

# **Baptist Churches of Tasmania**

*Partners in Christian Mission*

***An open letter to the pastors and congregations of all Tasmanian Baptist churches from Ivan James, chairperson***

***Dear brothers and sisters in Christ***

At the mid-year assembly of Tasmanian Baptists on 4 July 2009, we discussed the issues confronting our churches over the next decade. This was a very moving experience as we sensed the Holy Spirit challenging us afresh and we agreed that these issues should be made known to every congregation and there should be a special call for prayer. Therefore, at the request of the mission leadership team, I am writing to explain these matters in some detail.

In his book, *The Forgotten Ways*, the founding director of Forge Mission Training Network, Alan Hirsch, challenged mainstream churches in Australia to rethink their whole approach to church and mission when he said,

*The twenty-first century is turning out to be a highly complex phenomenon where terrorism, paradigmatic innovation, an unsustainable environment, rampant consumerism, discontinuous change and perilous ideologies confront us at every point. All this amounts to a kind of ecclesial future shock, where we are left wandering in a world we don't recognise anymore. (For more from Hirsch, see box 4 on page 8.)*

***A decade of progress in ministry***

Ten years ago, I was part of a taskforce that reviewed the Baptist work in Tasmania and at that time we said,

*Although we are confronted with many challenges and difficulties, these are days of great opportunity for us as a family of churches to work together and we believe that the Lord has great things in store for us as we serve Jesus cooperatively in our State.*

In many ways this has proven to be true. Superintendent Garry Billing's wise and sensitive leadership and his persistent and perceptive ministry have resulted in a stronger and better resourced team of pastors with a healthy bond of friendship and a growing unity of purpose.

The operations of the denomination have been streamlined and the mission leadership team is focused on two exciting initiatives - *Vision 2020*, a united plan for church planting in the greater Hobart region; and the Forge Cluster Project at City Baptist, an educational and experimental program to develop new faith communities alongside a normal church program.

***Time for review***

Earlier this year, the council of the union asked me to conduct a fresh review of the denomination and make recommendations as to the future direction. This review came

about because superintendent Garry Billing will retire at the end of this year. (The terms of reference for this review are shown in Box 2 on page 8.)

Over the last nine years, as I have visited most of Global Interaction's main overseas mission fields and listened to our staff and their friends tell their stories, I have compared what we do overseas with what we do within the home church. I can't help asking, why is it that Australian Baptists in foreign mission are intentional, relational, adaptive and creative in their expressions of evangelism - but at home we seem to be ad-hoc, constrained by our existing socio-economic circles, and rigid in our expressions of worship and witness? Furthermore, we seem to have out-sourced evangelism to professional pastors and de-emphasised the role of lay people as missionaries.

For the last year, I have been a member of the Forge Cluster Project that I mentioned earlier. Whilst this project is still in its early stages, this has involved a reappraisal of our place in the city and a reassessment of what it means to be a missional church in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. The result of my reading for this project, the debate within the cluster, and the opportunity to hear the thoughts and experiences of Forge team members from around Australia, have been challenging and sobering and no doubt this experience has coloured my thinking for this review.

### ***The church is losing momentum***

I started the review process by examining the trends in church affiliation and attendance nationally and locally.

The last Australian census was in 2006. People were asked in the census to identify their religious affiliation, which means different things to different people and it's not meant to be a reliable guide to attendance or participation.

In 2006, out of every 100 Australians, 64 claimed to be Christians; 6 belonged to other religions; 19 had no religion and 11 avoided the question. Only 1.6 said they were Baptists. See chart 1 on page 7.

Obviously, the number of people who identified themselves as Christians is overstated significantly because we don't have 12.7 million people actively involved in Christian work and witness across Australia. Perhaps this result arises because many people answer this question based on their inherited religious affiliations rather than a first-hand experience of Jesus as Saviour and Lord.

In the 10 years to 2006, the total population of Australia increased by 12 percent but the number of people who said they were Christians only increased by 0.8 percent. The proportion of people who said they followed other religions grew by 79 percent with strong growth in the numbers of followers of Buddhism, Islam and Hinduism, albeit from a lower base.

The number who said they had no religious affiliation increased by 26 percent but perhaps this points to an increasing honesty within this group.

### ***Numbers are shrinking in Tasmania***

Over the last ten years, the number of people attending Baptist churches in Tasmania fell by 15 percent and the number of resident members fell by 10 percent. This attendance equates to only 0.4 percent of the State's population. (See chart 2 on page 7.)

(Interestingly, in the 2006 census, 0.5 percent of Tasmanians said they were Buddhists and perhaps our wake-up call should be, “more Buddhists than Baptists in Tasmania”. Whilst I know some readers will say these numbers are unreliable and they are coming from a small base, but Buddhists, Hindus and Muslims are also missional in their own sense of that word and they are growing from a similar small base and we are not.)

### ***Many Tasmanian Baptist churches could die within 10 years***

The age profile of Baptists in Tasmania compared with the total population is proof of our crisis. We have 44 percent less people in our churches under the age of 40 than the average population in Tasmania and we have a much higher proportion of people over the age of 60. (See chart 3 on page 7.)

This means that we have failed to reach what some marketers call “Generation X” (age 30-45) and “Generation Y” (15-30). On the other hand, we are heavily populated with “Baby Boomers” (45-60) and “Veterans” (over 60). Also, because we are not reaching the new families in Gen X and Gen Y, then we will have less children and teenagers coming into our congregations.

These four generations have vastly different outlooks on life. One writer says, “Veterans work first, Baby Boomers live to work, Generation X works to live and Generation Y live then work”. For whatever reason, the Veterans and Boomers, who largely built and now sustain many of our churches, are finding it hard to relate to the new generations.

### ***Consumerism is killing us***

The other negative factor is what I call ecclesiastic consumerism - the increasing trend for church members to go shopping for better experiences of church, treating church as another commodity. The search for better preaching, more professional singing, trendier youth ministries, more programmes, and the anonymity and feel-good factor of a larger congregation is sapping the life out of our smaller churches, which cannot compete with the programmes offered by mega-churches.

### ***We are not evangelical***

Most of the new people joining our congregations came not as a result of evangelism but as switchers and transfers. This means people arriving from other local churches or other denominations (switchers) or from churches of the same denomination (transfers). In 2006, 25 percent of our congregations came from this source within the previous five years.

The story regarding youth retention and evangelism is even worse. In 2006, only 3 percent of the State’s Baptist congregations were made up of young people aged 15 plus who were attending the same church five years ago (young adult retention). Only 8 percent of the congregation in 2006 were not attending any church five years ago (new-comers).

Over the last 10 years, Tasmanian churches averaged slightly less than one baptism per church per year. In 2000 the former leader of New Zealand Baptists, Brian Winslade, (now the national director of the Baptist Union of Australia) put this challenge to his churches when he said, “Baptist churches that don’t get their baptismal pools wet year-after-year are not behaving like Baptists”. What does this say about us?

### ***What is God's Mission?***

Paul said the mission of God (*Missio Dei*) as redeemer, through Christ, in the Spirit, is to restore and reconcile the fallen creation (Colossians 1:20).

I think Tim Dearborn puts this into context for me when he says,

***It's not the Church of God that has a mission in the world, but the God of mission who has a Church in the world.***

However, the numbers tell us that our current versions of church are not making a lasting impression on the world in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Hirsch puts it more bluntly when he says that we are not moving outside our existing cultural boundaries and therefore, we are doomed to fail if we persist with our current methods.

Australians are not the only ones to be thinking this way. I have been impressed by the reported emergence of an effective church planting movement within the Anglican Church in Great Britain and I think their definition of a missionary church (shown in Box 3 on page 8) is a good one to use to test against our current expressions of church.

### ***Three options for leadership***

With regard to the future leadership of the denomination, I am considering three main options. The first option is to appoint a new denominational leader but probably avoiding the title "superintendent" because this is not indicative of the role and not in keeping with our view of the autonomy of the local church.

The second choice is to appoint an intentional interim denominational leader. The argument for this approach would be that we are in transition and not ready to commit to a new leadership structure but it would not be easy to find such a person.

The third option is to appoint a mission leadership team, consisting of the three regional ministers and the GIA state director, with one of their number being the team leader. This would be a new style of leadership but it has the advantage that it builds on the progress already being made by these leaders in their respective fields and maintains the current momentum. At this stage, I favour this third option, but I would appreciate receiving comments from pastors and churches on this matter.

### ***More care needed for people in crisis***

As I look at the changes that have taken place in pastor's roles over the last ten years, I believe we need to rethink our process for caring for pastors and/or churches in crisis. This needs to be done in a responsible manner, without being diverted from the main task of church planting. Without clear boundaries, this task can otherwise become a black hole that consumes the leadership of the denomination.

The age profile that I mentioned above is bringing with it another risk. Generally, new pastors come from the age groups that are missing from our churches. When they are called to our churches we see them as the super-hero who will bridge the gap and attract people of their generation.

However, people of their generation are not attracted to our current version of church and soon the so called super-hero becomes the next scapegoat for our failure. Disillu-

sionment and blame replace adulation and support and yet another pastor's career ends in failure.

In my opinion, all churches seeking a new pastor should first appoint a qualified intentional interim minister to deal with the issues of the past and prepare for the future. The incoming candidate also needs more information regarding the church's history and circumstances prior to the issue of a call.

We also need a dispute avoidance procedure developed in advance with a commitment from the church and the pastor that serious differences of opinion will be handled by a professional independent consultant. The cost of this consultancy should be carried by the church undergoing dispute resolution.

### ***Key questions for all churches***

In my experience, apart from data collection, the next most important part of a review process is the definition of key questions. They have to be questions that make you feel uncomfortable so that you are forced to re-examine assumptions and paradigms.

I have developed five questions that I have posed to the mission leadership team, union council, pastor's conference, and assembly delegates. When I raised these questions at the mid-year assembly, the delegates decided we should encourage all churches to prayerfully consider the material I have outlined above and discuss these questions:

### ***We need a broader vision***

First, should we just focus on saving the denomination and continuing to "play" at being church or should we recognise that Tasmania is still a mission field and if so, shouldn't we focus on being intentional missionaries and planting new faith communities throughout Tasmania?

I raise this question because my terms of reference currently focus on the future of the denomination, but I'm not convinced it's the right place to start.

If currently we are ineffective as missionaries and we refuse to change - perhaps we don't deserve to survive. Admittedly, we could just put in place band-aid measures to maintain the activities of what some might call a Baptist social club for an ageing population, but don't we have a higher calling than that?

### ***We need to repent and pray***

Second, when did we stop being missional, and why, and how should we encourage our congregations to repent and pray for revival?

In the 1999 review report, we said,

*The committee strongly recommends that the first priority of our union of churches should be a prayerful waiting on God in the spirit of Psalm 37:3-7 and a desire to know His healing and renewal.*

For some reason we spent less time than we should on that recommendation but we shouldn't make the same mistake this time. Unless God convicts us of our lack of focus on mission, unless we repent, and unless we pray effectively for spiritual revival - I fear

we will continue to be unfruitful and 85 percent of the people around us might never hear the Gospel.

***We need to act urgently***

Third, how should we communicate the urgency and importance of this missional task to every congregation?

I encourage church leaders to chart their own numbers for attendance, membership, age profile, switchers, transfers, young adult retention, newcomers, baptisms, deaths and leavers over the last ten years. Until your church leaders study your church's data and ask probing questions about the effectiveness of your church's work and witness, you cannot expect to see a meaningful change in direction.

***We need to cope with pain***

Last, are we prepared to cope with the pain and sacrifice that will come as we become missional?

In other words, will we be prepared to stop being demanding consumers of religious goods and services and become servants of the God of mission in our generation? The easiest thing to do would be to maintain our existing church growth model. But God's path isn't meant to be the easy thing to do and the church growth model isn't working.

***We are at a crisis point***

As I said to the delegates at assembly - if all I have to do at the end of my current review of the union is suggest better ways to rearrange the deckchairs for the comfort of the passengers on the *SS Tasmanian Baptist* as we sail in ignorance toward the fatal icebergs of cultural and generational gaps - then that would be an easy task.

Instead, I believe we have reached a crisis point and our first reaction should be repentance and prayer. We need to grieve for lost opportunities and we need to reach the point of brokenness before God can heal us and use us effectively in the future.

***We are called to be servants***

We are called to be servants of the God of mission, which means every one of us should be a missionary reaching out to the generations in this State that we have failed to reach to date. To do this, we must be intentional, innovative, relational, caring and involved in the community and not isolated and aloof from the people around us.

Jesus was the friend of sinners. He was also the friend of the sick, the widows, the orphans, the poor and the oppressed. Jesus was not afraid to reach out and touch those who were suffering. He moved amongst the people, not staying in one place to wait for the world to come to Him. In all these aspects, we need to become more like Jesus.

Yours in Christ's service



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*Chairperson of Tasmanian Baptists*

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A copy of the PowerPoint presentation used at assembly is available on the Tasmanian Baptists website, [www.tasbaptists.org.au](http://www.tasbaptists.org.au) under the heading "Review of Tasmanian Baptists".

Chart 1

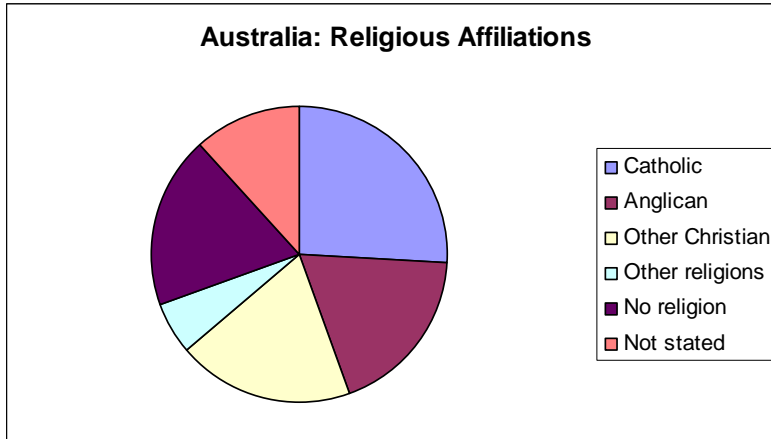


Chart 2

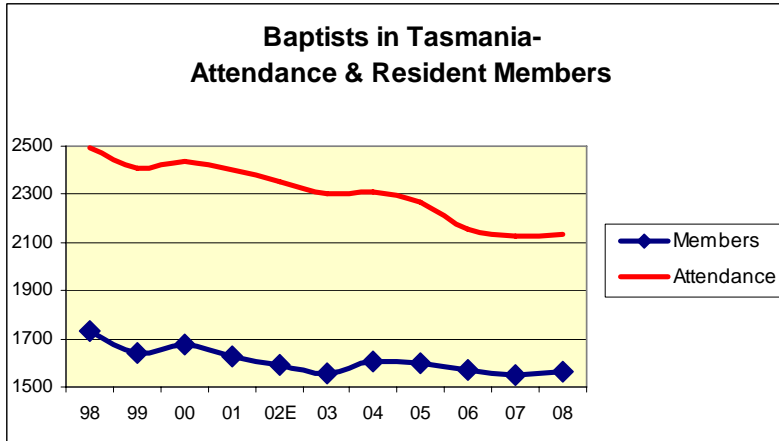
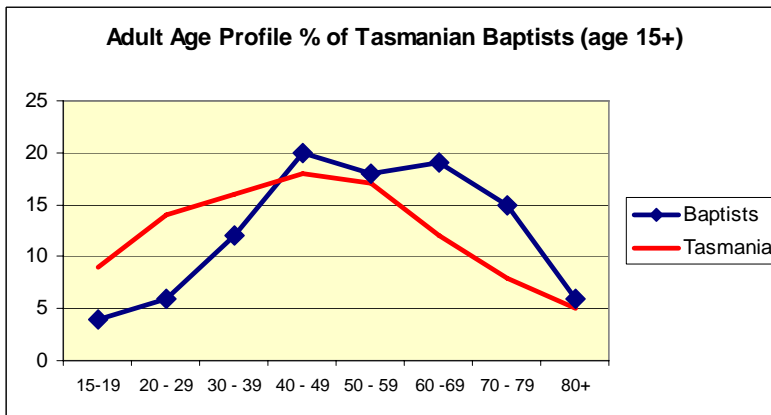


Chart 3



**Box 1****Role of the superintendent**

The superintendent is the visionary leader of the denomination; team leader for the mission leadership team; mentor for the pastors and responsible for church care and the liaison with other Baptist unions.

**Role of the regional ministers**

In addition to their roles as pastors, John Smith (South), Jeff McKinnon (North) and Ivan Jordan (North-West) are responsible for missional leadership; care of missional leaders; working with the superintendent to cast missional vision and care for churches and pastors in crisis.

**Box 2.****Terms of reference for the 2009 review**

Establish and coordinate a process of review, developing recommendations to address the three core issues:

1. Longevity and viability of the denomination. This issue highlights a complex interplay of factors, including the denomination's ageing profile; lack of viable youth ministries; its restricted capacity for renewing vision; difficulty coping with discontinuous change; and the increasing challenge of resourcing the state-wide mission in terms of personnel and finance. It also relates to the impact on our churches of post-denominational attitudes, especially among the younger generations.

2. The reduced commitment to churches and the denomination: Churches struggle to maintain competent leadership, find resource personnel for key programmes, finance the Union budget, and accommodate a greater plurality of those with non-Baptist heritage. Denominationally-speaking, it is increasingly difficult to identify and involve suitable people in council or taskforce roles. There appears to be a gap between the aspiration of churches to be part of the Union and their capacity for, or commitment to, practical involvement

3. The implications of these issues for the future denominational leadership model. In light of the current Superintendent's notification of his intention to retire at the end of 2009, it is opportune to re-assess the denomination's leadership needs in the light of the above factors. This also opens up issues such as leadership priorities, style, and preferred models for a time of challenging and discontinuous change.

*Tasmanian Baptists*

**Box 3****An Anglican view of church**

A missionary church is focused on God the Trinity, all its life and activity is undergirded by prayer; incarnational, it seeks to be responsive to the activity of the Spirit in its community; transformational, it is not self-serving, self-seeking or self-focused – the kingdom of God is its goal; makes disciples, it is concerned with the transformation of individuals as well as communities; and relational, it is characterised by welcome and hospitality.

*Mission-shaped church – Church planting and fresh expressions of church in a changing context*, Willow Publishing 2005

**Box 4****Alan Hirsch speaks about church culture**

He makes the point that the contemporary church growth approach adopted by most churches is failing and has become a source of frustration and guilt.

He says, "I discovered when I surveyed, the average non-Christian population generally reported a high interest in God, spirituality, Jesus, and prayer that, taken together, indicated that a significant search for meaning was going on in our time."

At first glance, this looks like a great opportunity for mission but sadly, Hirsch goes on to say, "mainstream Australian churches tend to cater largely to what might be called the 'family-values segment' – good, solid, well educated citizens who don't abuse their kids, who pay their taxes, and who live, largely, what we call a suburban lifestyle" but this segment represents only 12 percent of the population.

Hirsch is scathing in his conclusion, "in Australia we have the somewhat farcical situation of 95 percent of the evangelical churches tussling with each other to reach 12 percent of the population ... what about the vast majority of the population, in Australia's case 85 percent that report alienation from *precisely* that form of church?"

He goes on to say, "(this) 85 percent range from being blasé, (*"good for them, but not for me"*) to total repulsion (*"I would never go there"*). At best we can make inroads on the blasé; we can't hope to reach the rest of the population with this model (of church) – they are simply alienated from it and don't like it for a whole host of reasons."

Hirsch, Alan: *The Forgotten Ways – Reactivating the missional church*, Brazos Press, 2006 pp 34-36 and p 285