

Beginnings

During the 1990s, the Baptist Union had convened a Human Sexuality working group, which produced a discussion document for churches Making Moral Choices. This encouraged those who studied it to consider a number of moral questions. One of them was sexuality, engaging with the way the Lesbian and Gay Christian Movement (LGCM) understood the issues alongside a contrasting approach.

Despite this, some LGBT Baptists found rejection in their churches if they shared their stories. One such experience was recounted in a letter in the Baptist Times, which brought together a group of concerned ministers and lay leaders to offer pastoral support.

When the Affirming Baptist Network was launched in 2000, as well as that group, it also included a number of Lesbian and Gay Baptists. It was led by Revd David Trafford and Martin Stears-Handscorn.

Engaging with the Baptist Union

A joint letter to Council led to the avoidance of what would have been a negative debate on a resolution at the 2001 Baptist Assembly. Instead there was a private session of all two thousand delegates where several LGBT members were able to “come-out” either within buzz-groups or at the plenary session.

Meetings followed with leaders of BUGB and BMS World Mission, which over the next few years established an informal “consultative status”. LGBT members sought to establish the principle of “nothing about us without us” on the basis that we are all on a “journey of understanding under the Holy Spirit”, which ties in with the Affirm ethos. At the 2006 Assembly, members of the Network participated in a workshop on Civil Partnerships led by Nigel Wright (Principal of Spurgeons’ College). However the requests for an official interest group meeting and/or a stall at the Annual Assembly were never granted.

Building the Network

Members are those Baptist Christians who have signed the Network’s statement. Membership grew until by 2007 there were over 60 individual members. Working with colleagues in the United Reformed Church, annual meetings were held with a variety of speakers and workshops, attracting 20-30 each year, around half of whom were Affirm members. Open Committee meetings were held on average twice a year with 5-6 members attending. Newsletters were produced, often twice a year.

There were frustrations in the lack of visible results in most churches and work tailed off in the last years of the noughties. However, the value of “being there”, the groundwork of changing minds “one heart at a time” and the support for many who otherwise would have felt totally isolated meant that the co-ordinator’s conviction never altered that this is God’s work. “We love our Baptist family, some of us are gay, we are staying.”

Tenth Anniversary and Beyond

The Tenth Anniversary celebration in 2010 was an effective re-launch, with 30 attending. New LGBT members shared their stories. Revd Sharon Ferguson and Revd Benny Hazlehurst spoke at the worship session. In 2011 BU Council formally recognised the Network, instructing the Faith and Unity Executive to work with us “to make its purposes clearly known and recognised, so enabling its ministry of care and support to be available within BUGB.”

The Network was now led by Martin and Avril Mackenzie-Parr. The name changed to Affirm with the old longer name as a subtitle and the www.affirmingbaptists.org.uk website was set up. A Reference Group of 5 leading UK Baptists was also formed.

Members had from the beginning been active in a range of Christian LGBT groups and this was a period of considerable activity with the retirement of Jeremy Marks of Courage and launch of Two:23, the growth of Accepting Evangelicals and Christians at Pride and we were able to undertake joint activity with them and with the more established group Evangelical Fellowship for LGBT Christians.

2012 was an exceptionally busy year and included organising our own fringe meeting at Assembly at which Jeremy Marks, now a regular committee member was the speaker.

2013 and Continuing the Conversation

At last in 2013 we had our Assembly workshop! 150 delegates attending the official workshop organised by the Faith and Unity Executive at which Avril and Martin shared their stories and several others spoke. The Assembly Plenary session the following morning started the conversation: "How are we to respond in missional and pastoral ways to people in faithful same-sex relationships within our churches?"

In the years that followed, a good number of Baptist churches have declared themselves to be 'Affirming' and some have registered for Same-Sex Marriage. Other churches and ministers declare themselves "on a journey" or at least accept the integrity of those who are affirming. A larger number find this difficult and struggle to remain in fellowship.

Decisions at Council and reported to Assembly have reflected this tension; the tension between the responsibility of each local church to discern God's laws under the Spirit's guidance and Jesus' prayer that we should seek to be at one so that the world will believe.

Affirm seeks to "Continue the Conversation" started in 2013, conscious of the challenges that that entails and looking to the experience of those involved in Conflict Resolution, in the knowledge that our Baptist Unity grew from our ability to disagree well for the sake of the Gospel.