

SPEAKING FOR THE BAPTIST UNION OF GREAT BRITAIN

Finding our voice on public issues

Introduction

In any large and complex organisation, the issue of who is able to speak on its behalf and with what authority is likely to be a difficult one to resolve. This is even more so for BUGB. We claim to be a 'Union' of churches, associations and colleges, bound together in covenant rather than by structures that exercise authority over the whole, and in all we decide we seek to give ultimate allegiance to the authority of Christ. On the one hand, there are those who could argue that no one can ever speak for BUGB, and there is certainly truth in that statement. Any voice claiming to represent the Baptist position on a particular issue must recognise that any local church, for example, may choose to dissent themselves from that view and interpret the mind of Christ otherwise. On the other hand, there are many who want and expect BUGB to be represented in the public square. Even though our relationships with one another as Baptists are covenantal, we still allow for the passing of resolutions that seek to express our shared convictions regarding the mind of Christ as revealed amongst us.

This paper seeks to chart a possible way forward. It affirms the need at times for BUGB to speak on issues of public concern, for example to Government or to the media, while recognising the difficulties of doing so within a very diverse institution. It tries to set down the principles that should guide such speaking. It offers proposals on who might speak, how it might happen, and what should be said.

Principles

Baptists believe that the Church of Christ finds clear expression within the life of a local congregation. Each congregation has the freedom and responsibility to order its affairs under the authority of Christ.

At the same time, Baptists have recognised that the covenant commitment that marks the life of the local congregation also finds expression in wider circles such as Regional Associations. Here, too, there is the expectation that the representatives of churches are able to discern the mind of Christ as they meet together. Decisions made by a Regional Association cannot be imposed on a local church, but the covenant relationship means that there ought always to be a willingness to listen and to trust, and often to act together in ways that express mutual responsibility and accountability.

This same covenant commitment extends to the structures that bind us together as BUGB. Again, decisions cannot be imposed. But our relating together requires a high level of trust in one another, and the recognition that in certain respects a wider gathering can be more able to discern the mind of Christ on a particular issue.

Just as in a local church and in a Regional Association, so within BUGB there are those who are called to exercise pastoral oversight. As such, they are people who might be expected to give voice to beliefs and convictions held amongst us. As Baptists this will always be within a framework of trust and accountability, and the strength of such leadership will rest on the quality of service and ministry exercised.

The need to speak

When issues of public concern arise it is always possible to remain silent, and sometimes this is the most appropriate response. The church always needs to be careful about when it chooses to have a voice, not least to ensure that it has something meaningful to say into a situation. But it could be argued that in recent years BUGB has been too reluctant to enter the public arena and that alongside the risks there are immense opportunities to engage with both Government and media.

Perhaps more importantly, it can be argued that it is our Christian responsibility to speak. Our Baptist emphasis on the local can mean we too easily fail to hold a wider vision of God's involvement in all creation, and so this level of engagement is urgently needed for the sake of our churches. Significant international and national events should not be ignored as if our faith has nothing to say into such events. Our traditional Baptist involvement in vital political commitments (such as the area of human rights) should

continue to be part of our life together. The voice of the Church of England and the Catholic Church are often heard, but the distinctive Free Church (and Baptist) voice is also needed. For all these reasons, BUGB should be ready to speak, and our participation alongside the Methodist Church and the United Reformed Church within a Joint Public Issues Team offers resources that make this both more possible and more credible.

Seeking the mind of BUGB

There are many occasions when BUGB is asked to speak on issues of public, social and political concern, and other occasions when it might choose to do so. These include:

- Churches and ministers asking for the BUGB view.
- Media asking for the BUGB view.
- Government consultation processes.
- Issuing a press release.
- Making representation to Government.
- Responding to requests for comment from the Baptist Times.
- Signing up to a public statement or letter.
- Participating in campaigning.

While there is no one clear way of determining what should be said on behalf of BUGB on a particular issue of concern, there are a number of routes that can be followed.

- a) **Assembly Resolutions –**
The BUGB constitution allows for the possibility of resolutions being proposed and voted on at the annual Assembly, thus allowing those attending on behalf of churches and Regional Associations to express convictions on a particular issue and so determine BUGB policy.
- b) **Council Resolutions –**
Meeting at least twice a year, the Council is also a representative body in a different way to Assembly, and is also able to deliberate on resolutions proposed and declare a particular view on an issue.
- c) **Executives –**
Appointed from Council and meeting two or three times a year, Executives have the opportunity to consider issues in greater depth and to reach decisions about appropriate responses. The Faith and Unity Executive have primary responsibility for work in the area of public issues.
- d) **Senior Management Team –**
Meeting regularly, the Heads of Departments together with the General Secretary and General Manager exercise what might be regarded as a 'team ministry' for BUGB, with oversight responsibility. At times this Team has been used to agree a particular approach on an issue of public concern that might then be expressed by one of those within the Team.
- e) **Regional Team Leaders and Trustees –**
Both these groups meet regularly and are in a position to reflect the views and concerns being expressed within BUGB, particularly by local churches within Regional Associations. While they are unlikely to make declarations on public issues, their meetings offer significant opportunities to discern what ought to be said and done.
- f) **General Secretary –**
Often it is expected that the person elected and appointed as General Secretary will speak on behalf of BUGB. Considerable trust is invested in them. There are many who will expect their voice to be heard as representative of Baptists, and hence they are not in a position to speak personally on issues.
- g) **President and Treasurer –**
These two elected positions carry with them a certain independence that at times allows for a prophetic voice to be heard both within and beyond BUGB. They are able to be a public face for BUGB at specific times.

These different pathways recognise the complex covenant relationships that exist within BUGB. They potentially act as important checks and balances at times, and confirm our rejection of autocratic and hierarchical forms of church government. They recognise that the mind of Christ is revealed in different contexts, that it always involves careful listening and reflecting, and that different ways of speaking for BUGB are open to us.

In addition to our own checks and balances, there are important opportunities to listen to the voices of partner churches, organisations and agencies. They will often be going through similar discernment processes, and it may be that they are able to offer understanding on particular issues and situations that can assist BUGB as we seek to find our voice.

Speaking for BUGB

It will never be possible to lay down procedures and processes for all situations, but it is important to seek to establish guidelines that can help in determining who speaks and what is said. The following are the kind of questions that need to be asked and how they might then be answered.

What is the issue on which BUGB is being asked to speak?

Has there been a resolution passed by Assembly or Council? If so, then a summarising statement can be issued.

Has the issue been considered by an Executive or by SMT? If so, then this may form the basis of a considered reply if a clear position was reached.

Have partner organisations and other denominations made statements about the issue? If so, these may give a clear basis for BUGB to speak.

If the issue has not received consideration, then it may be appropriate to decline to speak.

If the issue has not received consideration but is believed to be of sufficient importance, then it may be referred to the relevant Head of Department (usually Faith and Unity) for attention.

If it is an area of specialist concern, then it may be appropriate to draw on the expertise of particular individuals within BUGB.

Examples:

- a) International poverty issues (debt, aid and trade) have been the subject of debate and resolution by Assembly and Council, having been carefully considered by an Executive and involving close collaboration with partner organisations. This has enabled BUGB to participate in campaigning, to sign letters appearing in the press, and to make clear statements of commitment.
- b) The issue of the possible replacement of Trident became the subject of research and reflection within ecumenical circles. As a result, the issue was highlighted at Assembly, a resolution passed at Council, and detailed public campaigning (including written submissions to Government) took place under the direction of the Faith and Unity Executive.

What is the timescale for making a response?

Is there time for full consultation? If so, then the matter should be taken up by an Executive (usually the Faith and Unity Executive). This might result in –
a consultative exercise amongst the churches, Team Leaders and Regional Associations.
a debate and resolution at either Council or Assembly.
a paper approved by the Executive.

Is a quick or immediate response needed? If so, then a proposed response should be agreed with as many as possible drawn from the SMT, the Faith and Unity Executive, and the President and Treasurer. Where possible, such a response should be based on previously agreed resolutions and statements made by BUGB.

Examples:

- a) The Government sought responses to proposals on domestic violence. There was time for limited consultation, and so a number of Baptist churches and individuals working on the ground were consulted and a submission was made by the Mission Department on the basis of responses received.
- b) The recently introduced Sexual Orientation Regulations were the subject of prior consultation by Government. The submission made by BUGB had to be provided within a limited timeframe that precluded full consultation, and it was also raised highly contentious issues. In drawing up a

response, the Faith and Unity Department drew as far as possible on existing BUGB policy in this area, circulated draft and final documents to members of the Faith and Unity Executive and SMT for comment, and made the final version widely available through the Email Correspondent. The diversity of views within BUGB on issues of sexual orientation was carefully expressed.

Who should speak?

Is a public letter or statement required? If so, then it will normally be the General Secretary who responds, and this should happen in consultation with the relevant Head of Department.

Is a longer document required? If so, then it will normally be the relevant Executive that responds.

Is a more private response required? If so, then it will normally be the relevant Department that responds.

Examples:

- a) The General Secretary has signed a letter appearing in the national press on the issue of cluster munitions. As well as what might be termed our general BUGB commitment to peacemaking, past Assembly resolutions gave a mandate for taking this public stance.
- b) Private letters are often received asking for a response from BUGB on the situation in Israel and the Occupied Palestinian Territories. These are usually answered by the Faith and Unity Department drawing on decisions and commitments made by the Executive, together with those of partner organisations.

Who is asking for BUGB to speak?

Is it the national media? If so, then it should be referred to the Communications Department. Normally national media would be addressed by the General Secretary, a member of SMT, or the President if this is considered appropriate.

Is it local media? If so, then it should be referred to the Communications Department who will normally involve the relevant Regional Association and Team Leader. The national resource can be used to provide help and support as required.

Is it an individual church minister or member? If so, then a prompt response should be given by the relevant Department.

Examples:

- a) During the captivity of Norman Kember in Iraq, the national media sought statements and views from BUGB. This was handled by the Communications Department, and statements and interviews provided by the General Secretary and other SMT members.
- b) Concern was expressed by local churches about the possible consequences of the 2005 Gambling Act. The Faith and Unity Department was able to provide resources to aid local campaigning.

In following these procedures and processes, it will be important that as far as possible what is said by BUGB is shared as widely as possible and continues to be open to careful scrutiny, particularly by Council. Only by doing so can we remain faithful to our ecclesiology. There is the responsibility upon Executives to report back on where our voice has been heard on public issues, and the website provides a place where wide communication is possible.

It should also be noted that in addition to the times when BUGB is asked to speak, there are many other times when regional and local views are sought. Those involved in responding to such situations need to be aware that it is always possible for local issues to become national involving BUGB as a whole, and so close collaboration with the Communications Department is often a wise course of action.

Conclusion

The most difficult situations are clearly those where BUGB is asked to speak quickly on an issue that has not previously been considered within any of our structures and that could be controversial. It is at these times that as much care as possible should be exercised, both to ensure that the voice of the church is authentic and credible, and that the institution itself is always properly protected. Trust will always be needed and must remain at the heart of the way we seek to live together as the people of God, but good processes are equally important. In such circumstances the use of email should enable a quick consultation process to take place involving the General Secretary, SMT, the Faith and Unity Executive,

and others as required. All those involved have a duty to seek to represent the wider views of BUGB as far as they are able.

In general, it is proposed that:

The General Secretary should be involved or informed whenever BUGB speaks into the public arena, whether through a statement, letter or longer submission.

The Council should be informed where it has been necessary to make statements or submissions to Government without time for a full consultative process, and asked to debate and approve a way forward when this is appropriate.

The Communications Department should always be informed and consulted when BUGB speaks.

The Faith and Unity Department should, with its responsibilities for social and political affairs, usually be involved in shaping what BUGB says, when it is said, and who says it, often drawing on the resources present within the Joint Public Issues Team.

GRS
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