

Chorlton Central Church (Baptist and United Reformed Church LEP), Manchester **A response to the Baptist Union Council Statement (March 2016) on Same Sex Marriage**

In 2014 the Baptist Union issued guidance on same sex marriages which recognised the right of local congregations to make their own decision on registration of their premises for same-sex marriages. The Statement confirmed that Ministers carrying out the wishes of their congregation to conduct a same sex marriage would not be liable to disciplinary measures, while reserving the rights of Ministers who were unable to conduct such marriages with a good conscience.

This was a model of restraint, recognising that congregations have reached differing conclusions on the matter, and many of us were delighted with it. We have seen in our own congregation the hurt suffered by those rejected (or only accepted conditionally) by Churches on the basis of their sexuality, and have been delighted to witness the recovery of a living faith among those previously rejected whom we have been happy to welcome into our fellowship.

We were therefore profoundly disappointed by the further Statement issued in March 2016 by the BU Council which, while endorsing the Declaration of Principle, requests us not to register our premises for same-sex marriages.

The Statement and a draft of this Response were discussed at the Church Meeting of Chorlton Central Church (Baptist and United Reformed Church LEP) on 7th April 2016; the meeting was unanimous in supporting this Response.

We are unable to accede to the request not to register our premises for the following reasons:

- 1 We believe as a congregation that we are called to affirm faithful, stable and loving same-sex partnerships. We trust and hope that in so doing we act within our Holy Spirit guided liberty to *'...interpret and administer Christ's laws...'* as set out in the Declaration of Principle of the Baptist Union. The recent Statement reads (perhaps unintentionally) as an attempt to set limits to that liberty and we are concerned that it may itself become an obstacle to continuing conversation and prayer between those who disagree.
- 2 The statement claims to recognise the costs of the request made, but we wonder if the harm caused to individuals and congregations has really been understood. Congregations such as ours have waited for a number of years for recognition of our right and duty under the guidance of the Holy Spirit to re-order our faith and practice on this matter. It now appears that we must either follow our conscience and disagree with the BU Council, or act against our conscience in order to preserve the unity of the Baptist Union. This carries (again, perhaps unintentionally) the implicit sub-text that should this lead to division congregations such as ours will be held responsible. Freedom of Conscience must preserve the freedoms of *both* parties to disputed issues. We do not seek to pressure other congregations with whom we disagree on this issue; we regret that we have been asked to deny our consciences.
- 3 The Statement *'positively re-affirms and commends to our churches our Union's historic Biblical understanding of marriage as a union between one man and one woman'*. We must consider that there have been considerable historic, regional and denominational variations in the understanding of Christian marriage; for example betrothal practices, the need for a legally recognised marriage contract and the validity of a childless marriage. Such understandings have not included same-sex relationships, but they do indicate that Christian understanding of the nature of marriage can be and has changed. There have also been historic Biblical understandings on other issues; for example slavery, women's enfranchisement, empire and race relations, all Biblically grounded and sincerely held, but which are not now considered normative. We dare not exclude the possibility that 'the Lord hath yet more light and truth to break forth from His word'.
- 4 The Statement reminds us *'That it is the duty of every disciple to bear personal witness to the Gospel of Jesus Christ, and to take part in the evangelisation of the world.'* We feel that few features of the Church landscape present such an obstacle to this duty as the Churches' historic understanding of marriage and specifically the lack of understanding of same-sex relationships. We believe that the refusal of same-sex marriage by a congregation which under the guidance of the Holy Spirit believes this is the correct response to a faithful, stable and loving same-sex partnership is in itself an obstacle to our bearing witness to Christ.

We respectfully request the Baptist Union Council to withdraw its March 2016 Statement on Registration of Church Premises for Same-sex Marriages, and speak up in support of a better interpretation of the Declaration of Principle, encouraging genuine unity and genuine respect for freedom of conscience among Baptist congregations.