

Canadian Baptists of Western Canada

Autonomy and Affiliation

(Spring 2021, written by Rev. Cal Malena, edited by Ryan Sato, Jeremy Keay)

We are aware of the developments in our denomination that brought up the issues of the *Autonomy of the Local Church* and the meaning of *Affiliation with the CBWC*, particularly around decisions about local church membership. As local churches in the CBWC we would like to offer our perspective and feedback.

Our Understanding of the Background

A few years ago the Board of the CBWC received a letter from a ministerial group of CBWC pastors in Central Alberta who discovered that two churches in Vancouver had accepted a gay couple as members. They demanded that the Board require these churches to rescind this practice or they would bring the issue to Assembly to have the churches removed from the denomination¹. The Board interviewed the two Vancouver pastors to clarify their position and responded to the ministerial group that they would explore the issue.

In response, at the 2019 Assembly, Renee Embree of the CBAC led a workshop on the LGBTQ+ conversation and facilitated a table-talk exercise which discussed in part what role the denomination should play in discerning local church membership. One result of this discussion was the sense “that local church autonomy is very important and that denominational leadership or staff should not be playing a role in local church membership”².

The CBWC Board then established a Core Values Working Group to “define the values that define us as Canadian Baptists and to provide a framework for on-going discussions as they relate to local church autonomy and free association with the CBWC”.³ This group was to bring recommendations to the CBWC Board in January 2020.

This process produced a draft paper entitled “Identity Statement of the Canadian Baptists of Western Canada.” It includes a Statement of Faith adopted by the Carey Theological College, the four historical ‘Baptist Distinctives’, and a few other statements including exclusive heterosexual marriage and the ordination for ministry of both men and women. During 2020, the Regional Ministers had virtual group meetings with their pastors to introduce the paper and receive feedback.

In 2021 a revised version of the Identity Statement with notices of motion for three motions presented by the Board of Directors of the CBWC were sent out to the churches and credentialed ministers along with a cover letter entitled “A Letter of Explanation to the Churches of the CBWC”

The Identity Paper and motions will be presented to be affirmed at Assembly 2022 and then will be used in the unresolved situation of the Central Alberta ministerial complaint. What is lacking in this process, in our opinion, is a more direct discussion on the two main points - the meaning of *Local Church Autonomy* and the meaning of *Affiliation with the CBWC*.

I. Autonomy

¹ This letter has not been shared with the constituency but its contents have become common knowledge .

² An Assembly Follow-up letter from Rob Ogilvie and Sam Breakey, p.1., Dec 4, 2019

³ Ibid p. 3.

As noted in the Assembly table-talk, most local churches hold very strongly to the principle of the *Autonomy of the Local Church*. For example, one of our CBWC church's by-laws state:

First Baptist Church Prince George is autonomous and democratic under the Lordship of Jesus Christ. The Membership retains the exclusive right of self government in the life of the Church. The Membership reserves the exclusive right to determine who will be Members of this Church and the conditions of Membership.

What Autonomy means is that no other ecclesiastical organization exercises any authority or governance over the local church. Many local church constitutions describe their own historic doctrinal statement and their membership requirements.

The CBWC lacks a clear statement of local church autonomy compared to other Baptist denominations and no such statement is included in the Identity Paper, but the autonomy of the local church is an historic Baptist distinctive.⁴ The principle is however implied in some CBWC documents. In the CBWC by-laws, there is a short description of '**Church-Union Relationships**' describing the denomination's relationship to a local church. It states:

- 1. Each church shall have the privilege of determining its relationship to various aspects of the program of CBWC.*
- 2. A church should confer with the respective Regional Minister when matters of relationship to any particular aspect of the program of the CBWC are being questioned.⁵*

The CBWC document entitled "What Makes Us Baptist? Includes this statement Under the heading **Congregational Governance**:

"We follow a congregational form of government in which believers come together as a priesthood of believers under the Lordship of Christ, the authority of the Bible and the guidance of the Holy Spirit, to determine God's will for us. We avoid the top-down hierarchy often associated with other denominations. Locally autonomous churches make their own decisions, but participate in the larger body of Christ by associating with the denomination..."

It is revealing that much of this affirmation of local church autonomy was excluded in the new Identity Paper's section similarly entitled Congregational Governance. If there is an attempt in this process to diminish the principle of the autonomy of the local church, let us be clear that we 1.) understand that our association with the CBWC is voluntary, 2.) that we have the freedom to not participate with any elements of the denomination's program with which we disagree and 3.) that the denomination does not exercise any ecclesiastical authority or governance over the local church.

II. Affiliation

Most local churches have multiple associations listed in their websites and governing documents - CBWC, CBM, BWA, EFC - as well as local ministries and para-church organizations which they support. A denominational affiliation is probably the most important association and yet largely undefined in the case of the CBWC. Other than the brief constitutional reference mentioned above under Church-Union Relationship, there are no 'Articles of Association' in the CBWC documentation. There is no description of membership fees, or specific responsibilities of local churches to the denomination⁶ or causes/processes

⁴ <https://www.baptistdistinctives.org/resources/articles/church-autonomy/>

⁵ CBWC By-laws -Part II Section J.

⁶ Although there are for credentialed ministers as described in the MPP.

whereby a local church could be removed. The previous reference in the 'What Makes Us Baptist?' document went on to state:

“Locally autonomous churches make their own decisions, but participate in the larger body of Christ by associating with the denomination and its shared ministries and by entering into annual covenantal agreements with the denomination.”

If this practice of annual covenantal agreements existed for a time, it is not something that was historically, or is presently, practiced to any extent. While the denomination has developed some requirements for churches newly seeking affiliation with the CBWC, there is nothing in writing for the historically affiliated churches that we are aware of. The denomination does often articulate the programs, services and ministries that they provide to local churches which could be perceived as being covenantal commitments and there is an undefined expectation that local churches would voluntarily give financial support for this denominational programming.

The new Identity Paper however, seems to be an attempt at prescribing some common doctrines, beliefs and ethical positions upon the member churches in an attempt to resolve the issue of the two Vancouver churches.

III. Our understanding of the Dual Identity of “Canadian Baptists of Western Canada”

One understanding of the CBWC is that it is a not-for profit legal entity. From a governance point of view, the CBWC is a corporation, with a Board of Directors, a Staff, and a membership made up of representative delegates from its affiliated member churches. It has an Annual General Meeting to report on its corporate activities and to approve its plans and policies. Its primary purpose and subsequent programs are to support and extend the ministry of its member churches⁷.

At other times however, the term ‘Canadian Baptists of Western Canada’ is used in a different way which can cause confusion. Sometimes it is used to describe a “family of Baptist churches”.

*The Canadian Baptists of Western Canada is a voluntary affiliation of churches....”*⁸

The draft document entitled *Our Identity as a CBWC Family*, in the Statements of Faith and Practice section, begins with the words “The Canadian Baptists of Western Canada accept wholeheartedly”⁹ Here the reference is not to CBWC’s policies and practices as a non-profit corporation, but instead is an attempt to define the voice and position of all the individual member churches. In this regard the paper begins to infringe on the principle of local church autonomy.

The annual Assembly is part Annual General Meeting for the CBWC corporation and is also part fellowship/worship event for the delegates of the constituent churches. Decisions made by resolution at Assembly can legitimately be made to dictate the policy, faith statements and programs of the CBWC as a corporation. But under the principle of local church autonomy, decisions and resolutions made at Assembly cannot dictate the policy, faith statements or

⁷ <https://cbwc.ca/about/> CBWC prayerfully supports local churches and their communities by training leaders, supporting innovative ministries, responding compassionately to social needs, responding to crises and providing churches with administrative and financial services. In partnership with our local churches, CBWC also plays a collaborative role in seeding new expressions of church for today.

⁸ Terms of reference for new affiliation with the Canadian Baptists of Western Canada

⁹ *Our Identity as a CBWC Family*

programs of our local churches. The resolutions on such things *a women's role in ministry or same-sex marriage* can legitimately be decided at Assembly as they apply to the programs of the CBWC corporation, but such resolutions are in no way binding on the life and ministry of the local church. The denomination has no ecclesiastical authority whatsoever as the local church exercises its *"privilege of determining our relationship to various the aspects of the program of CBWC."*

We therefore question the entire premise of an 'Identity Paper' that seeks to speak on behalf of all the churches, *unless all the member churches have individually affirmed each point of such a document in their own congregational meetings*. We especially reject such an 'Identity Paper', if its actual intent is to be used to censure some of our member local churches for their beliefs and positions on disputable matters.

If the denominational Staff / Board/Members are at a place of wanting to impose new 'conditions of association' upon the member churches, which would include certain ethical positions as prerequisites for membership and affiliation, then this should be clearly presented to each of the individual member church boards. It is not sufficient to think this could be accomplished by passing an 'Identity Paper' at an Assembly. Many local churches are passionately committed to the principle of local church autonomy, and many would probably choose to not affiliate with a denominational body that would impose these new conditions on Affiliation.

IV. Conclusion

In the letter to the churches dated March 4, 2019 from Rob Ogilvie and Kayely Rich it states: (also repeated in the CBWC letters from February 5, 2021 and February 24, 2021)

"Two key questions around the membership issue need to be discussed. First, who makes the decisions about local church membership? And second, what does it mean to be a member church of the CBWC?"

We would offer an answer to these questions. To the first - Unequivocally, local churches make their own prayerful decisions about membership in their churches. To the second - Currently to be a member church of the CBWC is to voluntarily support the programs and ministries the denomination engages in, to accomplish things together that we cannot do separately. What it does not currently mean to be a member church is that the denomination can impose beliefs and values on its member churches. Assembly resolutions should be understood to indicate majority votes on issues to guide the denomination's own programs and not as representing the 'CBWC family of churches' unless each of the churches has actually discussed and agreed to it. If the CBWC intends to add new 'articles of association' on member churches, then it must be considered that many existing churches will decline to be such members, on the principle of local church autonomy.