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From Assembly Council Update and Next Steps following the November Assembly

Dear Friends,

Thank you for your ongoing prayerful interest in the matters that continue to challenge us as a movement following our November Assembly. This update outlines the steps Assembly Council is taking regarding the recommendations on Affiliation, Baptist Values and Marriage that were presented to Assembly.

You may be aware that Assembly Council recently conducted a survey of everyone who voted at the Assembly, seeking to better understand the reasons people voted as they did for some of these recommendations. There has been a strong response which has been very helpful; thank you to everyone who participated.

What Assembly Decided

Before us at the Assembly were 22 recommendations regarding Affiliation, Baptist Values and Marriage. These motions came from Assembly Council following instructions to it from the Special Assembly in February last year, and in the light of the consultation and discussion that had taken place following this.

The first 8 of these recommendations were voted on, but Assembly ran out of time to discuss and decide on the remaining ones.

In summary:

- Assembly voted to adopt 3 position statements (motions 2,6,7) – on Marriage, Congregational Governance and Local Church Autonomy/Healthy Association. Each of these in and of themselves gained significant support - 75% or greater.
- The 2 in-principle motions (motions 3&4) that churches and accredited ministers needed to support the marriage statement were passed, though with less support (61% & 64% respectively).
- There was also less support (58%) for the establishment of the category of Position Statements, and the inclusion of them in the Association's constitution.

Where to from here?

Our aim is to seek the mind of Christ together. We have a situation where motions 2-8 were passed, but with significant and deeply held differences of view in some areas. It is clear that we are finding these issues significantly challenging to negotiate. The way ahead will require us all to consider one another as we relationally and prayerfully move forward.

The Survey

Following the Assembly, Assembly Council decided to conduct a survey of all who voted on 12 November, to seek to better understand the reasons people voted as they did for some of the motions. The aim of this was to provide insights that might help us to be as constructive as possible as we take the next steps that will be needed proceeding from these decisions.

Thank you to everyone who took part in the survey. Almost 2/3 of all who voted at assembly participated and this gives confidence in the helpfulness of the results.

Insights from the Survey

- In broad terms motions 2-8 that were passed at Assembly were more in-principle, whereas the remaining motions (particularly motions 13-22) laid out specific ways forward to implement those in-principle decisions.
- The survey results indicate that a bit under 80% of those who voted 'yes' for motions 3 and 4 (the 'in principle motions' about supporting the marriage statement) would also be in favour of motions 10-22, which outlined an implementation mechanism requiring affirmation of this support every 5 years. What this shows is that the overall support for this way forward of implementation is likely to be very marginal.
- The survey results also revealed that, had motions 10-22 not been on the table, up to 15% more of the assembly would have felt able to support motions 3-4. In other words, the existence of the process of reaffirmation and all that this entailed was a disincentive for some to support motions 3-4, when they otherwise might have.
- This accords with more narrative feedback received by AC that in particular there are concerns over these mechanisms of requiring support to be evidenced in the way of a 5 year affirmation process.
- The survey also revealed that for most people (86%) who did not support Motion 5 (to establish a category of Position Statements which would form part of the affirmations), this was at least in part because they feel that this would open the door to more position statements being added in the future the track, and a tendency towards legalism.

Next Steps

The Assembly Council met on 13 December to consider the survey results and other further feedback that has been received, and to prayerfully reflect on the most appropriate way to implement the in-principle decisions made at the November Assembly. Given the level of anxiety and concern that is evident across our movement at this time, with the clarity gained from the survey, and after prayerful reflection and discussion, Assembly Council is taking a number of steps.

1. Assembly Council considers the best way forward is to lay motions 10-22 'on the table' for the time being, and not bring them forward for discussion and voting at this time.
2. Rather, the next priority for us together is to seek to discover whether there are more widely acceptable ways to be faithful to the in-principle decisions made at the November Assembly.

These need to be discerned relationally. Council has appointed Tim Dyer, an experienced mediator and trainer of our church consultants, to lead a small team of envoys to conduct discussions with various parties across our movement in the early part of 2023. These discussions will seek to identify potentially fruitful and practical ways of applying the decisions Assembly has already made. Assembly Council will consider these in the leadup to the 2023 Annual Assembly.

3. In the light of the above, Assembly Council is not calling an extra assembly in the first part of 2023. The next Assembly will be as scheduled - the Annual Assembly, on Saturday 6 May 2023.

Assembly Council is painfully aware of the significant and deeply held differences of view in some areas and that all our joint efforts to this point still leave significant work to be done in seeking the best ways forward in some of these complex issues. However we continue to believe the Lord is in control and trust that despite our weaknesses, He will guide us as we prayerfully seek Him.

Please continue to pray for our Association in these matters.

In Him,

Jamie Long,
Assembly Council Chair