist convictions;
- reference to the Declaration of Principle.
- a simple statement of our core values.
- a re-commitment to the primary purpose of our Union in serving the mission of God.
- a re-commitment of our churches to each other in this task.
- a re-affirmation of our responsibility to provide financially for the work.
- a statement of our hopes and intentions for the first decade of the new millennium.

Explanation: The millennium offers a focal point at which the various elements of the Denominational Consultation might be drawn together. In preference to 'a method of annual renewal of commitment between churches, associations, colleges and the officers and staff of the Union' to which the TGA's terms of reference refer, we recommend an act of mutual commitment in the year 2000 when many of the issues arising from the Denominational Consultation will have been clarified. To assist

this a brief statement of commitment for use in the churches, associations and the Union assembly in 2000 would seem appropriate. However, this could be helpfully supported by a more extensive document bringing together for future reference some of the elements listed in the recommendation. It would seem sensible to focus in the document on our hopes for the first decade of the new millennium rather than on the indefinite future. Future generations might choose to renew their commitment in a similar way at the turn of the decade.

- R7 We recommend that a group be specifically charged with enabling the implementation of the recommendations contained in this report, once accepted, and other reports which arise out of the period of denominational review.**

Explanation: It is recognised that the recommendations in this review must be referred to the associations upon which they have a direct bearing. However once they are tabled the Union will have before it a variety of reports which will need to be decided on and, where agreed, implemented. The Union will need to move from reflection to implementation in order to keep faith with the expectations raised by the Denominational Consultation. A group needs to be charged with overseeing the completion of the task which has begun. This includes envisioning the ministers and churches of the Union concerning the priority of associating in the service of mission.

5. CONCLUSION

- 5:1 The TGA was charged with furthering the concerns of the Denominational Consultation by bringing forward proposals for the radical revision of our associating. We believe we have done this.
- 5:2 It has been our concern to bring forward radical proposals which are at the same time workable and practical. We believe that where the will exists what we have proposed can be accomplished.
- 5:3 In referring back to the advice offered by the Denominational Consultation we believe that what we have recommended is substantially in line in detail with what the Consultation called for and completely in line in spirit and intention. If these recommendations are accepted, the life of our churches, associations and Union would be more intensely relational, considerably less cumbersome and significantly more de-centralised. We have sought to offer a broad and consistent framework in which many subsidiary details could be supplied according to local need. We offer these recommendations unanimously in the belief that they will contribute to the Union's becoming more and more a movement which serves the purposes of God.

Appendix 1

Terms of Reference of the Task Group on Associating

1 Preamble

The (Terms of Reference) Group noted with satisfaction that Council intended to appoint a Task Group, rather than a Review Group, to consider the task of improving our associating.

2 Aims

The Task Group on Associating should:

- i) Further the concerns of the Denominational Consultation and the Baptist Union Council for a radical revision of our Associating.
- ii) Investigate experiments in reforming our Associating that are already taking place.
- iii) Encourage a deeper understanding of the need for Associating, and further experimentation in new patterns of Associating.
- iv) Explore the importance of Associating for promoting the mission of the local church.
- v) Determine a method of annual renewal of commitment between churches, Associations, colleges and the officers and staff of the Union.
- vi) Consider ways of deepening spirituality through associating.

3 Objectives

The Task Group on Associating should consider:

- i) What is meant by Associating?
 - a) Our basis for Associating - covenant commitment to one another.
 - b) Our patterns for Associating - structure and geography.
 - c) Our purposes for Associating - mission, resourcing, envisioning, inspiring.
- ii) In what ways does Associating best take place?
 - a) National, regional, local.
 - b) Theological, ecumenical, cultural, ethnic.

The relationship of Trust Corporations to Associations can be considered under (i) (b) and (c), and (ii) (a).

4 Method

- i) In place of a programme of visits to Associations which the Terms of Reference Group believe would be slow and expensive, the Task Group on Associating should consult with Area Superintendents and Association

- ii) Secretaries to establish the current practices of, and visions for, Associating. The Task Group should consult with key people and churches within the denomination who are not aligned with existing Association structures, to understand their reasons for not supporting the present structures and their ideas for alternative ways of Associating.
- iii) The group think that a questionnaire approach to local churches would *not* be appropriate.
- iv) The Task Group will need to respond to the Council decisions on the *Transforming Superintendency* report, and make recommendations about any changes needed by existing Association structures to fulfil the responsibilities imposed by it.
- v) The Task Group should be aware of discussions proceeding on other relevant areas of the Denominational Consultation advice.

5 Membership of the Task Group

The Terms of Reference Group believe that the Task Group on Associating should consist of no more than eight members plus a staff member, and that membership should include an Area Superintendent, at least one Association Secretary, and several members who do not presently play a part in Association structures. They recommend that a member of the Senior Management Team be invited to be a full member of the Group.

6 Time Scale

Council instructed the Task Group to report no later than March 1999. The Terms of Reference Group consider that because of the urgency expressed by the Denominational Consultation about the subject, and because of the methodology proposed - of consultation rather than a prolonged process of visitation, it is not unrealistic to ask the Task Group to bring their report to the Council in March 1998.

Appendix 2

Examples of good practice

As the TGA has fulfilled its task it has gleaned examples of what people find helpful and unhelpful in associating and association. These are listed here as encouragement for those seeking practical ways forward.

- Smaller groups of churches networking together.
- Associating in short term projects for a specific timescale.
- Large scale celebration gatherings.
- Prayer breakfasts drawing ministers and leaders together.
- Local rather than centralised activities.
- Non-competitive environments
- Visionary leadership with mission perspective, especially at Association level.
- Larger churches twinning with smaller churches.
- Smaller churches 'borrowing' workers from larger ones for periods of time.
- Grouping churches in smaller networks.
- Meetings where there is no agenda but where matters are prayed through together.
- Task-orientated and flexible regional structures.
- Associating and gathering with a clear purpose in view.
- Supportive trans-local ministries.
- Remodelled assemblies where there is an investment of thought, energy and preparation.
- Ecumenical co-operation in ventures such as church planting.
- Co-operation with other churches in social witness and justice projects such as care for the elderly, witness to councils and to government.
- Events which meet obvious needs, which are meaningful and interesting.
- Events which are clearly focused.
- Events which move away from business to inspiration and fellowship.
- Training days.
- Commitment on behalf of ministers to interdependency.
- Providing needed specific services and resources, including Trust matters.
- Personal contact with Association leaders.
- Association visits to churches.
- New patterns of ministers' meetings.
- Appraisal programmes for pastors and churches.
- Lay training events.
- Association Family days.
- Association investment in church plants.
- Churches co-operating in resourcing seeker services.
- Creating lists of professional expertise.
- Pastoral visits to churches.
- Mission teams drawn from several churches.
- District meetings for information and ministry led by the superintendent.
- Association Council meetings on which churches are directly represented.

For completeness, the following are found to be unhelpful:

Associating solely for denominational or historical reasons.

Geographical units which do not allow for meaningful relationships.

Association life which is primarily administrative and organisational.

Traditional association assemblies.

Lack of support for smaller churches.

Too many committees meeting for little real purpose.

Routine Council meetings.

'Anything that smells of formal institution'.

General purpose events.

Lack of visionary leadership.

Placing the needs of the organisation above the mission of the churches.

Institutional patterns and tiers which are not perceived to be relational.

Hyper-independency.

The self-sufficiency of larger churches.

Appendix 3

Summary of responses from Association Secretaries

In the light of questions asked and the very full response from Association Secretaries, the following general observations can be made of current patterns of associating in the work of our existing Associations:

Many Associations are undergoing a period of reappraisal and review with the aim of renewing goals, structures and life.

Associations regard their primary goal as mission with their work focused on the churches where it is expressed in encouraging, enabling, resourcing, advising and equipping.

Association secretaries are presently over-stretched, under resourced and in many cases unfairly recompensed. They include in their aims the providing of leadership, vision, resources, advice, oversight and care, effective administration, a liaison with Area and Union, expertise and inspiration.

The excessive burden of administrative duties is the greatest obstacle to Association Secretaries fulfilling these aims.

Association-wide events struggle to succeed whereas those of smaller groupings appear to work better. Positive factors encouraging success include relevance and a clear focus, and a moving away from business to inspirational/fellowship/task orientated models.

The needs of the churches are for relevance and a clear focus (often expressed towards mission) by Associations. Perceived lack of relevance is stated as the primary reason for churches' distance from current Association life together with the independence of the local church.

Formal Districts based on a historical and geographical model, often functioning as mini-associations, have not worked. However, there is a clear need for smaller groupings or clusters of churches.

Suggested keys to good associating highlight the commitment of ministers and leaders, together with relevance, vision and leadership; enabling the mission task of the local church; and for models to be relationship based. The consensus is the priority of the relational model.

The provision of full-time trans-local leadership, released from a largely administrative role, is a clear aid, as are smaller groupings of churches with lighter and more flexible supporting structures.

Experiments in associating meet modest success and include a redefinition of the role and function of the Association Secretary; revitalised vision and direction through new leadership and streamlined structures; overseas links; enabling the mission task of the local church; models to be relationship based; informal networking of like-minded churches; new patterns of ministers meetings; provision of a resources directory; annual covenants, and annual appraisals of churches.

What is not working is associating for purely denominational or historical reasons in geographical units which do not allow for meaningful relational contact. Neither does association life which is primarily administrative, organisational and representative and in places based on illogical boundaries. Smaller churches do not feel supported and present institutional patterns and tiers which are not perceived to be relational are considered unhelpful.

A significant number of responses suggest a move towards smaller networks of between 2 and 8 churches, not necessarily determined by geographical considerations. This would be resourced by a trans-local leadership team based on an Area or Regional model.

Appendix 4

Renewing Associations: A Case Study

The Sussex Baptist Association provides a model of an existing association that has undergone considerable change. It is an example of how change can be introduced and gives indications as to the success and limits of such change in our contemporary setting.

In the early 1990s the decision was made by the Sussex Baptist Association to discover a more effective model of association. This began with a re-emphasis upon the Association's foundational mission statement: 'The object of this Association is to encourage our Churches and Ministers in the evangelisation of our County and to foster the establishment and growth of strong local Churches' (Rule 2). This led to the decision to move from a part-time General Secretary and full-time Missioner to employing a full-time Director of Mission as the Association's Chief Officer, supported by a part-time Administrator and reinforced with appropriate secretarial help. The intention was to free the new Director from administration in order that he or she might be able to become more proactive in helping the churches in their mission.

Replacing the office of Association General Secretary, the role of the new Director of Mission was to envision and enable the Association and its member churches in their primary object of mission, understanding the fostering of strong, healthy local churches as the most effective way to reach the county. A crucial shift in emphasis was made from association to associating, from an organisation or institution towards a relational body serving the needs and mission of the member churches. Only those structures and supports needed for this new focused, relational and task-orientated model would be retained.

In pursuit of this new agenda the Director of Mission was required to delegate all relevant clerical and administrative tasks. Significant though this delegation was, of greater significance was the transformation of structures. With the objectives of simplification, efficiency and the avoidance of duplication the majority of Association committees disappeared. The net result has been a minimal structure as below:

1. Council (2 representatives per church who meet 3 times a year for worship, prayer, news sharing and major decision making).
2. An Executive (who meet 6 times a year)
3. An Association Resources Group (who meet 2 times a year)
4. An Association Ministerial Recognition Committee (who meet approximately 3 times a year as required). It is being considered whether this could operate better as an Area Committee.

In addition the Director of Mission, Administrator and Treasurer meet monthly together with the Area Superintendent.

In terms of events, only those that were seen clearly to meet the needs of the churches continued. Association life was to help and serve the local church. For instance, an annual

Family Day was discontinued while an annual Celebration attracting over 1000 has been increased to a bi-annual event. Each of the four Districts under the leadership of a District Coordinator (all serving ministers) has been encouraged to develop a termly Prayer Event at a time and venue helpful to and chosen by the District churches. Other events have again sought to be focused and task-orientated, e.g., Secretary and Treasurer Days, Church Planting Forums, Worship Resource and Training Days, and an Awayday for Home Mission grant aided churches.

In a period of only two years it is difficult properly to evaluate the effectiveness of this new model. The most effective change has been the release of a Director of Mission to envision, enable, encourage, trouble-shoot, teach, strategise with, offer counsel and friendship, and so provide what has proved to be an effective package of leadership, care and vision.

The emphasis has shifted from Association to associating, the work now is task-orientated, relational and proactive. The administrative load has clearly been significantly lifted. Within a year the Administrator's workload had lightened and the role was redefined in the light of fewer committees and less administrative demand. The budget for clerical support in 1997 has proved smaller than in past years. The budget itself has been transformed in appearance and emphasis to become a mission statement of its own.

Relationship, partnership, focus and the goal of mission has proved attractive to many who previously stood on the fringes of association life. However, realistically, there are still those who remain to be convinced for whatever reason and experience has proved that if the leaders do not share the vision then it is difficult to get the churches on board. The challenge remains in persuading, educating and bringing on board the majority of ordinary church members who continue to be unaware of even new forms of associating.

Appendix 5

Financial Implications

The present associations are financed partly by historic money in their own localities but mainly by three streams of money from Home Mission. The first is a flat rate sum per Area which provides the salary and expenses of the Area Superintendent regardless of the size and finances of that Area. The second is a refund of 25% of the previous year's Home Mission giving. The third is an increasing number of grants from Home Mission towards association employees of one sort or another.

The new regional associations might also be funded from the same sources in a different combination and the following three models are suggested as guides. Each would involve a re-negotiation of the longstanding agreement of the Home Mission Scheme.

1. Each of the regional associations might receive a flat rate sum from Home Mission regardless of its size or Home Mission giving.
2. Each of the regional associations might receive a sum equivalent to two salaries of full-time regional ministers together with a smaller percentage of their Home Mission giving.
3. Each of the regional associations might receive a larger percentage refund of their Home Mission giving from which they would be expected to pay the two full-time salaries on an agreed national basis.

The figures in the 1998 budget which are relevant to this funding are as follows:

Superintendents	£432,000
Association refunds	£620,000
Grants	£80,000
Total	£1,132,000

This implies the following figures for the three options above, based on 16 regional associations:

1. Each regional association to receive £66,000
2. Each regional association to receive two salaries and associated costs plus 10% of their previous year's Home Mission giving.
3. Each regional association to receive 42.5% of its previous year's Home Mission giving.