

The Joint Baptist Assembly

encouraging fellowship - inspiring mission

Introduction

A number of issues have prompted the Assembly project Team to reflect on the purpose and values of a joint Baptist assembly, including:

1. Transition and change within the Union and a commitment to do things differently where appropriate
2. The need to keep the costs of assembly for BMS and BUGB as low as possible
3. The recognition that accommodation costs mean that many churches are not represented
4. Fewer staff, especially in the Union, means that the current level of activity needs to be even more closely scrutinised and justified
5. To clarify and affirm the purpose of a joint assembly enables us to agree values which will make our planning and promoting of the assembly more effective and will also mean that hard decisions can be made on the basis of shared values rather anxious pragmatism.

A joint assembly on the scale of recent years is resource hungry, yet it remains an inspiring part of denominational life and an important sign of and means for partnership between BUGB and BMS. But what is its purpose and how, when times are tough, can we define and agree the values which will both direct creativity and inform practical decisions?

BUGB and BMS World Mission

What is the purpose of a joint assembly? Questions concerning the assembly cannot be answered separately from considering the nature of BUGB or BMS World Mission. We know these are two different kinds of organizations, but how does that recognition affect the way that they plan and deliver a joint assembly? A distinction usually made is that the Union is a fellowship of churches in covenant relationship while BMS is a mission agency. That explains why they are governed differently but somehow doesn't do justice either to the Union's missionary purpose or the Society's ecclesial nature. For example, the second object of the Union, according to its constitution is 'to spread the gospel of Christ' while the objects of BMS are preceded by this explanation: 'to enable Baptist Churches to respond to the call of God throughout the world'.

Perhaps it would be helpful to make a distinction (but not a separation) between the spiritual and organisational natures of the two bodies. The *union* isn't the structures of BUGB but the fellowship-sharing *koinonia* which is the work of the Holy Spirit binding churches together. BUGB is the corporate manifestation of that fellowship and the agency by which God calls us to serve one another and seek his kingdom. Similarly, BMS is the corporate manifestation of those same churches' desire and intent to seek God's kingdom through international mission partnerships, just as it is the corporate manifestation of the mission intent of the churches of BUW and BUS.

The Purpose of a Joint Assembly

Seen in this way, a joint assembly is far more than a pragmatic alliance. It is, it is true, an example of partnership between two organisations. However, because each organization is the manifestation of an aspect of the fellowship of the same churches, a joint assembly might better be seen as an assembling of those churches in two interrelated modes: fellowship and mission, both of which are in the context of worship and stewardship, as we frame everything with prayer and hold ourselves accountable to one another before God.

When the Union was formed in 1812, many of the key leaders were the same people who had been instrumental in establishing BMS twenty years before. Interestingly, some within the Society were concerned that its base was too narrowly dependent on a few outstanding individuals and that a national Union would broaden the base of support for BMS. Indeed, the annual meeting of the Union was to include collections in aid of 'the Baptist Mission', which at this stage I assume meant BMS. In short, the creation of a Union was in the interest of the Society.

In 1813 the objects of the new body and its assembly included the 'exciting of brotherly love' and furnishing 'a stimulus for a zealous co-operation in promoting the cause of Christ... and especially to encourage and support our missions.' By reorganization in 1832, the first two objects of the Union had become, 'to extend brotherly love and union among Baptist ministers and churches' and 'to promote unity of exertion in whatever way may best serve the cause of Christ'. Put simply, the main purposes of the Union were to deepen fellowship and to energise for united mission. Both these concerns of course pre-existed the formation of either BMS or the Union but were advanced by the structures put in place in the formation of the two bodies. The continuing interweaving of concerns is evident if we compare the objects of both bodies in their current constitutions (see below). In particular, the objects of BMS are to enable Baptist *Churches* to respond to the call of God throughout the world, and the Union's objects include the aim of cultivating respect and mutual love and 'to spread the Gospel of Christ'.

Shared values for the Future

These objects form a good basis for clarifying and affirming what we seek to do when we gather in assembly. **We gather in order to encourage and deepen fellowship amongst the churches and we gather to inspire and resource mission both in the UK and worldwide.** In this there is no fundamental separation of aim between the two bodies – both seek to inspire and enable mission and both seek to do this through giving attention to the fellowship between the churches.

Some Practical Reflections

1. To clarify and affirm the purpose of assembly enables us to think creatively so that we don't simply repeat what we have done before, but respond to changing circumstances while seeking to further our shared and historic objectives.
2. To clarify our purpose enables us to sharpen our publicity and our recruitment and marketing strategies which may relate to practical arrangements such as timing, length, cost or delegates, representation of churches etc

Appendix

| Comparison of 'Objects' clause in BUGB and BMS Constitutions | |
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| <p>The object of the Union is the advancement of the Christian religion, especially by the means of and in accordance with the principles of the Baptist Denomination in particular, but not exclusively, through any or all of the following means:</p> <p>4.1 <u>To cultivate among its own members respect and love for one another, and to all who love the Lord Jesus Christ.</u></p> <p>4.2 <u>To spread the Gospel of Christ</u> by ministers and evangelists, by establishing Churches, forming Sunday schools, distributing the Scriptures, issuing religious publications, and by such other methods as the Council shall determine.</p> <p>4.3 <u>To afford opportunities for conference, and for united action</u> on questions affecting the welfare of the Churches, the support of the ministry, and the extension of the Denomination, both at home and abroad.</p> <p>4.4 <u>To promote good relations</u> between Baptists in this and other countries.</p> <p>4.5 To obtain and disseminate accurate information respecting the organisations, labours and sufferings of Baptists throughout the world.</p> <p>4.6 To confer and co-operate with other Christian communities as occasion may require.</p> | <p>The purpose of the Society is <u>to enable Baptist Churches to respond to the call of God throughout the world</u> by pursuing the following Objects:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">a) To make known the Gospel of Jesus Christb) To prevent and relieve povertyc) To relieve sickness and promote and protect healthd) To advance educatione) To alleviate human suffering caused by disaster overseas <p>[<u>Underlining</u> is for the purpose of illustration]</p> |