

THE CONSULTATION PROCESS

AN UPDATE

By Jonny Hirst, on behalf of
the Consultation Steering
Group

In 2020 the Ministerial Recognition Committee, Baptist Union Council, and the Core Leadership Team together began a process of considering whether there should be a change to the Ministerial Recognition Rules regarding Marriage and Accredited Ministry, after a request was made by 70 members to do so. (*visit: baptist.org.uk/consultation to learn more about the background to this process*)

After much consideration, Council agreed that a process of national consultation should take place. As Autumn now draws in, we are over half way in to that consultation process, which commenced in January 2023 with the assembling of a Baptists Together Consultation Steering Group and the appointment of an independent Research Team (Sandra Cobbin and Associates).

Since then, much work has already been done in constructing appropriate surveys and gathering the viewpoints and data from many of our churches and ministers. Surveys were distributed electronically in May of this year, and the opportunity to participate onsite was given at Baptist Assembly in June.

Deciding what questions should go into the survey was a challenging task, but through the piloting of a sample group, and obtaining detailed feedback from many members of the Core Leadership Team, each question was scrutinised, debated and reviewed in order to refine what is being asked. The result is a set of questions that focus on helping Council make its decision.

All of this research will continue to be gathered and analysed until later this autumn, and the Consultation process will conclude in March 2024, where Council, having had all the

research presented to them, will meet to respond to the question we have been asked.

The Consultation is about hearing the heart and mind of where our Baptist movement is on these matters of human sexuality, with the question about same-sex marriage and Accredited Ministry, and its potential impact on the mission and ministry of our churches at the centre of the research. The research has never been about a referendum style vote on the matter, but aims to hear as many voices as possible in our movement and provide as comprehensive as possible feedback from our ministers and churches to enable Council to discern a way forward in a way that reflects our wider Baptist family.

If you are a Minister or Church representative who has received an email and code for the survey, and you haven't done so already, let me encourage you to share your thoughts, and

those of your church, however certain or unsure they may be, by completing the survey. It is not too late to do so.

As we're considering all things digital in this issue of the magazine, let's take a moment to reflect how this consultation process has been possible this year. Although our Baptists Together Teams still know and experience the value of onsite gatherings, so much of our work in-between has only been possible through online video conferencing and electronic correspondence. As we have all experienced over the last three years, Zoom, Teams, and Google Meet have all become common place in the business, prayer, and even the social lives of our church communities. Yet it is still remarkable that this technology allows me to be in a local church meeting here in the north of England one minute, to be meeting with members of this national group from all around the country the next.

More than that, our modern forms of sharing information through electronic technology have enabled us to distribute communication to our 2000 churches and our ministers in an instant, and then gather information back at just a few strokes of our keyboards. And thanks to the talents of our Research Team, all that securely stored information is then produced into quantitative and qualitative data, then analysed and will eventually be translated into reports and presentations for Council. There are many

human voices, prayers and hands at the tiller of this process, but the engine is digital, and it has well and truly revolutionised the way we discern together across our national Baptist movement.

STILL FULLY HUMAN?

I recently attended an international Baptist gathering where one of the conference speakers asked AI to produce a letter of encouragement to today's global Church. On the surface the letter was full of Christian and Biblical language, but it was nuanced with several inaccuracies, and ultimately revealed itself to be decisively inauthentic. While the exercise was fascinating, even comical, the end result obviously lacked the complexity of human wisdom and experience.

Could there be a risk that in all the digital technology used in the Consultation we don't truly hear the human voice of our Union? Should such important and complex questions around human sexuality rely on such technologies, rather than onsite meetings? Well, despite our reliance on digital technology to undertake this process it is far from being artificial intelligence. The responses that are gathered come from real human beings, carrying all sorts of complex thoughts, experiences, reflections and emotions. The data being analysed has been shared by human minds and praying hearts, in fellowship with the Living God. While some of the research was able to be undertaken onsite at the Baptist Assembly this year, it alone will not have the same potential

reach and impact as the digital surveys can have, as long as real people respond through the tools of the digital technology in front of them. Please add your response to the process if you haven't done so already.

Emails with links to the survey were sent out to ministers and church representatives around the 10 May 2023. If you're unsure where that link is, or how to complete the survey at this stage, visit the FAQ section of the Consultation page on the Baptists Together website. (baptist.org.uk/consultation)

Jonny Hirst, on behalf of the Consultation Steering Group. Other members of the steering group include Lynn Green, Hayley Young, Mark Spriggs, Dion-Marie White and Mike Lowe.



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