



24 May, 2017

News:

'Horrorified and deeply saddened'

Christians are among those to express their horror at the terror attack in Manchester on Monday night (22 May).

At least 22 people died when a lone male set off a homemade bomb at the end of a concert by US singer Ariana Grande at the Manchester Arena. Prime Minister Theresa May described it as 'a callous terrorist attack' that targeted some of the youngest people in our society 'with cold calculation.'

Baptists have taken to social media to express their distress and prayers.

'Shocked to hear the news as I woke up this morning,' wrote Baptists Together General Secretary Lynn Green on her Facebook page. 'Praying that all people of peace would resist the darkness...'

Andy Fitchet, minister of Whitchurch Baptist Church in Hampshire said: 'Horrorified and deeply saddened by the attack in Manchester. Thoughts and prayers for those who have lost loved ones and those fighting for life.'

Joe Haward, minister of This Hope Baptist Church in Newton Abbot, invited others to join him on Facebook Live at 1.15pm for a time of prayer for the people murdered in the bombing, and their families. He said he would also pray for the families murdered in bombing attacks in Iraq a couple of days ago, and Afghanistan over the last few weeks.

A number of Baptist churches opened their doors for people to pray, including Northfield Baptist Church in Birmingham.

Church from Scratch, a pioneering Baptist church in Southend, Essex, quoted Martin Luther King on its FB page:

“Darkness cannot drive out darkness: only light can do that. Hate cannot drive out hate: only love can do that.” Martin Luther King Jr.

Richard Littledale, minister of Newbury Baptist Church, Berkshire, highlighted the way the city’s people had offered rooms, taxi rides and more under the #roomsformanchester hashtag

On Tuesday afternoon, Phil Jump, Regional Minister North Western Baptist Association, released a statement and a prayer in reponse to the attack. He wrote:

North West Baptists will be among the many ordinary citizens across our region who are stunned and shocked by the terror attack in Manchester Arena on Monday evening. At this stage, we do not know whether any of our churches and families will have been affected, but our thoughts and prayers are with all who have been harmed by this act of mindless evil.

We know already that young people from across the North West and beyond, attended Monday’s concert, and while Manchester has borne the brunt, this is an attack on all of us. As Regional Minister, it is truly heart-breaking to hear the names of familiar communities identified as the places from which many of the victims have come. I am sure, in the days ahead, that many local congregations will be reaching out to provide care and support in the neighbourhoods that they serve.

This is also a moment to affirm faith as that which heightens our awareness of divine love and human goodness, and to renounce any attempt to use it to justify wickedness and harm. Such actions have no place in any civilised society or faith community.

Our emotions at this time will be raw and varied. A mixture of dismay, horror, fear, anger and defiance will no doubt emerge as we struggle to comprehend what has happened. These reactions are inevitable, but it is vital that we do not give in to those who perpetrate such evil and allow these natural human emotions to cultivate the division and distrust that they seek to sow.

As churches and individual citizens, let us commit ourselves afresh to building communities of hope, goodness and compassion - reflecting the values of God’s Kingdom and the principles of love, kindness and self-giving on which our faith is founded.

Tony Peck, General Secretary of the European Baptist Federation (EBF), wrote to EBF members: 'Please pray for the people of Manchester, England, after last night's terrorist atrocity at the Manchester Arena that has left 22 dead, some of them children, and many injured. Some of our churches in the region will open this evening for prayer. Lord, have mercy.'

Beacons of Hope – Baptists Together

‘God is on the move in us and through us’, said General Secretary Lynn Green during the Beacons of Hope session

A number of key things across Baptists Together that are moving us forward in our vision for mission were shared.

We are passionate about growing healthy churches, said Lynn: the results of the Fit4Mission survey last year have been shared with Association teams, who alongside the Baptists Together Mission Forum are using the data as a basis to develop plans that can encourage the health and vitality of our churches.

We also want to intentionally develop a culture where we embrace adventure, she continued: the Mission Forum has released two pioneer co-ordinators, (Roy Searle and Simon Goddard) and we have also become a formal partner with the Fresh Expressions Network.

Planting and pioneering is something ‘we urgently need to invest in and encourage,’ she continued, reminding delegates of the 94 per cent of the population who don’t yet follow Jesus.

‘Our churches are seeing that there is a spiritual openness in our communities at the moment that we haven’t seen for many years,’ Lynn said.

‘And so if we are going to see individuals and communities transformed with the good news of Jesus, then we need not only for our existing churches to be healthy and fruitful for the Kingdom, we also need to be pioneering and planting new things!’

She mentioned that so much of what we do as Baptists Together is about investing in Godly leadership. The Marks of Ministry calling - which help to identify someone’s character - have been agreed and will be used from September 2017.

Lynn also expressed ‘heartfelt thanks’ to John Rackley for his many years as Moderator of our National Ministerial Recognition Committee, as well as her delight that his successor will be Sian Murray-Williams.

Lynn spoke of how the Faith and Society Team is continuing to support, enable and develop our communications collaboratively across Baptists Together. She highlighted Together magazine, website traffic growth, and increasing social media channels and engagement. She said there were 80 ‘fantastic mission stories’ on the website, and encouraged others to share their stories with the team.

Concluding her update, Lynn shared Isaiah 43:18, the scripture she had originally shared in 2015 when launching the Beacons of Prayer initiative.

'I have this deep sense that God is wanting to do a new thing among us.

'What I see across Baptists Together are an incredible spiritual openness, people finding Jesus, amazing local churches and leaders loving their communities, creative missional regional teams equipping churches for mission and many gifted people offering their expertise in a whole host of ways.

'All with the common desire to be "growing healthy churches in relationship for God's mission".

'Thank you and your churches for all that you are contributing to that.

'God is on the move in us and through us and we need to keep our eyes fixed on Jesus, following Him wherever he leads us.'

The session also included updates on our finances and pensions, and a vote on proposals for changing the legal status of BUGB.

Finance

Our Union's treasurer John Levick gave an update on our finances. Home Mission giving last year was £3.8m. This enabled a variety of work to be funded, including:

In North Northfleet, an area of poverty in north Kent. The South Eastern Association Evangelist, Dawn Turner, Dawn Turner, has been pioneering mission in this community which now includes a small adult worshipping group, a kids church, a men's group, a CAP project and youth group. Home Mission funding through the Association has enabled this initiative.

Associations being able to provide events to support churches. He cited an example from Southern Counties Counties which put on a day to nurture relationships and interdependence between Home Mission supported churches and pioneers to encourage, inspire and equip them in their mission.

The third example was The Well in Sheffield, a new church already with a congregation of 200 set up with help and finance from the Yorkshire Baptist Association, and helped by the Specialist Teams which provided expertise and loans to enable the purchase of a building. Both the Association and the Specialist Teams are funded by Home Mission.

'These three examples show that churches are not only supported by direct mission grants but also indirectly through funding for Associations and the Specialist Teams,' said John.

'All three are good news stories and we can give thanks to the Lord for His provision.'

However, he also explained that Home Mission giving is in slow decline. Funds are needed to address the pensions deficit. Many Associations are running at a loss. Costs are increasing because of inflation.

‘The implications of all this is that there will be less money to go round,’ John said. ‘We cannot afford to do all we do at present unless our income grows.’

He said actions have already been taken and more are planned, but called on support from churches. He said one simple action was to review giving to Home Mission: many have standing orders in place which have not been reviewed for years.

During the session John was also reappointed Baptist Union treasurer for another year.

Pensions

Richard Wilson, Support Services Team Leader, gave an update on the Baptist Ministers Pension Scheme.

He explained how the environment for pensions had seen dramatic changes in the last decade. Unprecedented low interest rates have resulted in lower investment returns, which are used to pay pensions. In addition, life expectancy has risen – someone retiring aged 65 has a two year higher life expectancy than just 10 years ago.

A process to carry out a full valuation of the scheme’s assets and liabilities and agree a funding plan, as legally required every three years, is currently underway. Because things have deteriorated since the last valuation, it is inevitable that churches’ deficit contributions would have to rise if nothing is done, said Richard. ‘This is something we are very keen to avoid.’

He explained that in 2016, the Baptist Pension Employers’ group was set up, chaired by Malcolm Broad, a former treasurer of the Baptist Union. This group represents the interests of all the employers in the scheme, particularly the 1,300 local churches.

The Employers’ Group have developed the Family Solution plan, a series of proposals involving all across Baptists Together. The aim is to eliminate the deficit in ten years without increasing the overall level of contributions from churches.

‘These are challenging objectives, but with God’s grace they are achievable.’

He called on churches to be patient and seek appropriate advice. A series of pension roadshows will take place in the autumn.

‘Above all, I ask all members of the Baptist family to pray for the situation and the people working on your behalf in this area,’ said Richard.

Charitable Incorporated Organisation

Rich Webb, chair of the Baptist Union of Great Britain’s (BUGB) board of trustees, gave an update on the Charitable Incorporated Organisation (CIO) progress.

‘The BU is not an incorporated organisation; this means it has no legal personality,’ Rich explained. ‘It operates through the trustees. We are recognising this is not the most helpful set up for the Union.’

After a process that’s involved much consultation, and advice from solicitors Anthony Collins, our Union has decided to pursue an option of becoming a CIO.

Rich explained that this was simply a change to the legal structure of our Union.

There had been an informal question and answer session on the proposed change prior to the Assembly opening. Some of the questions included: what actually changes? Will there be a difference in terms of ecclesiology? Will there be a name change? A change to pensions?

The answer to all of these questions is no, said Rich. ‘This will not change any of those things, it’s simply the legal structure at the centre of our Union.’

A resolution to prepare a draft constitution and to pursue the CIO route for the future was approved, with no abstentions or opposition. A new constitution will be worked on and presented to next year’s Assembly.

A vision of God’s kingdom on earth

The progress BMS is making in its 2016-2020 mission strategy ‘One Million Lives

The strategy captures a series of targets for each of BMS’s seven ministries, namely church, education, justice, development, health, leadership and relief. It was launched at the 2016 Baptist Assembly.

‘Our vision was one of faith,’ explained Peter Dunn, BMS Director of Mission, ‘one that stretched us, that caused us to look for God in new ways. To pursue that vision of God’s kingdom on earth.’

Reflecting on the first year of the strategy, Steve Sanderson, deputy director for mission, began by talking of the three priorities that underpin these more specific goals. BMS aims to work:

among the most marginalised people

in the least evangelised communities
in the most fragile places

In terms of that first aim, BMS has a target of investing at least one third of its resources in the countries in the bottom quarter of the human development index. Currently this figure is 26 per cent, which BMS characterises as reasonable progress.

BMS is also nearing its goal of investing at least half of its resources in the third of the world that is least evangelised, with a 39 per cent spend. 'We are getting there,' said Steve, 'but this shows there is more to be done.'

However, it is already meeting third target of working in 10 of the 20 most fragile states on earth. 'We have already managed 10!' said Steve.

Steve then moved on to updates on the seven specific targets.

In terms of church ministry, BMS aims to reach 500,000 people over five years. Last year it reached 70,012. 'We want more people to know about Jesus, and we recognise we need to be more innovative about how we share Jesus,' said Steve.

For education, the target was 50,000. In the first year, BMS reached 4,796 people. 'This is some way below what we'd hoped for,' said Steve, reflecting that BMS still has more to do in these areas in the coming years, but fully expects to hit the five-year targets.

However, the remaining five ministries were all on track, and in the case of both health and leadership, the targets had actually been exceeded.

He stressed this was not 'a numbers game', that BMS was aiming at lasting transformation, and having measurable targets helped inform its work. 'In this, we have faith that God will honour our work in ways we had not even imagined.'

Overall, in its first year of a five year ambition of seeing 1 million lives transformed, BMS has reached 193,000 people.

'We are encouraged by signs of God in many places,' said Peter.

To underline this, stories from ministries in Uganda and India were shared.

Finance

The session also saw an update on BMS' finances.

'This is an opportunity to celebrate the Lord's provision, and understand the challenge BMS faces,' said honorary treasurer Robert Ashurst. He shared that there

had been an increase in giving in the previous year to BMS, after several years of it remaining constant.

‘We want to say thank you to you – and above all to God for another year of provision.’

In addition, the first five months of the current financial year the income is on budget.

However, BMS faced a number of challenges, Robert continued, meaning there no cause for complacency.

The weakness of sterling following the EU referendum means payments it makes to partners in foreign currency costs BMS a lot more. Secondly, BMS mission personnel may no longer be eligible for NHS treatment as the Government clamps down on health tourism, with reduced health care for mission workers being an unintended consequence of that decision. Thirdly, as with many pension schemes, there is some volatility, although BMS has actively and effectively managed that aspect over several years.

He ended by giving thanks to both Val Stephens, BMS Finance Director, and her former deputy Marian Rudall, who retired in March after 25 years.

‘Marian had a fine eye for details, but she always understood that numbers mean more. They allow BMS to fulfil its calling.’

Turning to delegates, he continued, ‘We are grateful for your support, your money, your prayers, sending your best people.’

In the first part of the session, delegates voted that BMS moves from being an unincorporated charity to an incorporated one. The motion was overwhelmingly carried. This will take effect on 1 November. This was a legal change to the charity’s status, said General Director David Kerrigan, ‘You will not see any difference in our work.’

‘A holy ground moment’

Ministers, pastors and preachers who have recently transferred to the accredited list and BMS mission personnel were commissioned and prayed for at the Baptist Assembly

‘We now come together for a holy ground moment,’ said Lynn Green at the outset of the Saturday evening session. ‘We want to welcome, commission, and pray for them.’

Lynn and David Kerrigan took turns in reading out the names from each Association, finishing with the BMS personnel.

As their names were called, the ministers and mission workers were invited to the front of the stage, many accompanied by the cheers and applause of their friends in the congregation.

Once all were at the front of the stage, new President Dianne Tidball led the act of commissioning, with responsive words on the screen, followed by prayers.

Dianne, Lynn and David then shook everyone's hand as the worship band played.

As well as praying for the ministers and mission personnel, Lynn also invited delegates to use this as an opportunity for all of us to rededicate our lives to Him, 'to recommit ourselves to God.'

'God, I want to see a new thing!'

British Baptists have been challenged by church planter Ben Francis to be open to God doing a new thing, and stop clinging to what worked in the past

That was the message from Ben Francis, BMS Associate Team Leader for India, who gave an energetic and passionate address on Saturday evening.

Repeatedly urging delegates to be prepared to change their focus, Ben said it took him over a decade to respond to God's call on his life. 'I thought it was mission impossible to bring the gospel to West Bengal, there were just too many people,' he shared.

'But He said: "Behold, I am doing a new thing."'

Ben had taken Isaiah 43: 18-19, as his text, reading it in Bengali. He said God is now 'getting ready to do something new' in the UK.

To be ready for this, we have to change our mindset in three areas.

Firstly, we have to stop looking behind. 'God is saying, you cannot depend on your past victories.

'Thank you - you have impacted the world. But those past victories are not going to sustain the world. You need to see what God is doing today. What is God doing new today?

'That's what I had to in Calcutta.'

Secondly, we can't allow our past failures to stop us. We need to ask God to forgive our failures, and move on.

And thirdly, we cannot live on yesterday's faith. The church needs to go out and seek the lost.

'Go out from here thinking: "God, I want to see a new thing",' Ben said. 'I want to see healing on the streets of England. I want to see neighbours knocking on my door asking who is Jesus!

'If you want to see what you've never seen, you've got to do what you've never done.'

Ben shared a story from Kandhamal, Orissa. Back in 2008 Christians in the Indian state had been subjected to a massacre, with 100,000 people murdered, and churches razed to the ground. Some managed to escape, including one particular pastor, who had started a new life in Mumbai.

But one day he'd had a call to return to Orissa, scene of the awful persecution – and has now helped to plant 1500 churches.

The pastor is even working alongside someone who had originally wanted to kill him. A man called Kishor was behind the Kandhamal massacre, but was now a modern day Saul, Ben said. Jesus had spoken to him over the course of seven days, asking 'Why do you persecute me?' Initially Kishor didn't want to believe, but eventually relented, and is now a church planter.

'If God can do that in Orissa,' said Ben, 'God can do that in your neighbourhood.'

Challenging delegates, he said, 'Say to God, "I stand here. Where do I go from here?"

'We will pray that God rain down here, God will do a new thing here.'

Baptisms

Barton Baptist Church, Torquay: Heather Chamberlain-Drury, Holli Baker
Centenary Baptist Church, Cambridgeshire: Michael Fox and Mary Fox
Emsworth Baptist Church, Hampshire: Matt Ferreira, Alan Dawkins, Jenny Smith, Mike Masih, Kierstie Masih, Elsie Kempson, Dave Mallan and Jeny Mallan
Hamsterley Baptist Church, Co Durham: Erin Robinson
Socketts Heath Baptist Church, Grays: Olivia Lovett and Tega Fe-Cados

Death

HARRIS, NORMAN LESLIE (REVD)
Passed away peacefully in Bedford 11 May 2017.
Former minister in Chatteris, Breachwood Green, Stoke Green Ipswich.
Funeral 230 pm 2 June 2017 at Bunyan Meeting Bedford.

