

National Leadership Council Report for the Baptist Union of Southern Africa

BUSA Assembly October 2021

The letter to the Thessalonian church reminds the saints to,

“... give thanks in all circumstances; for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you.”

Thankfulness. The two years of pandemic lockdowns and its consequent impact on our union of churches, has made this a very testing command from our Lord and Saviour to obey. Yet, despite immense challenges both from within and from outside our union we have much to be thankful for.

We are thankful for promise of Scripture that our heavenly Father will never desert us, “It is the LORD who goes before you. He will be with you; he will not leave you or forsake you. Do not fear or be dismayed.” The Lord has indeed been our Shepherd through these days.

We are thankful for the way our churches have responded in diverse and unique ways to continue preaching the Gospel and develop disciples. Churches have had to learn new technologies to broadcast the Good News. Zoom, YouTube, WhatsApp, podcasting, live streaming, and weekly recordings have become part of the new way of “doing church”.

We are thankful for the way many of our union churches responded to the financial shortfalls suffered among many pastors because of the pandemic. The Pastoral Support Committee initiated a covid fund raising some R260,000 to assist pastors in need.

Pandemic. The past two years of ministry have on every level has been over-shadowed by the covid pandemic. Sadly, this pandemic has led to the passing of some of our active and retired pastors. Later in the reports one can see the unusually long list of tributes to those who went home to glory. The pandemic also led to increased levels of trauma and stress amongst the shepherds of the Union. Pastoral families have had to deal not only with the loss of congregants and restrictions on funerals, but also the loss of income and fellowship. This assembly recognises that our pastors need to be ministered to as well. Thus, Eastside Community graciously arranged a day and half of before the business of the assembly to minister to pastors attending the assembly.

Assembly 2019. Since this assembly the union churches have not joined together to conduct the business of the Baptist Union. The 2019 assembly expressed concerns over the financial state of the Union’s finances. One of the outcomes of these concerns was the abandonment of the National Ministry Leader elections due to take place. A further outcome of the floor debates was the decision to increase the membership fees from R30 per member to R60 per member. These extra funds were to serve two purposes, viz. to begin to pay some of the internal loan accounts against the Trust Funds, and secondly to build up a fund to enable the union to call a National Ministry Leader (NML).

During this assembly Rev Greg Matthei came in as president with the theme “Will you not revive us again.” He would have been the last elected president of the union, due to hold the position for less than a week. However, fate intervened in the form of the global pandemic.

The NLC requested that Rev Matthei continue as president/interim NML after the assembly. The upshot has been that Rev Matthei has served as the interim National Ministry Leader from that assembly until the present, performing the duties of the NML in all operational processes at national level. It is likely that he will be asked to continue in this position until a full-time NML is appointed. Since 2019 he has performed these duties with admirable dignity and humble servanthood, for which we deeply thank him.

BU National Office. The year 2019 saw an immense loss of organizational knowledge following the retirement of Rev Angelo Scheepers in March 2019, followed by Rev Stuart Cranna's resignation in December 2019. After serving the union for a period as interim National Administrator, Rev Cranna was called to the pastorate at Lambert Road Baptist. At the same time Rev Rick Inglis retired from overseeing the BU ministry board. Mr Lance Robertson, BU financial administrator also resigned. This period also saw the retirement and resignation of long serving clerical staff, viz. Mrs Lyn Webster and Miss Natalie Hood. Mr Dawid Khumalo, who served on the maintenance team at the national office, also retired after 27 years' service.

In October 2019, Rev Colin Diesel was called upon to manage the finances and administration at the BU national office. He has performed this task in a voluntary capacity for the past two years. Although this was meant to be for only three days a week due his pastoral responsibilities, it has been impossible to perform this task professionally on a part time basis. Considering this, the July 2021 National Leadership Council invited Rev Diesel to assume the role of BU National Administrator on a permanent basis commencing October 2021.

With the introduction of the POPIA act in July 2021, Mrs Patricia Ihlenfeldt was asked to act as the BU POPIA information officer on behalf of the BU national office.

Finances. The national office has seen a marked reduction in funding from churches since the 2019 assembly. This has been due to number of factors such the impact on church finances by the pandemic; disgruntlement by some churches over fiscal disciplines at the national office, the impact of the doubling of membership fees, as well as disputes over the implementation of the new structure and statement of faith.

Despite this the Lord has blessed the BU's finances against all the odds. In 2020 and 2021 we will have achieved healthy surpluses in the BU's finances. The 2022 budget is also projected to achieve a surplus in the fiscus of the union.

This is due to several factors:

Firstly, tight controls on financial expenditure at the national office.

Secondly, improved use of technology (such as Zoom) to raise efficiency of administration.

Thirdly, adjusting the office staffing structure to perform multiple roles.

Upon the instruction of (and since) the 2019 assembly to deal with any loans owing to various funds and accounts we have achieved the following:

- R177,946 paid off against the Trust Funds loan by the BU (R541,000 still owing)
- R242,154 accumulated in the National Ministry Leaders Fund to call an NML
- R300,000 owing to the 2017 Christmas Appeal paid to our pensioners in Apr 2020
- R150,000 owing in municipal arrears cleared with last payment in August 2021.

Furthermore, we had the pleasure of having Mr Garth Coppin (CA) and Mr Stephen Paddy (Businessman) join us on the finance board. Their financial insights will be of great benefit to the BU going forward. Mr Garth Coppin has agreed to assume the chair of the finance committee.

Upon completing the 2019 financial audit, the BU's external auditor, Mrs Alice Jones asked to step down from this responsibility. We thank her sincerely for her diligence as auditor for 14 years. Mr Grant Drysdale (CA) has agreed to perform the external audit of the BU's books for the foreseeable future, and we welcome him in this role.

The tenants (Ritmia Gemeente) that share the Baptist House office space with the BU have taken a further wing of offices for rental. The Baptist House is now fully occupied.

National Leadership Council (NLC). The NLC last met face-to-face at Grahamstown Baptist during March 2020. Since then, all NLC meetings have been by Zoom. While this is adequate, it is not ideal for the important discussions that need to be held within the union at the present. The NLC will meet face-to-face once again at Waterkloof Baptist in September 2021.

Baptist Missions Department (BMD). The BMD has continued to meet online through the past two years. The BMD committee has been astutely led by the Rev Dr Darryl Soal, through these difficult times. Income for missions has declined due the pandemic preventing church visitation to raise missions' awareness. The 2020 easter appeal only realised R6,500, while 2021 raised R100,000. During 2020 Rev Angelo Scheepers served for a large portion of the year in a voluntary position as NOD due to lack of funds, for which we are grateful. Rev Angelo Scheepers has been invited by the BMD committee to continue as part-time National Outreach Developer (NOD) until March 2022, funds permitting. Mission activities are once again being planned for 2022.

Our BU missionaries, Keith and Christine Moller, report that the translation of the Bible into pure Yao is going ahead at full capacity, and they continue to persevere in the field in Malawi.

Deeds Of Love Ministries (DOLM). During 2021 Errol Muller relocated to Bethulie in the Free State resulting this been the operational hub for DOLM. This ministry was also impacted by the pandemic which limited funding and movement.

Baptist Women's Department (BWD). Mrs Patricia Ihlenfeldt continues to direct the activities with effective leadership and compassion. As with all departments of the BU the pandemic curtailed the BWD's work across the country. The Hidden Treasure shops were forced to close for extended periods; however, they are now open and doing well once again. A new Hidden Treasure outlet was opened in Alberton in August 2021.

Maranatha Campsite. The pandemic dealt a mortal blow to the operations and profitability of the campsite. It has quickly become a severe drain on the BU finances, with no substantial income to support its monthly costs. This resulted in the difficult decision to retrench all the campsite staff in July 2020. Investigations are ongoing under the leadership of Mr Dave Temple as to the potential sale of the property. The assembly members will be asked this year to give their consent to the process of the sale of the campsite.

Theological colleges. These institutions have continued nurture and educate their students despite the challenges of the pandemic. We congratulate Prof. Piff Pereira, who was appointed as the principal of the Baptist Theological College in Randburg. We also commend Prof. Godfrey Harold who was appointed principal of the Cape Town Baptist Seminary. We ask the Lord's continued favour on these learned gentlemen as they serve our Union in these crucial positions.

The merger (incorporation) process between the two colleges has seen much discussion over the past few years. However, this process has been abandoned for the foreseeable future. We congratulate BTC on their 70th Anniversary celebrations this year.

"The fear of the LORD is the beginning of knowledge; fools despise wisdom and instruction"

New structure. However, this pandemic era has also highlighted some challenges to the unity of our beloved union. The 2018 assembly initiated the countdown towards implementing the new Baptist Union organizational structure. Alongside this were deep debates over the need for a more comprehensive Statement of Faith to replace the 1924 Statement of Faith.

Once again, the implementation of the new BU structure was plagued by the pandemic, as well as the loss of experienced leaders over the past few years. This has delayed both the implementation and the discussion over this implementation process. The cost of the full implementation was also a factor considering the critical financial situation at the national office. Unfortunately, when considering the costs of the full implementation of the new structure it seems at this stage to be beyond the financial ability of the national office.

The NLC did make some decisions towards implementing the new structure. The appointment of a full-time National Administrator and a National Ministry Leader were pursued over the past year. The National Administrator post will be filled by Colin Diesel from October 2021, while the search for a National Ministry Leader continues.

There were concerns from some of the territorial associations over the transition from associations to networks within the new structure. There are some valid issues that need to be addressed in this regard. Therefore, the NLC decided at its July meetings to ask the assembly delegates to grant a further two years to allow for a more considered approach to the implementation of the new structure. A small team of BU leaders will be asked to travel through the regions to hear not only concerns, but also assist in the network transitions.

It must be noted that the Western Cape is well advanced in transitioning to a network, and so too the Border association.

Statement of Faith. Some of our churches have felt that the 1924 Statement of Faith no longer adequately portrays our stance on Scripture as a union of churches. These churches have expressed a concern that should the Union not express a strong stance on the authority of the Bible, the Union might find itself experiencing “liberal drift” away from Biblical obedience to a point in the future where we may face compromise both theologically and morally in certain issues.

It was from these concerns that a team was asked to review the 1924 Statement of Faith and strengthen the emphasis on Scripture. This new proposed Statement of Faith was brought to the 2017 assembly. The decisions before us during this assembly will revolve around whether churches may replace the 1924 with the 2017. Furthermore, we will have to ask ourselves whether associations/networks will be able to utilise the 2017 instead of the 1924. May the Lord Jesus grant us wisdom, fraternity and understanding as we attempt to settle these matters.

The BU’s stance on Scripture was affirmed by a commendation at the 1990 assembly. The assembly held at Roodepoort in October 1990, which met at a time of great uncertainty and social change in our land expressed the affirmation below. The declaration on Scripture affirmed then is still the affirmation from the Union until today. Quoted from the 1990 assembly minutes,

Statement on Scripture: The following statement on Scripture was adopted: -

“Having no authority to accept a doctrinal statement on behalf of our churches, but knowing there is unsettlement in some of our churches, we agree to commend this statement to them for their consideration as a general expression of our Baptist belief.

“To the extent, if any, that this statement is construed as being inconsistent with, or in substitution for, the Declaration of Principle recited in the Constitution, the latter declaration shall prevail.

“The Holy Scripture comprising the sixty-six books of the Old and New Testaments, is the complete and final written record of God’s revelation to man. It is in its entirety the very Word of God. It is powerful, with its own inherent authority. It is the final rule and authority in all matters of faith and conduct.

“The Holy Scripture was written by men who were supernaturally moved by the Holy Spirit in such a way that their human writing was divinely inspired. This inspiration of the Holy Scripture extends equally to all parts; the thoughts and ideas are expressed in words which are themselves inspired. It is wholly reliable, trustworthy and true, without any mixture error. It has been, and will be, kept by the Holy Spirit, throughout all ages in such a way that we may have confidence in the text before us today!”

*“Your word is a lamp to my feet
and a light to my path.”*