

Learning on the Way: Receptive Ecumenism and the Catholic Synodal Pathway

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Briefing Paper: The Baptist Union of Great Britain

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1. Introduction

In this paper I am representing the tradition of the Baptist Union of Great Britain (BUGB, now more popularly known by its logo as 'Baptists Together'). This community is a union, made in the late nineteenth century, of two much older streams of Baptist life in the UK dating from the period of the long English Reformation. 'General Baptists' began as a group of English 'Separatists' from the Church of England who were religious exiles in Amsterdam, and who adopted the baptism of believing disciples in 1609, while 'Particular Baptists' (more Calvinistic than the General Baptists) emerged from Dissenters in England about 1640, again adopting a disciples' baptism. Both streams of Baptists were among the churches that can be reckoned as a 'fourth strand' of the Reformation alongside Lutherans, Reformed and Anglicans, namely those for whom the life of the church was characterized by 'covenant', a feature of central importance for the idea of 'synodality' as I hope to show.¹ Other churches gathered by covenant in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries included English Separatists, the continental Anabaptists, and 'Independents' in England who retained infant baptism and were later to be named 'Congregationalists'.

I am not writing from the perspective of an 'official' in BUGB, but I have an extensive experience of Baptist life, both in the UK and on the world scene, stretching now over some seven decades.

2. Vision

2.1. *Some key words about synodality*

Reading the Catholic briefing paper with its stress on 'journeying together', 'walking together' and 'gathering', a Baptist feels on familiar ground. These are expressions associated with what has been called 'covenant' in the Baptist story. Early covenants added the phrase 'watching over each other' to 'walking together' in the community of the church, and related words were 'fellowship' (*koinonia*) and being 'one body in Christ' (see 2.3 below). These

¹See Paul S. Fiddes (ed), *The Fourth Strand of the Reformation. The Covenant Ecclesiology of Anabaptists, English Separatists and Early General Baptists* (Oxford: Centre for Baptist History, 2018).

key words expressed a conviction that the church was ‘gathered’ by Christ, a word often used in contrast to a church whose membership was equivalent to those born and living in a particular region. At the heart of the covenant community was the privilege and obligation to ‘find the mind of Christ’ together, since—in another key phrase—the church existed ‘under the rule of Christ’. This expression also indicated dissent from any rule of the state in the oversight and worship of the church, and so represented a demand for religious freedom. Members pledged to ‘receive one another’ and regarded themselves as part of the ‘communion of saints’ (understanding ‘saint’ to be all members who were called to be holy). In summary, key words have been:

- ‘walking together’ and ‘watching over’ each other
- ‘gathered’ in ‘covenant’, ‘fellowship’ and one ‘body’
- ‘finding the mind of Christ’ and living together ‘under the rule of Christ’
- ‘receiving one another’ in the ‘communion of saints’

2.2. *Some key scriptural texts about synodality*

From earliest Baptist life, a key text used to describe a community gathered by the risen Christ has been Matt 18: 20: ‘Where two or three are gathered together in my name, there am I in the midst of them.’ The ‘Great Commission’ of Matt 28:18–20 has been seen as defining the nature of the church: living under the sole authority and rule of Christ, baptizing disciples, and taking the gospel to all nations. These are the three clauses on which the ‘Declaration of Principle’ of the Baptist Union was based in 1904. The story of the baptism of the Ethiopian Eunuch in Acts 8:26–40, with his request ‘what hinders me from being baptized?’ has illustrated the theology of a covenant which is embodied in baptism. The ministry of the church has been understood as carried out collegially by every member of the ‘body’, and here Paul’s account in Rom 12: 4–8 and 1 Cor 12: 4–13 has often been cited. With regard to the church gathered to exercise discernment, the story of the Council of Jerusalem has been influential, with the Apostles’ statement that ‘it has seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us’, interpreted as the Spirit bearing witness to ‘the mind of Christ’, as in 1 Cor 2: 16 (cf. Rom 8:27, 15:6, Phil 2: 2, 5).

2.3. *Covenant, Fellowship and Body: a longer explanation*

(a) *Covenant*

According to a covenant ecclesiology each local church congregation is gathered by a covenant which has both a horizontal and a vertical direction: it is made by members with each other, expressing their mutual commitment, and it is made with God. In the words of the early Baptist, John Smyth, in 1606, ‘A visible communion of Saints is of two, three or more Saints joined together by covenant with God & themselves...’² In early Baptist history, it was a pact undertaken and signed when a particular local church was founded, and subsequently made by new members on entering it. They promised both to ‘give themselves up to God’ *and* to ‘give themselves up to each other’; to ‘walk in the ways of the Lord’ *and* ‘to walk

² John Smyth, *Principles and Inferences Concerning the Visible Church* (1607), in W.T. Whitley (ed.), *The Works of John Smyth* (2 volumes; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1915), I, 252.

together’; to obey the ‘rules of Christ’ *and* to ‘watch over each other’ in a corporate *episkope* (oversight). All this was expressed in the covenant made at Gainsborough in 1606 or 1607 by the congregation of English Separatists who were shortly to travel into religious exile in Amsterdam and there adopt believers’ baptism. As William Bradford recalled the event years later in America, the members ‘joined themselves (by a covenant of the Lord) into a Church estate, in the fellowship of the gospel, to walk in all his ways, made known, or to be made known unto them, according to their best endeavours, whatsoever it should cost them, the Lord assisting them.’³

Baptists, led by the thought of John Smyth, saw that the intersection of the horizontal and the vertical dimensions of covenant must mean that God’s eternal covenant of grace for human salvation is actually *identified* with the covenant-making of a local congregation in time and place.⁴ Thus, when a local church makes covenant its members are entering, or entering more deeply, into the new covenant in which they are redeemed by Christ. To take one example, in the covenant of the church at Horsley Down (1697), which became the model for many other covenants in Particular Baptist churches, the members promise ‘to give up ourselves to the Lord, in a Church state ... that he may be our God, and we may be his People, through the Everlasting Covenant of his Free grace, in which alone we hope to be accepted by him, through his blessed Son Jesus Christ.’⁵ The baptism of a believing disciple is the moment of entering into this covenant which is both eternal and local, and it is an opportunity for all members witnessing it to renew their covenant and effectively re-make the church. This theological vision has meant that, during the Baptist story, in many churches baptism replaced the making of an actual document. In recent years, the understanding that the church at every level of its existence is covenantal—including its relation with the wider church—has nevertheless been revived among UK Baptists, and opportunities to affirm and re-affirm the covenantal nature of the church have been provided.⁶ This, we might say, using Catholic terminology, has been the Baptist ‘pathway of synodality’.

(b) *Fellowship (koinonia)*

Describing a covenant community as a ‘fellowship’ underlines that this community participates in the fellowship of the triune God (1 Jn 1:3). For Baptists, being a ‘gathered church’ means not just ‘gathering together’, but ‘*being* gathered’ by Christ who is the covenant-maker, drawing believers into the covenant-fellowship of God. Though faith has an essential voluntary element, in response to the initiating grace of God, the church is not regarded as a merely voluntary society, since it gathers in obedience to Christ who is present in its midst. In recent dialogue between the Baptist World Alliance and the Catholic Church, an important step was made in recognizing that Baptist language of covenant and Catholic language of ‘communion’ (*koinonia*) could be aligned. According to the agreed statement:

³ William Bradford, *History of Plymouth Plantation* Vol. 1, 1620-1647 (repr. Mass. Historical Society, Boston, 1912), 20–2.

⁴ Smyth, *Paralleles, Censures, Observations*, in Whitley, *Works* II, 403.

⁵ Benjamin Keach, *The Glory of a True Church* (London, 1697), 71.

⁶ *Covenant 21. Covenant for a Gospel People* (London: Baptist Union, 2000).

The *koinonia* of the church may also be understood as a ‘covenant community’ although this language is less familiar to Catholics than to Baptists. ‘Covenant’ expresses at once both the initiative and prior activity of God in making relationship with his people through Christ, and the willing commitment of people to each other and to God ... The fellowship or *koinonia* of the church itself is [thus] both a gift and calling...⁷

(c) *One body in Christ*

Understanding the covenant community as the ‘body’ of Christ—the embodiment of Christ in the contemporary world—has important implications for a ‘synodal’ life-style. With other churches at the time of the Reformation, Baptists asserted that the whole congregation corporately shared in the three-fold ministry of Christ: prophetic (expressed in preaching), priestly (expressed in the sacraments), and kingly (expressed in a mutual discipline of ‘watching over each other’ and in the freedom to find the purpose of Christ without external ecclesial authority). All individual members had thus been given spiritual gifts for different services, although Christ also called some among them for the particular ‘offices’ of minister (or ‘elder’, or ‘bishop’) and deacons, without which the church was not completely formed.⁸ When the Lord’s Supper was celebrated, Christ was understood to make himself present not only through the elements of bread and wine but through the ‘body’ of the gathered members of the church.

The affirming of ‘one body in Christ’ also makes clear that each local church/congregation is interdependent with others. In the words of a Baptist confession of 1644, referring to the synodality of ‘walking together’:

... although the particular Congregations be distinct and several Bodies, every one a compact and knit City in itself; yet are they all to walk by one and the same Rule, and by all means convenient to have the counsel and help of one another in all needful affairs of the Church, as members of one body in the common faith under Christ their only head.⁹

Each congregation has the freedom to make decisions for its own faith and life, since it exists under the rule of Christ, and this cannot be infringed upon by any external ecclesial power. Yet this is not an ‘autonomy’ (‘self-rule’) because congregations are covenanted together as members of ‘one body’, observing ‘one and the same Rule’. The rule is the personal rule of Christ himself, discerned on the basis of scripture when congregations assemble together. Since Christ rules in assemblies of churches when they gather, the local church meeting *must* give serious attention to the way that this wider association has discerned the mind of Christ, and to be ready to trust fellow churches. It will think that it needs the fellowship and gifts of

⁷*The Word of God in the Life of the Church, A Report of International Conversations between The Catholic Church and the Baptist World Alliance 2006-2010, American Baptist Quarterly* 31 (2012), §16.

⁸*Confession of Faith Put forth by ... Many Congregations* 1677 (Second London Confession), XXVI.8.

⁹*Confession of Faith of those Churches ...* 1644 (London Confession), XLVII.

others (in association or national union) to *find* the mind of Christ on many issues, but will also believe that it has the freedom to *recognize* whether Christ's purpose has indeed been found for its own life. This is a delicate balance, arising from the nature of covenant. Like the sharing of authority between pastor and people within the single local congregation, this tension can only be lived within by mutual trust, not on the basis of law. The wider church (ultimately the 'church universal') is not a mere collection of local congregations, since it is the one body of Christ. Baptists have much sympathy with some recent Catholic ecclesiology which envisages a *perichoresis* or mutual interweaving of the local and the universal church.¹⁰

3. Synods, Structures, and Style

The Catholic briefing paper handles 'synodality' under three headings: 'synods', 'structures', and 'style'. The paper admits that these categories are interwoven, but they are even more entangled from the perspective of covenant, which is both a style of life and expressed in meeting together. Nevertheless, I will follow this three-fold division, though in a different order.

3.1. Institutions and processes for regular communal discernments and listening ("structures")

At the level of a local congregation, the 'Church (members') Meeting' (CM), which meets regularly—either midweek or after Sunday worship—has freedom to discern the purpose (the 'mind') of Christ for every area of its life and its mission. This is in accord with the principles of covenant, fellowship, and body discussed above. As the instrument of covenant life, it also admits new members and has the power to dismiss members. It calls a woman or man to be its minister of word and sacrament (or perhaps a ministerial team) and is guided by the church 'officers', who are the minister(s) and a group of lay 'deacons', making up the 'diaconate'. In turn the diaconate implements the decisions made by the CM. Prayer and bible study should permeate the atmosphere of the CM, since the aim is essentially to discern the mind of Christ who stands in the midst of the church, not to find a majority. Each member has a voice and a vote in the CM, and every attempt should be made to listen with sensitivity and respect to varying opinions and different life-experiences, with nobody feeling excluded. The meeting will be open to hear prophetic and unexpected voices, as well as being willing to listen carefully to those it has called to teach and oversee the community. If possible, discernment is made through coming to a consensus, but on some issues a vote will need to be taken, and on some matters (such as the calling of a minister) the CM will require more than a bare majority.

This traditional Baptist structure of members and diaconate has now had necessarily to come to terms with the demands of compliance with charity law, and has been overlaid by the duality of members and 'trustees'. The two structures do not exactly fit, as trustees are intended to 'govern' and 'control' the charity. However, charity compliance can be made to work if there is a *will* to live in the ethos of covenant. To assist, a governance document for

¹⁰ E.g. Walter Kasper, 'On the Church' *The Tablet* 255 (June 23, 2001): 927–30.

Unincorporated Charity Associations (UCAs) has been agreed between the Charity Commissioners and BUGB, where trustees are subject to ‘any specific or general directions of the Church Members’ Meeting’, and the ‘precedent’ document for a Charitable Incorporated Organization (CIO) requires the trustees to ‘note’ and ‘respond to’ the decisions of the church meeting.¹¹ In this situation, living by the vision of covenant becomes even more important.

The church meeting lies at the heart of the process of synodality among Baptists, and the covenantal relation between CM and diaconate is reflected (approximately at least) at every level of church life. There are 13 ‘regional associations’ in BUGB, and each has something corresponding to a CM and diaconate. There is an assembly (sometimes called an AGM) of representatives from member churches, which is a kind of ‘church meeting of church meetings’; as part of its consultation process it appoints several ‘regional ministers’ and elects an ‘executive committee’ or ‘steering group’ (the trustees), which oversees a wide range of services and support offered to its member churches.

At the national level of BUGB the church meeting is reflected in the Council, which is mainly constituted by representatives of associations, and whose aim is to find the mind of Christ for the life and mission of the churches, associations, and colleges it represents. It has, in effect, two diaconates in a ‘dual operating’ structure, which guide the Council and implement its strategic vision in practical terms. On the one hand, the Board of Trustees of BUGB (which is a CIO) operates in the world of charity compliance and exercises a general monitoring function while administering a range of committees, organizations, and other charities which provide resources for the churches of the Union. On the other hand, the ‘Core Leadership Team’ (CLT) includes all regional minister team leaders as well as other leaders in the denomination and operates in the world of ‘Baptists Together’ as a ‘grass-roots movement’ for spiritual life and mission including some 2,000 local churches. The ‘General Secretary’ or senior minister of BUGB is a member of Council, Trustees, and CLT. Once again, a will to live in the ‘synodal’ style of covenant is essential, and this is assisted by an agreed constitution for the Charitable Incorporated Organisation (CIO) which distinguishes between ‘broad strategy’ provided by Council, and ‘management’ provided by the Trustees.¹²

As explained above, all local churches retain their own freedom, but join associations and the Union because they recognize that they do not have all the resources and spiritual gifts they need to make the body of Christ visible in the world on their own. Associations and the union do not regard themselves as ‘a church’, but they have ecclesial reality and the marks of church.

At a world level, a similar pattern of church meeting and diaconate can be perceived. The European Baptist Association (EBF) has a Council of member bodies (national unions and conventions) and an executive committee. The Baptist World Alliance has a Council of member bodies from 120 countries and an Executive which includes secretaries for each region and a General Secretary. In 2013 the BWA launched a ‘Covenant of Intra-Baptist

¹¹See Baptist Union of Great Britain documents C04, C10.

¹²See BUGB CIO Constitution (2018), 18.1, 19.1.

Relations’, thus signifying some kind of ‘ecclesial’ or ‘churchly’ relations between its members, while still of course not regarding the BWA itself as a church. Its constitution declares that it ‘exists as an expression of the essential oneness of Baptist people in the Lord Jesus Christ, to impart inspiration to the fellowship, and to provide channels for sharing concerns and skills in witness and ministry.’ It adds that it recognizes the freedom as well as the interdependence of Baptist churches and member bodies.

3.2. *Occasional gatherings for a particular purpose (“synods”)*

Owing to the covenant structure of Baptist life, it is difficult to define any difference between ‘structure’ and ‘synods’. The assemblies of associations, and Councils of the EBF and BWA might be regarded as ‘synods’, since they usually meet only once a year. Similarly, alongside the Council of BUGB there is an annual Assembly which reviews the life of the Union, elects the General Secretary, guards the constitution, and affirms major appointments. Council and Assembly in BUGB are both a version of the church meeting writ large, or two modes of a membership covenanting together, or two forums for discerning the mind of Christ.

Representatives of associations gather in Council, whereas representatives of all member churches can gather in Assembly. While Council can assign work to the Trustees and the CLT, by the constitution of the BUGB CIO it discerns the broad strategic direction of the Union, ‘subject to any direction of the Assembly’.¹³

3.3. *The ‘synodal style’ of being church individually and communally, and its values*

For Baptists, an ethos of openness, accompaniment, listening, and mutual learning is essential for being church at the local, association, and Union levels since there is no hierarchy of power. For example, the Union ‘accredits’ ministers after a thorough process of ministerial recognition and formation, but accreditation is not tied to ordination, and a local church is free to appoint a non-accredited minister. Further, the Union and associations together collect funds for the support of small churches in an annual appeal to the churches, and after an allotment for its central agencies, the Union does not retain control over its expenditure but distributes it to the associations for them to make their own decisions.

Tensions may well arise between the way an individual church discerns the purpose of Christ in the modern world and in its particular context for mission on the one hand, and the strategy developed by association or Union on the other, also seeking the mind of Christ. These tensions can only be dealt with by developing trust, and being willing to listen and learn together. Regional associations, consisting as they do of about 150 churches, encourage the development of small informal ‘clusters’ of congregations for fellowship and mutual learning, and offer programmes to facilitate this. There is encouragement to include churches of other Christian confessions in these clusters wherever possible. One expression of values, written shortly after a major re-organization of associations, received widespread acceptance among churches: *Five Core Values for a Gospel People* (1998) began with the declaration that BUBG consists of churches covenanted together, and then outlined the values of a church as a prophetic, inclusive, sacrificial, missionary, and worshipping community.

¹³See BUGB CIO Constitution, 18.1.

In the Baptist way of covenant, there is always the danger that the local church will consider itself to be self-sufficient, especially when it is strong in numbers and finance, and will not open itself to listen to others. The challenges of a synodal style are also increased by the necessity to comply with charity law, as outlined above. There is a temptation for trustees to focus on their legal rights and obligations and to neglect covenant. It has been discovered to be less easy to echo the pattern of church meeting plus diaconate on the association level than on the local and Union level, partly because associations have followed the model of a Company Limited by Guarantee (CLG), which until recently has been the only alternative to the UCA on offer. The legal responsibilities of trustees in a CLG mean that it is difficult to give assemblies of its members the kind of scope for deliberation and discernment of the mind of Christ that a church meeting has. Association executives/boards of trustees have thus tried to cultivate covenant relations with the churches through a whole range of sub-groups and networks—for example leaders’ conferences, mission and ministry training, youth work, social justice and safeguarding—on which members from many different churches are involved. The will to live in a covenant way is thus made the more urgent in the present relation of the church to civil society through charity status.

4. Discernment and Difference

4.1. The practice of listening

The Catholic briefing document asks what it means to practise ‘what the Spirit is saying to the churches’, which we may also understand as ‘finding the mind of Christ’ or ‘discerning the purpose of a missionary God’. As outlined above, discernment is practised among Baptists mainly through the local church meeting, and in its parallel structures at association and Union level. Hearing the diversity of lived experience means encouraging people to speak in the church meeting and assuring them of the value of their voice. Small group work also creates an environment for dialogue where the Spirit can be heard. At Union level, efforts are made by the nominations committee to ensure diversity in nomination for the Trustee Board and the Core Leadership Team, and in addition to representative members of Council and the CLT there is provision for co-option to ensure that there is proper diversity in gender, age, ethnicity, and ‘ablement’. Associations have similar provisions.

Over contentious issues, time is taken in Council and Assembly simply to listen to the experience of those on different sides of a matter, without pressure to come to an immediate decision. ‘Listening days’ are arranged by Union and associations. During the 1990s these were arranged prior to changes in the shape of the Union and its governance, and more recently they have been used to listen to the experience of those in the LGBTQ+ community, such as in the provision of ‘Kind and Gentle Spaces’ for conversation (Southern Counties Baptist Association). Courses are provided to help members of local churches to listen to each other and particularly to those who feel excluded, including individuals and couples in same-sex relationships (for example ‘Creating Sanctuary’). At present there is a live issue over whether Baptist ministers might be, or might remain, accredited, if they are living in a same-sex marriage, and a year will be taken for ‘listening’, including the use of a survey for all churches to inform a Council decision in 2024.

4.2. Holding plurality of understanding and practice together

Theological plurality is fostered by the fact that there is no common statement of faith within the covenant life of BUGB. Instead, dating from 1904, there is a brief ‘Declaration of Principle’ which is affirmed by all churches and ministers and which affirms the final authority of Christ, the freedom of the local church to discern the purpose of Christ, the normative nature of baptism as the immersion of believing disciples in the name of the triune God, and the obligation for every disciple to be involved in mission. This is not a confession of faith but a covenant document, setting out the ground on which covenant partners can ‘walk together’. The freedom of the local church is the basis for plurality within these wide boundaries, and churches are free to affiliate to other networks of churches in addition to their membership of an association and BUGB.

There is also plurality over baptism. While believers’ baptism is affirmed as normative, the majority of churches operate an ‘open membership’ policy in which members are not required to have been baptized as believers, but may join on the basis of their infant baptism or a public confession of faith. A minority have ‘closed’ membership, requiring baptism as a believer, and others operate an ‘associate’ membership for those not baptized in this way. While BUGB is a full ecumenical partner with the WCC and ‘Churches Together’, churches have been able to indicate that they wish to be disassociated from these links by signing a register. While many churches believe active same-sex relations to be contrary to scripture, if a church meeting and the minister agree, a church may register for same-sex marriage and the minister may conduct the marriage; some churches have taken this course of action as part of their desire to be fully inclusive. The aim is to hold all these differences together in a covenant relationship and in a common concern for mission.

4.3. Allowing confrontation to become opportunities for learning

While the church meeting may take a majority decision where consensus is not possible or desirable, attempts are made to carry out the decision in a way that takes account of the minority voice, and where the church goes on learning from that minority position. One good example of confrontation leading to learning was the occasion when African and Caribbean members of the General Council of the Baptist World Alliance meeting in Ghana (July 2007) confronted western churches with the need to apologize for slavery, and BUGB was a particular target. This triggered a process of reflection, learning, and facing truth among BUGB churches about racial injustice lasting several years (called ‘The Journey’), initiated by an apology issued by the BUGB Council in November 2007 recognizing ‘our part’ in the transatlantic slave trade.

5. Mission

5.1. The relation of synodality to mission and ministry

The church meeting decides on a strategy for mission in its locality, guided by the diaconate, and its members are also committing to carry it out. In a spirit of synodality, the church may carry out a ‘mission audit’ (assisted by materials from BUGB) to discover more about the wider community in which it is set; it will seek to listen to the stories of others, since ‘walking together’ also means accompanying those the church seeks to serve in its

neighbourhood. Some associations also offer a ‘Re-imagine’ programme which enables churches to re-imagine what their mission might look like; this is a ‘community learning journey’ that enables a team from a church to join with teams from other churches in synodal style to consider four key areas of what it is to be a missional church: engaging in culture, empowering leadership, encouraging discipleship, and embracing mission.

At association level, the executive or steering group will form a strategy for mission, informed by its sub-groups and networks, and will then resource individuals or groups to engage in mission—whether in new church plants, fresh forms of mission in existing churches, or chaplaincies in the community. At Union level, Council will decide on general strategy, and then the Core Leadership Team which has been involved in this synodal process will exercise leadership ‘on the ground’ to carry it through, whether in association life or in colleges.

5.2. Formation in synodality for the sake of the gospel

Formation for students intending for ordained ministry (including pioneer ministry) is itself a process of listening and discerning in community. Most women and men preparing for ministry now follow a ‘church-based’ pattern where they are called to exercise pastoral ministry in a local church (whether as part of a team or on their own) and study theology at a college alongside this. The local church where they are placed both receives and welcomes their ministry but is also actively involved in partnership with the college in helping to form and shape them for the future. At college, student ministers are enabled to reflect theologically, in community with fellow ministerial students, on their pastoral practice. Where a student is residential rather than being church-based, extensive church placements offer some of the same experience.

6. Catholic Learning

The Catholic briefing paper graciously asks its ecumenical partners to consider whether there are insights from their tradition and practice that might help in meeting the challenges it lists as having emerged from the Synodal pathway.

6.1. Improving the quality of preaching

In ‘church-based’ formation of Baptist ministers, the congregation through its leaders feeds back reaction to preaching to the tutor/mentor assigned to the student; this tutor also listens to the student’s preaching on site in her/his placement. We have found that such personal mentoring is needed to supplement instruction on homiletics within the college, and assessments of a student’s preaching that take place there. Where students are college-based with a church placement, some feedback can also be obtained from a congregation.

6.2 The place of women in ministry

Women became fully accredited ministers in BUGB in 1920, although there are still a few churches where women’s roles are limited within the freedom of the local church to call its own ministry. National and local Gender Justice Hubs formed in 1996 promote the ministry of women by creating resources and offering support for local churches and ministers. Women were—and are—accepted in ministry for at least three reasons: (a) For Baptists, the

basic question is whether women are called by Christ to a full ministry of word and sacrament; if so, this should over-rule all church regulation as the church is gathered in covenant by Christ. Whether Christ is making this call is to be discerned by the ‘synodality’ of the church gathered together, seeking the mind of Christ. (b) Churches are helped in this discernment by women taking whatever range of roles is possible, such as being deacons. Historically, the creation of an order of ‘deaconesses’, and the way that these deaconesses led local churches resulted naturally in recognizing a calling to be ordained ministers. (c) The church must also listen to the way that the Spirit of God is moving in wider society. Historically the acceptance of women at all levels of the professions was influential in understanding the purpose of God for ministry in the churches; both the President and General Secretary of the Baptist Union in the decade 1910–20 were active supporters both of women’s suffrage in society and ordination of women in the church.

6.3. Listening, celebrating, and doing mission as an inclusive church

All Baptist churches aim to offer pastoral care to people regardless of gender, sexuality, ethnicity, disability, and neuro-diversity. In this sense they aim to be ‘welcoming’, which is a first step. A number of churches affirm active, faithful same-sex relationships by accepting into membership those in such partnerships and a small number of churches have also registered for same-sex marriage. But we have found that there is a constant need to challenge the reality of the inclusiveness that a church claims to practise. To do this, a number of courses or projects are provided by BUGB or associations to local churches, offering group studies and sermon material in, for example, building a multi-ethnic church, integrating those disabled, being agents for social justice, and giving women their full place in church and society. The ‘Re-imagine’ programme (see above) begins by exploring our shifting cultural landscape in order to understand the challenges for serving communities. We have also found that extra effort has to be made to encourage women and men from the black and minority ethnic communities to listen to a call from God to ministry, and to be given the confidence to respond.

6.4 Avoiding being a ‘talking shop’ or a mere ‘parliamentary democracy’.

The Catholic document mentions the dangers of synodality resulting in either an inward-facing, self-referential church or a simple replication of secular structures, rather than a pathway to following Christ more fully. I recognize these dangers in my own tradition, especially the latter in the face of charity-compliance. To avoid ‘mere democracy’, the aim of all covenant-gatherings must be to find the mind of Christ, not to achieve a majority for one party over another. The place of prayer and bible reading is essential in forming a consensus, all voices must be valued and listened to, conflict should not be suppressed, and the minority must be cared for pastorally. Fear of conflict can lead the church meeting to be poorly attended; however, the use of group work, offering creative agendas, and using codes of conduct for speaking and listening to all members can mitigate risk.

To avoid becoming merely ‘self-referential’, circles of covenant-fellowship must interact with other social groupings where there is a striving for the common good. The breadth of God’s covenantal relations with the human world and natural creation should be recognized, and so a church’s ‘walking together’ must include walking with others beyond

the church for the sake of human flourishing. For instance, where church buildings are used by other charitable groups or official organizations, the church should have continuous conversation with them about their common service to the community.

Of course, the synodal life of any church should also be interacting with the synodal life of other churches, including moving across confessional divides. In principle, a church gathered by covenant can extend this covenant to include any Christian churches that are willing to engage in mutual commitment with it. The Catholic briefing document asks how it might “enlarge its tent” ecumenically as it seeks to walk its synodal way’ and the answer can only surely lie in taking more opportunities for conversation, prayer, shared worship, and corporate ‘discernment’. Catholics and other Christian confessions can seek for the mind of Christ together in shared synodality, even where this cannot lead at the present time to joint decision-making.