

# Opening Up and Out?

Over the past few months, with our churches called to supportive prayer, we've been reviewing some key aspects of our Baptist Union. This process has included two rounds of regional meetings, open to all who wished to participate, and the work of a small discernment group clarifying issues. The purpose has been to focus the denomination on our commitment to God's mission thereby empowering churches in their missionary priority. This seeks to maintain the momentum of our inspirational "Live the Mission" Gathering last October.

On October 27 this year the Assembly will consider notices of motion which have been circulated to all churches with the unanimous support of the Review Group and of Union Council.

## BEING A MORE INCLUSIVE ASSOCIATION

We're seeking to open up our understanding of Church to celebrate greater diversity, ranging from conventional to so-called fresh expressions of Church. For example we propose a broader description of church: "Any biblical expression of the life of Jesus in communal form". Obviously this widens scope to affirm fresh expressions of church which are springing up, as well as established models.

Within our broad Baptist heritage we have so-called "open" and "closed" forms of belonging to local churches. Within our State most churches are "closed" in the sense of admitting baptised believers only into formal membership. Many congregations will adhere to this position and be supported in doing so. However we should surely respect the diversity that is already emerging in new partnership models and more open membership patterns. In all instances, it is intended to uphold the teaching and practice of believers' baptism by total immersion in the case of new converts. But why shouldn't the Union be able to recognize and associate churches who currently, or in future, wish to include committed believers from other denominational backgrounds in their membership? In the light of such factors, Assembly will be asked to formalize a more inclusive policy at Association level.

## REGAINING COVENANT COMMITMENT

Should Assembly approve these and related changes, a simplified, up-dated Constitution will be drafted. Consistent with Scripture and our Baptist heritage, a Covenant will also be prepared for consideration. It would express positively the key values, or what are currently called "objects of the Union". In expressing their commitment to our state-wide Association, churches would be invited to affirm the Covenant on a renewable basis. As Tasmanian Baptists we'll then have a practical, proactive means of expressing mutual belonging, highlighting shared values and focusing our commitment to each other and to God.

The biblical concept of Covenant is a theme of strategic significance for Baptists in this third millennium affirms Dr. Paul S. Fiddes, a British Baptist scholar. After all, the Lordship of Jesus Christ, expressed in mutual covenant commitment, fired the both imagination and missionary enterprise of earlier generations.

I agree with Fiddes that we need to regain this today. Surely it would please the Lord of the Church to see Tasmanian Baptist churches voluntarily binding together in mutual sharing of resources, prayerfully helping each other clarify their distinctive expressions of God's holistic mission in today's world.

Garry Billing

SUPERINTENDENT