

Churches in Partnership: Connecting, Strengthening and Renewing

The Theme for 2009-2010, *Churches in Partnership: Connecting, Strengthening and Renewing* is focused on the partnership of Baptist Churches and highlights our commitment together in advancing the Gospel, to make disciples of all nations. I will talk about the theme and directions arising for the coming year.

I count it a privilege to be called to serve as President of the Baptist Churches of NSW and the ACT. I am very appreciative of the attendance of my family, friends from education and other walks of life as well as many from the church family and from the wider Baptist family. Each has provided wonderful support and encouragement.

The Theme led by the Rev Norman Nix over the past year, "Our priorities in Ministry: the lost, the world and you" has encouraged commitment to mission and service within our Churches. Norm, your challenge at the April mini-assembly, *That we should reach more people for Christ*, has given a solid foundation on which we can build. We thank you Norm and Marjorie for your service in His Name.

Churches in Partnership – What it means to Baptists?

The individual Church has a unique place among Baptists but we value fellowship through the Baptist Association of Churches. Our partnership is based upon shared beliefs and a shared commitment to spreading the Gospel and reaching out to the poor, needy and distressed.

Being in partnership encourages Churches to support one another. There are outstanding examples where sister churches give generous assistance to other churches in their time of need whilst an outstanding example is the Crossover Australia ministry where churches collaborate in inspiring and equipping churches and leaders across the nation.

Co-operation among Baptists in NSW and the ACT commenced 141 years ago and has grown from just 2 churches to today's membership of 323. There are significant Ministries that have continued for lengthy periods that demonstrate the value of co-operation such as in the agreement for Baptist Theological Education (now 93 Years), the provision of Christian care to people in need through Baptist Community Services (over 65 years), vocational training for young people through Bedford College (over 65 years) and service to the world's poor and needy through Baptist World Aid and Global Interaction (50th anniversary this year). These are wonderful stories for praise and celebration.

Baptists have also connected with Christians and Churches of other communions and we pray that the *Jesus All About Life* campaign planned by the combined churches with the Bible Society will enable churches to reach their communities effectively with the Gospel.

The fellowship of Baptist Churches of NSW and ACT has important work to do including leadership of local and overseas mission work, ministry training, administrative support to reduce duplication and development of standards to apply across the denomination. In partnership we promote healthy churches and play a vital role in social services and in

planning, problem solving and conflict resolution. We continue to expand as a fellowship of churches and I believe we remain strongly committed to this longstanding partnership.

Assessment of the current Church context

Each generation faces their own social, cultural, political and economic issues. We are experiencing currently major economic pressures within our communities which are having severe effects on some families and causing people to be concerned about their financial wellbeing.

Among social issues causing much distress are domestic violence and the abuse of children within families and in communities both in this country and overseas. The challenge for all of us within the Christian community is to encourage caring and loving environments for families and children.

Within the wider community, the commitment of people to church and religion is changing. Many Gen X and Gen Y hold lifestyle attitudes based on the view that the church lacks relevance to their needs. These views contribute to our understanding of an important issue arising from the last census which revealed that there were less people in our churches between 25 and 45 years than at the last census, with the loss being about 18%. If the church is to connect more closely with these generations and attract and retain them, change will need to occur in the way church communities relate to their wider communities, the proposal being that we become more intentional, innovative and creative in approach.

Whilst Baptist Churches are holding their own in a declining church world, the Working Paper, *“Awaken O Sleeper: Disturbing a Denomination at the Crossroads”* contains a clear message that as a Denomination, we must embrace change. The major issues identified relate to lack of overall numerical growth, the ageing of our membership and the need to review governance arrangements which have been described as dysfunctional. The challenge is to reinvigorate the partnership of churches, find ways to improve our capacity for support and develop creative solutions to issues that limit church growth. We trust that one of the outcomes of the Taskforces will be to rebuild and strengthen the partnership.

Our focus areas for the coming year?

Initially I re-affirm our primary commitment to fulfil God’s Mission, “through Christ, in the Spirit, to restore and reconcile the fallen creation” (Col.1:20) but we need to be intentional in how this is to be achieved. In the planning and support for Churches that is being developed for the coming year, you will notice that there are links to the issues that we as a Denomination should face together and to the creative contributions to come from the Taskforces. So we are building on the purposes and developments of the past year and looking forward to better serving our Lord into the future, surrounding the process of change with prayer and the guidance of the Holy Spirit.

Connecting – connecting to its community is a sign of a vital and alive church. Connecting is relational, drawing upon friendship, empathy and caring, building links that unite people and doing good for the community (as in Gal 6:10) as well as using opportunities to witness to our faith.

Strengthening is about deepening the spiritual life of our people, enabling them to develop the personal resources to engage in Ministry. It requires us to identify those who can sustain Ministries into the future. The objective is to care for our key people, develop their understandings, skills and confidence and provide them with the necessary assistance and support to build strong connections between the church and the community.

Renewing brings challenge to rethink our commitment as Baptist churches, firstly to increasing our outreach to other people and secondly, to determining how we might function better as a Denomination, refining the arrangements for partnership among our churches and delivering better support for churches and congregations.

As local Churches nurture their members and seek practical and effective ways for reaching out to the lost and needy, they become powerful witnesses, pointing people to Jesus. With this goal in view, each church is invited to pro-actively support these activities of our Association of Churches.

CONNECTING – Ministries for Outreach

Connecting with Communities in Church Growth

Mission and Evangelism is my starting point – it is built into the Christian’s DNA. There is much movement in **Church Planting** which is innovative in approach and relevant to city, regional and rural circumstances. Through cooperation between Mission Support and Development (MSD), Morling College and churches, new fellowships are forming in selected communities, drawing upon the leadership and rich experience of those committed to this Ministry.

Equally significant is our plan to reshape the **Vision for Cross Cultural Ministries**, by re-appraising our current ideas and better integrating this Ministry within our mainstream churches. We will continue to strengthen connections with cultural groups represented within the NSW and ACT communities. This is important work that will enable us to grow in diversity and sustain a strong witness within communities of this nation.

I commend the program of **Global Interaction** for its proposal that Baptist Churches affirm a Mission Covenant, Empowering Congregations for Effective Mission. In an exciting year GIA has ambitious projects to announce, including the plan to increase the unreached people’s teams in Africa and Asia by 12 new staff.

Connecting with Children and Families

We are family focused Churches but the research finding suggests we need to revitalize our Ministries. We are challenged to take a fresh look at our activities for children and families to ensure that we are really effective in what we do. Are there unmet needs among families in our community that we could do something about? The partnership between the church family and the home is so important in enabling young children to have positive spiritual encounters and to be encouraged to grow in the grace and knowledge of Jesus Christ. Family support will be developed by MSD with the establishment of the Children and Families Ministry Taskforce and appointment of a Coordinator, Sally Smith. In addition the exciting Youth program in MSD will be continued to develop our links with Gen Y as will the work of Baptist World Aid Australia

which is making a difference for children and families through its community-based initiatives and its advocacy for improved maternal health funding for poor countries.

Connecting with Seniors and exploring a new Ministry

Increasing numbers of seniors are continuing to reside in their homes and represent a growing proportion of the population as well as an important group within our churches. Drawing upon the expertise and leadership from pastors and BCS, we will develop this Ministry for Seniors by sharing practical ideas and strategies that enable them to use their wide life experience in support of the Ministries of the Church and in community projects. Early retirees and able seniors have experience that is often overlooked by younger leaders. Also quite a number of our older members have special needs due to their responsibilities as carers and need assistance in coping with fears they hold for the future.

STRENGTHENING – Three Projects for Supporting our Congregations

Strengthening our Commitment to our Baptist Identity

Developing increased understanding of our Baptist identity in the 21st Century is an important element in achieving a cohesive and collaborative partnership of churches. This is a fitting way to celebrate the 400th anniversary of the Baptist movement. The materials will provoke our thinking about Baptist ideas and challenge us to be aware of their implications for the way we worship and the way we live. A Taskforce has been established with the critical role of producing materials to guide our thinking about Baptist beliefs and values in the 21st Century.

Strengthening and Valuing Pastoral Ministry Leadership

Faithful pastoral leadership underpins our spiritual growth and mission and we need to do all we can to support our pastors. The work of pastors is more complex today as they deal with a saturation of Ministries and with increasing needs within the community. Improving our support for the development of pastors is a high priority and our desire is that all pastors receive encouragement and mentoring from experienced peers and supportive networks.

Strengthening Leadership at Different Levels

Our collaboration in developing leaders at all levels will be critical in maintaining and achieving our God-given mission. Whilst potential leaders in our churches gain from experiences in leading a Ministry, preparation for leadership requires a much broader set of understandings. This is a task that we should approach together and I repeat Ken Clendinning's challenge in a recent article, "How is your church developing future leaders? How can we work together to develop leaders?" Through the partnership between MSD and Morling College, pastors and those in leadership roles and with leadership potential will have opportunity to engage in training and to be alerted to the calling of God to other forms of Ministry.

RENEWING: Reshaping the Partnership for the Future

In reshaping the organization and developing a blueprint for the future, we will be drawing upon issues identified in the recent survey of 270 churches. The issue of Governance will have a continuing presence until 2012 and the Review Team will be accessible to churches. The resolution of governance issues will require deep consideration and prayer over the next two years.

Where do we go from here?

Billy Graham in his 90th year recognized that for four centuries Baptist men and women have preached the Gospel of Jesus Christ, ushering countless people into the family of God. But, he says, our time is now. Our task is no less ambitious than it was for our forebears, and the need of people no less great in this troubled 21st century.

Through the leadership of the Holy Spirit and the commitment and collective wisdom of Churches, I believe we have the capacity to achieve great things within our communities for Christ. He longs to do for us “exceeding abundantly above all that we ask or think” (Ephesians 3:20).

For my part I look forward to visiting churches, meeting church leaders and discussing your work and Ministries. I look forward to collaboration between Churches and Denominational staff in the challenges of the coming year and pray that what we do, may be acceptable in God’s sight. Amen

Dr Alan Rice September 2009