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## The view from the associations

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# The view from the associations

by Paul Hills

I believe it was a Chinese politician visiting France recently, who was asked what he thought the major effects of the French revolution had been. He replied, 'It's too early to say'! This does represent something of a Chinese approach to things, but it could also be said with respect to the Futures Process and association life and with more justification! We are still very much in the early stages of working through the outcomes of the process. We are truly in a period of transition, and it will be some time before we know the full impact on ministers, churches and associations—not least because the impact is not one-way. We are all involved in the Futures Process and contribute to it as well as being affected by it. However, the BMF wants an article, so here are some thoughts!

## **Mission**

The Process sought to put mission firmly at the heart of what we are and do as a Union. The proclamation of the good news, the compassionate engagement with society, the challenge to injustice, the witness to the ways of the kingdom, the nurturing of disciples all come under this heading and possibly more besides. Talk about the nature of mission seems interminable! The challenge to ministers is 'How do we and those we serve become less inward looking and self-referential and follow the way of Christ into his world?'. This will be a continuing challenge for the local church, associations and the Union.

## **Interdependency**

This has become something of a slogan: 'our churches are not independent; they are interdependent'. Fair enough. Theologically that seems very sound and probably historically too. However, under the pressures of individualism and consumerism Baptist life still evidences a culture which is often isolationist. Why should I bother about racial justice when I live in a rural monoculture? Why should I bother about rural poverty and

housing issues when I live in an urban multicultural setting?

All ministers have plenty to do in their own patch, so why worry too much about other communities of Christ? The answer is that our commitment to Christ means we are part of one body and the balance of scripture requires us to engage together for the common good (Galatians 3:26-29 and 6:2-5). The simple practical fact is that we often need each other to be able to do what God requires of us. That's what underlies Home Mission in all its manifestations.

In practical terms the Process looks for ministers and churches and associations to be more engaged with one another in support of mission. So, HM grant funding is now devolved to associations. Work is being done to see how this might more closely involve networks of churches in decisions over grants. It may also mean networks being involved in ministerial recognition processes. Given the diversity of gifting amongst ministers and churches, this networking could lead to a wider sharing of expertise to the benefit of all.

## **Covenant**

'Covenant' is a word being used a lot at present, but with little definition. Walking together and watching over one another is fine, but what does it mean practically? Once again, this is impeded by the culture of the day, so in terms of attitudes it could be said that this means:

- ministers, association staff and national staff see themselves as collaborators in the mission of God;
- Baptist churches see sister Baptist churches as natural partners in the mission of God;
- engagement in networks, associations and Union is seen as a privilege to grasp rather than a right to take up if so inclined. Thus assemblies become places of genuine deliberation and mutual vision casting;
- a willing disposition to collaborate becomes the default setting for what we do in all areas of communal life in our Union;
- as part of the above, churches will become more willing to release their ministers and others who serve them into blessing other churches and networks. The resulting wider experience will return that blessing to the churches as their ministers and others bring fresh insights and encouragement back with them.

A covenanted relationship must be one that is freely entered into and involves some priority of engagement and effort. My wife and I enjoy a covenanted relationship in marriage and she does receive my attention, even above work on occasion! Ministers sometimes indicate that the way the word is used in some Union statements feels like an attempt to 'guilt' them into acquiescing with whatever the Union wants at any given time. I don't think that is the intention, but the feeling can be strong. Part of the aim of the Futures Process is to move from an attitude of 'the Union' to 'our Union'. As we all enter into the spirit of covenant as outlined above, we shall be doing this and mutual support and mission will result.

### **Involvement**

The Futures Process has worked on the basis that we need to avoid duplicating our work and that we should find the best place to locate any given set of tasks. For example, mission is seen very much as residing most especially with the local church. Any other 'level' of work on mission has to be informed by and supportive of the local church, otherwise efforts will be made to supply the churches with material and encouragement they do not need and haven't asked for!

Another example might be the production of materials to promote Home Mission. Is this best done nationally or more locally, or with a mixture of the two? Work is in progress on this, but it will certainly involve a more local focusing, and so, inevitably, more local engagement.

Ministers and churches will be asked to be more involved in these and other matters. This is likely to have a particular effect in the following areas.

- National and association decision making. Assemblies are likely to become more deliberative. If that is to work it will require us all to be more involved in the preparation and execution of such events. Moreover, the spirit in which this will be done will be that of 'speaking the truth in love' (Ephesians 4:15) rather than

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sounding off in cynicism! The latter is cheap and easy to come by; the former is precious, requires humility and is vital for the future of our Union.

- Being available beyond the local. We will need to give more time to spheres beyond our own. Associations may have task groups requiring members, or to find district ministers to share pastoral care, or evangelistic action focused in one area but needing people from a wider setting. Also, the new style Union Council will need people on it who are embedded in association and church life so that it will truly reflect the needs and aspirations of our churches.
- There is a devolving of work from Didcot to the associations. So far, this has mostly been seen in the area of ministry, with the mentoring of NAMs now being an association responsibility. Ministers will be needed as mentors and the administration of this vital aspect of the probationary process might be beyond the capacity of an association. Here might be another opportunity for service to the wider fellowship.

## **Prayer**

In a sense this hardly needs saying, but it does need saying! All the above amounts to nothing without sustained prayer for one another. Although it may have been prompted by financial issues, the Futures Process was truly conceived in prayer and engagement with God. The Transitional Steering Group is seeking to function in the atmosphere of worship and prayer. The intention is that the new BU Council will likewise model that rather than be a debating chamber. We are all growing in the dimension of the Spirit.

Mission, interdependence, covenant and involvement will mean little without the renewal of our spiritual life. This is happening and I dare to believe the Futures Process is part of that! This is an area in which I have a unique responsibility for myself. Earlier I said that the Process does not all flow in one direction. We all impact it and are impacted by it.

As I, as a minister of the gospel, take responsibility for myself and my growth in Christ; as I take responsibility for caring for my church and all others covenantally linked to me; as I participate in sharing work and responsibility in the whole covenant community—then the Future will unfold in the pattern of Christ's kingdom. Please God, may that be so!

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