

NEWSLETTER

EDITORIAL: THE BAPTIST ANNUAL ASSEMBLY

The Baptist Annual Assembly will occur on July 22-23 at Parkside Baptist Church. The final recommendations from the Directions 2012 process will be put to the assembly. These recommendations involve a significant restructuring of the Governance model of the Baptist Union of NSW/ACT and BET encourages pastors and delegates to attend this important meeting, read the recommendations carefully, and offer constructive, restrained, and thoughtful contributions to the Assembly. BET has previously offered thoughts on Directions 2012 through the *Lever*, downloadable at www.bet.org.au.

With this newsletter we do our best to summarise the substance of the recommendations, and outline the

concerns we have in the area of Assembly powers, and the relationship of Assembly to some committees of the denomination. When it comes to expressing concerns, the danger in being too prescriptive with alternatives is that those who read the newsletter may simply assume such prescriptions are the right ones!

The danger in not suggesting anything specific is that it leaves people without a concrete idea of how the recommendations might be improved. So we've aimed in the middle and made general comments that we hope will aid you in your own assessment, as well as three specific suggestions that give expression to some of those general comments.



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The place of Assembly in the New Denominational Order

ASSEMBLY, DIS-ASSEMBLY OR RE-ASSEMBLY?

There's nothing like a concrete proposal to force you to articulate your principles and work out the difference that they make to your practice. The members of Taskforce Three are to be congratulated on the completion of a mammoth task and thanked for the detailed recommendations that they have put in front of the assembly for our debate and decision in July. Now that there's a definite proposal on the table we can go back to our basic principles and use them as a yardstick to measure something solid and real.

In previous editions of

The Lever I have already written a couple of articles about the place that assembly has in our polity as Baptists, and the things that make for a good assembly. In this article, my aim is to assess the proposal that has been formulated by the Governance Taskforce from that perspective. My job will be to ask what effect the proposed restructuring will have on the role that Assembly plays in the life of our denomination and how we can improve the proposal to safeguard that role and improve the way it is exercised.

The main change
The main change that

the Taskforce Three recommendations would make to the way assembly functions in the life of our denomination would be to reduce the directness of its oversight of the co-operative agencies and officers of the denomination. The number of committees and departments that are required to report directly to assembly would be slashed to just two (the Assembly Council and the Morling College Council) and the number of positions that are filled by the direct appointment of the assembly would be massively reduced.

The rationale

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Motivating that change was a basic assumption about the inability of Assembly to do what it is currently charged with doing. The final report of the taskforce questioned:

whether an annual meeting of representatives of some 320 churches can, in the time available and given the nature of the gathering,

effectively discern the suitability or otherwise of the persons nominated to it for appointment to its councils, committees or staff

hold any council, committee or individual properly accountable for their performance, or

develop a specific, ongoing vision or direction (except to approve a proposal recommended to it for that purpose).

Assessing the Rationale

There is a measure of truth in that assumption. A gathering as large as Assembly does not start with a blank piece of paper and work out the details of the denomination's life, starting from scratch. The ability of Assembly to hold councils, committees and officers of the denomination accountable is heavily dependent on the quality and clarity of the information supplied to the delegates and the

time that they are given to digest it. And the *development* of vision and direction, from the ground up, rarely takes place in Assembly – what Assembly is good for is debate and resolution, not dreaming, discussing and detailed problem-solving.

So there is some wisdom in consolidating aspects of the way we structure, staff and govern the co-operative activities of our denomination. A good argument can be made for having a body like the Assembly Council to serve the Assembly, exercising some of Assembly's powers by delegation and co-ordinating the denominational agencies on behalf of the Assembly, so that Christ is served more shrewdly, purposefully and efficiently on our behalf.

What is at risk of being lost in the proposed new order, however, is some of the ownership and responsibility that the churches and their delegates feel for the life of the denomination and its co-operative endeavours. Assembly may at times be an inconvenience to the efficient running of the denominational agencies, but it is a vital inconvenience if we are to retain the directness with which the churches of the union have the ability to speak into the life of the denomination and exercise some responsibility over its direction and decisions.

The more decision-making responsibility that Assembly hands over to a triennially appointed Council (whose members are made up mainly of the nominees of its own nominations committee) the more our churches are at risk of becoming disempowered and disengaged from the affairs of the denomination.

Nor should we assume that the inability of Assembly to do all its own leg-work means that it is incapable of serving a useful, responsible function in the life of the denomination. Assembly does not operate in a vacuum, and its deliberations, debates and decisions do not begin when the delegates gather. The prospect of an upcoming Assembly, with notices of motion that make serious recommendations about weighty matters, can frequently be a stimulus for vigorous debate and discussion in hundreds of churches across the state. The brief hours of debate in Assembly itself are just the tip of the iceberg of prayerful and passionate thought and argument within the churches of the union.

Similarly, in exercising its powers of making appointments and holding appointees accountable for the exercise of their office, Assembly can still make excellent and responsible decisions, when it is

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provided with informative, lucid reports and clear, accurate answers to questions. Much of the time, of course, positions on committees are filled unopposed and officers are appointed and reappointed without major questioning or debate. But – especially for the positions that have the greatest impact on the direction and ethos of the churches in the denomination – the opportunity for the delegates at Assembly to ask questions and participate directly in decisions about appointment and reappointment is a crucial aspect of the churches’ ability to exercise some responsibility over their joint affairs.

Two positive proposals

With these considerations in mind, I am persuaded of the wisdom of the two concrete, positive proposals that are argued for elsewhere in this newsletter.

1. Assembly should

retain the direct responsibility for appointing the members of the Committee for the Ministry and confirming the appointment (and reappointment) of the full-time faculty at Morling. Given the key role that both of these groups play in the formation and accreditation of our churches’ pastoral leaders, there are strong reasons for the Assembly to retain its responsibility for making these appointments and not delegating the job to the Assembly Council or the Morling Council.

2. If we go ahead with the proposals of Taskforce Three to establish an Assembly Council with anything approaching the sorts of powers that the Taskforce’s report recommends, then there should be detailed and mandatory transparency requirements placed on the Assembly Council, so that the churches of the denomination, gathered in Assembly, have genuine access to the information

they would require to hold the Assembly Council properly accountable for the actions that it takes on behalf of the Assembly and the churches.

If we are to remain a denomination in which the member churches feel, possess and exercise a genuine spiritual responsibility for one another and for the common affairs of the union, then we need to be vigilant in protecting the integrity of Assembly as an arena within which that responsibility can be exercised. Without an empowered, informed and responsible Assembly, we run the risk of mutating from a denomination of fellow-citizens, capable of passionate debate and earnest participation, into a denomination of shareholders who vote in a board once a year, shrug their shoulders, and leave it all to the experts.

David Starling

TASKFORCE 3 AND THE COMMITTEES OF THE UNION

Getting Our Bearings

Let’s get our bearings. What are the committees of the union, the departments, the agencies? How do they relate to assembly at present?

The following **Committees and Councils** are currently

elected by assembly, and are responsible for reporting to it:

Executive Committee – responsible for oversight and co-ordination of the other committees and councils (exception of Morling Council).

Committee for the Ministry – responsible for the process of pastoral accreditation and discipline.

Finance Board – responsible for oversight of the financial dealings of the committees and



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TASKFORCE 3 AND THE COMMITTEES OF THE UNION

councils.

MSD Council – responsible for oversight of Ministry Support and Development.

GiA Council – responsible for oversight of Global Interaction NSW/ACT.

Morling College Council – responsible for oversight of Morling College.

In addition, the following Honorary Officers are elected by assembly for leadership of, and advice to, the EC:

The President, Legal Officer, Treasurer.

The Department of Administration and Finance is not voted on by assembly. It consists of employees at the denominational office in Epping under the leadership of the General Secretary. The General Secretary is elected/re-elected by assembly every several years.

In addition, the following are separately incorporated **Agencies of the Union** (companies in their own right, not directly answerable to Assembly or with boards elected by it):

- Baptist Community Services
- Baptist Financial Services (formerly Baptist Investments and Finance)

- Baptist Insurance Management

- Bedford College

- Baptist Foundation of NSW Ltd.

Morling College faculty and council are elected by Assembly and answerable to it directly.

The Substantive Change

At the risk of gross simplification, the substance of the changes to the governance structures can be summarised thus: those bodies now operating as Ministry Support and Development and the Department of Administration and Finance are merged and placed under the single directorship of the Director of Ministries. Moreover, the relationship is effectively inverted. Whereas previously the most senior position in these groups belonged to the General Secretary (from the administration and finance side of the equation), the most senior position in the new combined grouping would be the Director of Ministries (operating more from the ministry side of the equation). There is a logic to this. If ministry considerations could be thought of as ‘ends’ and administrative considerations as ‘means’ it would seem prudent to have the ‘ends’ in a position where they could ensure the ‘means’ are serving them—thus

avoiding the proverbial tail wagging the proverbial dog. Whilst we don’t find ourselves as opposed to ‘flat’ structures and ‘multiple leaders’ as Taskforce 3, we cannot see anything objectionable in this suggested ‘merger’ under single leadership.

Committees and Assembly

At present, Assembly finds itself annually electing people to around fifty positions to its committees and councils, and receiving reports from six of those committees and councils.

The recommendations from Taskforce 3 would reduce the number of elected positions down to Assembly Council (9), Morling College Council (10), and the Director of Ministries. Assembly would presumably receive two reports: one from Assembly Council and one from Morling College.

This is a significant reduction which the taskforce report argues for at length. We believe there is merit in many of the recommendations. Our concerns focus on three specific issues. The first two are simply where we see value in maintaining aspects of the status quo which we don’t think would sacrifice the overall benefits of the proposed structural changes. These two

TASKFORCE 3 AND THE COMMITTEES OF THE UNION

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specific concerns involve the Committee for the Ministry (CFM) and the appointment of Morling College Faculty. The third concern is to find a way of ensuring a greater level of accountability and transparency from Assembly Council to Assembly – in order to offer a commensurate balance to the increased powers of the Assembly Council.

In short, we believe it preferable that the Committee for the Ministry remain a body elected by Assembly, and likewise for the Morling College Faculty. We believe that some specific detail on Assembly Council reporting to Assembly could be beneficially added to the taskforce recommendations. David's article focuses on Assembly and I also put by two bobs worth in at the end of this article.

We make no specific comment on the suggested changes to the other committees and councils, or the suggestion of MOU's with the denominational Agencies.

First, Some General Comments on the Role of Committees

Whilst it is true that a certain level of expertise is essential on committees and councils, the offering of expertise is not their only function in the denomination. They not

only function to fulfil certain measurable tasks, but also as an extension of a certain 'ethos'. It is, admittedly, a little intangible, but the committees of the union do more than oversee the efficient functioning of various arms of the denomination; they represent the union's shared convictions and something of its diversity in culture and practice and in beliefs on secondary disputable issues.

A contrast may help. A company board has a fairly narrow brief – to make profits. The shareholders will assess the board's performance on that indicator almost exclusively. They will not be overly concerned for the board to be 'representative' or expressive of any ethos as such; they could all sit dressed in clown suits for all the shareholders care, so long as the bottom line looks good. The committees and councils of the union, on the other hand, are not just about productivity, but also a certain ethos. They enable churches to 'speak into' the central areas of denominational organisation. The members of the denomination want more than dividends – they want to be assured that their convictions and practices are understood and served by the denomination's co-operative ministries. Thus, even at the level of the Assembly Council, the AC requires 'skills based' members, but it has a chance to be more than

that; to be upholders of our core convictions and respectful, sympathetic guardians of the diversity of the churches that are united in those convictions. A peak body aiming solely at expertise would not necessarily be a body of this type.

It could well be argued that Assembly has the power to vote for the AC, thus assuring control over its make-up and its representative status. The point is well taken, except that the AC appoints its own nominating committee (see page 49, point 7.19-7.22), which will most likely be responsible for the majority (or all) of the nominations. This is a recipe for a monochrome body. Nonetheless, the fact is churches are free to make nominations for the AC (page 50, point 7.23). This must be acknowledged, and it is for this reason we see little value in opposing the suggested changes at that level. Churches will need to take seriously their responsibility to nominate for, and appoint, an Assembly Council that they feel will not only offer expertise, but also be a body sympathetic to the spectrum of churches in the denomination.

CFM and Morling Faculty

One can see the sense in the suggested changes to a group such as the Finance Board. For such a group to be answerable to Assembly Council and

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appointed by it seems sensible enough, and the direct impact of such changes on local churches seems largely immaterial.

There is a distinction, however, between a committee such as Finance on the one hand, and the Committee for the Ministry and the work of Morling Faculty on the other. These latter two have a role that contributes directly and significantly to the formation and accreditation of the people who give pastoral leadership and direction to our local churches. For the confident partnership between the churches and these two groups, it is vital that the churches feel ‘in touch’ with them and maintain a high level of responsibility for and ownership of their membership and operations. The re-election of these groups by the Assembly of churches offers a powerful affirmation of the churches’ satisfaction with the leadership that passes through the college and the CFM. There can be no more powerful affirmation. If I was a member of the CFM or the Faculty I would welcome its continuance.

Would keeping these appointments within the purview of Assembly bring down the edifice of the proposed new structure? We think not. The Committee for the Ministry would still be

monitored by the Assembly Council (as the assembly between Assemblies); it would still *operate* as a reporting committee of the AC, but its continued appointment by Assembly would stand as a recognition of the deeply vested interest the churches have in the operation of the CFM. It is hard to see how this would render the CFM any less efficient or accountable; likewise for the college faculty continuing to be voted on by assembly. The bearing of this on the ‘efficient’ operation of the Union is negligible, but the bearing of it on the soul of a congregational list denomination is significant. One could argue that the college often has to appoint faculty in between assemblies, and so the suggested changes only ratify current practice. This misses the broader point. First, all faculty come up for re-appointment, so there is always the opportunity for Assembly to affirm faculty, or otherwise, regardless of appointments made between assemblies. Second, it is not inconceivable that Assembly may dissent on the re-appointment of faculty. For example, the published theological views of a given faculty member may change over time, making them, in the view of Assembly, unsuitable to teach in an evangelical, Baptist college. For Assembly to have no recourse in such a

situation (apart from the desperate remedy of dismissing the entire College Board) has the potential to alienate the churches from the college. Why risk this if it is not absolutely necessary?

For these reasons we believe it preferable for the Committee for the Ministry and Morling College Faculty to remain as appointments of the Assembly itself.

On ramping up Assembly Powers Commensurate with the Assembly Council

The comments in the Taskforce 3 report at page 46 (7.1) and pages 47-48 (7.7.a-b) are important, and most welcome*. They point out that Assembly Council is ultimately answerable to Assembly, and obliged to report to assembly. If the AC is to undertake a new role with heightened levels of oversight and leadership, such a relationship to Assembly is paramount.

The taskforce 3 report is at pains to justify increasing the responsibilities of the AC over the other committees in its charge (page 19, 5.6.e). What seems missing from the Taskforce 3 report is a similar passion for increasing the powers of Assembly with respect to the Assembly Council. Can such a thing be

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 specified? We think so, and think it would do a great deal to ease any concerns people have about the ‘concentration’ of authority into the hands of the AC and the Director of Ministries.

The following brief and simple suggestion is offered as a possible way forward:

Have all *resolutions* of AC meetings posted on the denominational website, and reported in hard copy to Assembly, with adequate time set aside for questions regarding the resolutions. Resolutions of the AC are not confidential. Agendas of the Executive Committee

state: *The business of this meeting, in camera discussions and all associated papers are confidential (this does not include RESOLUTIONS).*

This recognises the importance of confidentiality in the conduct of ongoing business in a committee, but also the public accountability needed for those resolutions that are made. The publication and discussion of resolutions would make plain to Assembly the business of the AC, and provide opportunity for the AC to give a rationale for its decisions.

Matthew Arkapaw

* There are other welcome comments in the final draft of the report that also ought to be acknowledged. The recognition that denominational leadership is persuasive and advisory (page 17, 5.4(23)) is welcome. The clarification that the Director of Ministries and the AC operate to offer leadership to the committees and employees and departments of the Union, not the autonomous churches *per se*, is also a needed clarification (see points 6.8(4)(12.a), 7.3(c), 7.28 (a)) and a significant improvement over previous drafts, for which we can be grateful.

Property Trust Update

The BET steering committee welcome the fact that executive have listened to the concerns that have been expressed at the last assembly and have now withdrawn the proposed amendment relating to pastoral leadership. While many of the proposed amendments were sensible amendments that would benefit churches, the one that has been dropped was one that many of us believed undermined important Baptist and Biblical principles. The only other amendment that seemed to be

questioned at the May- mini- Assembly was issue 2 under governance. At the last assembly meeting at least one small healthy country church noted that it would be effected by this amendment because its membership was slightly less than 20. This governance amendment provides union oversight with regards to property for churches between 10 and 20. At the meeting it sounded like a church would need to have at least 20 members able to vote on property matters in order to not come under the oversight of the

Baptist Union with regards to your property. It would be good for churches to think through this issue more and tease out the reasons and the arguments for changes for it does have the potential to effect healthy smaller churches for whom there may be no good reason to be under the oversight of the Baptist Union.

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Baptist Evangelicals Today

Baptist Evangelicals Today (BET) is a network of evangelical Baptist pastors who are keen to promote evangelical belief and ministry among Australian Baptists. We believe that as Australian Baptists we are privileged to have a strong evangelical heritage but that we should never take that heritage for granted. Each generation needs to both promote and defend the truth of the gospel and BET aims to do both of these things by acting as a catalyst among Baptists for evangelical thought and discussion on a variety of issues. We hope, through a variety of ways, to promote a dialogue between Baptists that is true to the Scriptures and therefore to the evangelical faith.

For more information visit www.bet.org.au

The Lever

The Lever aims to open up healthy and respectful reflection in our denomination on the Bible's role in our identity and decision making. We want us all to be moved by the fulcrum of the Biblical Gospel – the unmovable centre of the Apostolic witness to Jesus – and to revolve around that centre, and derive our power from that centre. The journal aims to be a biblical, loving, robust lever for such aims.

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BAPTIST ANNUAL ASSEMBLY

Friday 22nd & Saturday 23rd July
Parkside Baptist Church
717 Smithfield Road, Edensor Park