

The Stone in the Water: Scottish Baptist-Brethren Dialogue, 2004-6

Neil T. R. Dickson

In 2004 Bill Slack, the General Director of the Baptist Union of Scotland, initiated conversations between the Union and the leaders of some evangelical churches in Scotland which had their roots in the Open Brethren movement.¹ This paper examines the context in which the dialogue took place, its aims, the process devised for it and the eventual outcome. As it seemed to peter out, the paper will also examine the reasons for this happening. Through this analysis, obviously some of the potential opportunities and difficulties in ecumenical dialogue will be shown but so too will some light be shed on the conversation partners, and even on aspects of a wider Scottish evangelicalism, as they entered the twenty-first century. To research the conversations, I partly used an oral history approach and during 2011 conducted a series of semi-structured interviews.² I interviewed six individuals who had been involved in the conversations, equally divided between the conversation partners, choosing two individuals from each of the three study-groups through which the dialogue was conducted (see Figure). I

1. As will become clear below, a number of congregations from the Brethren movement have stopped calling their buildings 'gospel halls', and the name most commonly used by them is that of 'evangelical church'. The theology, ecclesiology and church practices of such congregations are rooted in Open Brethrenism. As the movement did not adopt a formal name, terminology has always had a certain fluidity. This paper uses 'Brethren' and 'evangelical churches' interchangeably (as will become apparent, so do some of my interviewees from this tradition), but it should be understood that in the period during which the dialogue took place the former term in the paper only applies to the latter grouping.

2. The transcripts quoted in this paper have been lightly edited and the resultant texts submitted to the interviewees; cf. Rebecca Jones, 'Blended voices: crafting a narrative from oral history interviews', *The Oral History Review*, 31/1 (2004), pp. 23-42. Phrases in square brackets are my clarifications.

supplemented this series of interviews with two additional ones with evangelical church leaders who had recently become Scottish Baptist pastors, one of whom had also been involved in the dialogue.³

Contexts

Associations between the Open Brethren and Baptists have always been close since the Brethren emerged in the second quarter of the nineteenth century. In Scotland, because of a largely similar brand of conservative evangelicalism and their shared practice of believer's baptism, which is rare among other Scottish churches, transfers between the two have always been readily made. At the risk of oversimplification, such earlier transfers might be divided into two phases. In the first, which lasted from the later 1860s, when the Brethren began to emerge in substantial numbers in Scotland, until around World War I, the overall direction of the flow was in favour of the Brethren. Some seventeen large-scale transfers in which a substantial percentage of the membership, and even on some occasions the entire membership, of a Baptist cause (not all were churches) switched to the Brethren.⁴ By the early 1930s, when the membership of both bodies peaked, it is probable there were more

3. I am grateful to the kindness of the following individuals, without whom the paper would not have been possible, for granting me interviews: Jocelyn Anderson, Revd Ken Brown, Revd Noel McCullins, Dr Alastair Noble, Revd Alistair Purss, Revd Andrew Rollinson, Alastair Simmons, and Revd Bill Slack. The assistance of Revd Dr Brian Talbot and Roberta Hope in making contact with a number of the interviewees is also gratefully acknowledged. In the interests of full disclosure, it should be noted that the wife of the present writer was one of the conversation partners, and she preserved a number of the MSS generated. All matters of presentation and analysis are my own and I bear sole responsibility for them.

4. Neil Dickson, 'Brethren and Baptists in Scotland', *The Baptist Quarterly*, vol. 33 (1990), pp.372-4; this paper identified the Baptist causes as affected as: Banchory, Denny, Elgin, Glasgow (West Campbell St.), Helensburgh, Inverurie, Kemnay, Kilmarnock, Kirknewton, Lochore, Ratho and Westray; subsequent research has supplemented this list with Grantown, Inverkeithing, New Deer, Plean and Springburn (Glasgow): Neil T. R. Dickson, *Brethren in Scotland 1838-2000: A Social Study of an Evangelical Movement* (Carlisle, 2002), pp.97, 127, 128.

Brethren in Scotland than there were Baptists.⁵ The second phase broadly consisted of the two or three decades before 1990, when serious decline was affecting many assemblies. There was a perception that Baptist churches seemed to be doing rather well, allowing Ian Balfour to begin his survey of them in the twentieth century by noting that in 1984 they were the only denomination in Scotland to have increased in membership.⁶ There always had been Brethren individuals who had joined Baptist churches, but anecdotal evidence suggested this movement had markedly increased in these years largely due to dissatisfaction with various aspects of assemblies, mainly their conservatism.⁷ The climax of the process was represented by the Holm Evangelical Church in Inverness, which was principally planted by former members of the town's Brethren assembly in 1982 and was largely Brethren in its practice, but which affiliated to the Baptist Union in 1991.⁸

Of course, as is often the case with relatives, such kinship as had historically existed between Baptists and Brethren did not always make for amicable relations. An element of competition can be seen, for example, in the comparison the Brethren publisher Henry Pickering made in 1894 between the splendour of the Thomas Coats Memorial Church with its congregation of 140, 'most aged women', and a nearby assembly in Paisley that met in unadorned surroundings, 'where some two hundred and fifty born-again, men and women seek to gather unto the worthy Name alone'.⁹ The Brethren were critical of a number of aspects of Baptist churches:

5. According to David P. Thomson (ed.), *The Scottish Churches' Handbook* (Dunfermline, 1933); this is undoubtedly true if all sections of the Brethren movement are included. However Thomson's figures for the Open Brethren are open to doubt cf. Dickson, *Brethren in Scotland*, p.196 n.104.

6. Ian Balfour, 'The Twentieth Century Since 1914', in David Bebbington (ed.), *The Baptists in Scotland: A History* (Glasgow, 1988), p.67.

7. Dickson, 'Brethren and Baptists', pp.378-5.

8. Dickson, *Brethren in Scotland*, p.413.

9. *The Witness*, vol. 24 (1894), p.147 (cover), quoted in Tim Grass, *Gathering to His Name: The Story of Open Brethren in Britain and Ireland* (Milton Keynes, 2006), p.186.

their denominationalism, their views of Christian ministry and their conjoining of believer's baptism and membership.¹⁰ Those who left an assembly for a Baptist church were liable to be regarded as malcontents. For their part Baptists could regard the Brethren with a jaundiced eye. Although not everyone would go as far as the Aberdeenshire Baptist lay preacher, Alexander Burnett, in maintaining, as he did in the title of a pamphlet, that *Plymouth Brethrenism is Antichrist* (1873), Brethren proselytising left a legacy of bitterness, most notably in the confined community of Westray in Orkney.¹¹ There was also perhaps a tendency among some to blame perceived negative features of Baptist churches on the influence of former Brethren. As the Baptist in-joke had it: it's alright to have a Brethren background as long as it's in the background.¹²

These earlier phases of Baptist-Brethren relations in Scotland might be said to form the long historical context for the conversations. There was, however, a more immediate context within both bodies that would have consequences for how they unfolded. The underlying trend of late-twentieth century Scottish Baptist membership was downwards, as Kenneth Stewart showed in the mid-1990s in his comprehensive survey of Baptist numbers. The statistics compiled by Stewart demonstrated that by 1996 there had been an overall percentage decrease of 21.7 since 1950, dropping from 19,755 members to 15,472. Nevertheless his figures showed that Baptist decline had been largely arrested in the twenty years after 1970, with a percentage decrease of only two percent in these years, although between 1990 and 1996 there had a slight swell in the percentage decrease to 5.8. A number of churches had experienced growth that was compensating to a large extent for those churches in decline, ensuring that in some geographical regions Baptist numbers

10. Dickson, 'Brethren and Baptists', pp.374-8.

11. Neil T. R. Dickson, 'Revivalism and the limits of cooperation: Brethren origins in Orkney in the 1860s', in Neil T. R. Dickson and Tim Grass (eds), *The Growth of the Brethren Movement: National and International Experiences* (Milton Keynes, 2006), pp.80-91.

12. Quoted by Andrew Rollinson, interview 17.3.2011.

had an overall increase.¹³ However, despite the apparent arrest in severe decline of the mid-1980s, as they entered the new millennium Scottish Baptists, like any good evangelicals, could be found beating themselves up over the drop in recruitment. Stewart, in his presidential address to the Baptist Union Assembly in 2000, used the more dramatic figure of the decline since 1950 to raise the spectre over the future of Baptist churches of the once-successful Scottish grocery chain, Lipton's. Its declining sales had led to extinction.¹⁴ However, Bill Slack, who had been the Baptist Union General Secretary since 1995, reported at the same Assembly that 'the general impression I receive from my visits to the churches is one which is overwhelmingly positive and optimistic.'¹⁵ As the new millennium began, Baptists had the youngest membership among Scottish churches, and Slack's feeling was that decline had "bottomed-out", and was beginning to be reversed.¹⁶ Beginning from 'a prophetic word' at the 1998 Assembly, the 'Challenge to Change' Think Tank, accompanied by a day of prayer and fasting in November 2000, had suggested a number of far-reaching changes, which had as their priority making Baptist churches missionary congregations.¹⁷ As part of this there was a fundamental restructuring of the Union, which in 2003 saw the role of President and General Secretary merge into that of a full-time General Director within a collegiate Core Leadership. The new structure was designed to promote a more relational approach, through increasing contact between the churches and the Baptist Union staff, allowing the latter

13. Kenneth M Stewart, 'Towards 2000: A statistical look at Baptist Church life in the latter half of the twentieth century', photocopied word-processed MS, Baptist Union of Scotland [2006].

14. Kenneth M. Stewart, 'The Great Commission 2000 years on—the challenge to Scottish Baptists', in *The Scottish Baptist Yearbook* [hereafter *SBY*] 2001 (Glasgow [2001]), p.94.

15. Bill Slack, '131st Annual Report', *ibid.*, p.126.

16. Bill Slack, '134th Annual Report compiled by the General Director', *SBY 2004* (Glasgow [2004]), p.121.

17. 'Final Report of the *Challenge to Change* Think Tank', in *SBY 2002* (Glasgow [2002]), pp.126-7.

to serve them more effectively.¹⁸ After a year of operation Slack, who had become the first General Director, was able to report that they were ‘pro-actively moving the denomination’s agenda forward’, addressing ‘issues with a greater sense of immediacy’ thus making ‘our processing of business much more efficient.’¹⁹ But the restructuring had another significant consequence. As Slack notes:

The restructuring of the Union created greater liberty for the Union’s leadership to pursue “big vision” strategies that would help the development of our corporate life and witness in Scotland... During my period as General Director, it would be fair to say that I sought to give lots of space for the Core Leaders to both initiate and help shape our “blue sky” thinking. It was very much a corporate effort.²⁰

There is a constant tension among Scottish Baptist churches between centripetal and centrifugal forces, and this was an effect of the former that possibly corresponded more with the attitudes of younger ministers who usually felt more positively about the Union. They were probably among those whom Slack referred to when he declared that ‘a growing number of churches are also looking towards the Union as an apostolic movement that gives a quality of spiritual leadership’.²¹ He felt that Baptists needed to be better organised which meant working more fully with each other and with other Christians.²² An initiative which implicitly acknowledged the strength of the centrifugal force was ‘The Big Conversation’ during which meetings were held in fourteen centres throughout the country involving over 400 pastors and leaders, and these became *fora* for sharing best practice. The often moribund Regional Associations were replaced by Regional Mission Partnerships, which were couched in the non-hierarchical language of ‘networks’, in an effort

18. <<http://www.scottishbaptist.org.uk/about-us>>, accessed November 2011.

19. Bill Slack, ‘135th Annual Report compiled by the General Director’, in *SBY 2005* (Glasgow [2005]), p.118.

20. Bill Slack e-mail to the writer, 24 February 2011.

21. Bill Slack, ‘137th Annual Report’, in *SBY 2007* (Glasgow [2007]), p.116.

22. Bill Slack, ‘Assembly Message 2’, in *SBY 2006* (Glasgow [2006]), p.88.

to revive cooperation at the local level.²³ At the same time a theological reflection group ‘Towards 2020’ was established to ‘provide the forum for “blue sky” “out of the box” thinking about future trends and developments that will be necessary to help our churches engage meaningfully with the realities and challenges of our society’.²⁴ Andrew Rollinson, in 2006 the Baptist Union Ministry Advisor, one of the Core Leaders, summed up the contemporary position of Scottish Baptist churches as he saw it:

I am quite optimistic. But I’m a realist as well. I think we do score quite highly in terms of where we are, in that we have cohesion as a family of churches, but we have a level of flexibility, which saves us from some of the institutional bureaucracy, which just crush folk. So I think that’s where we’re strong in terms of structures. I think the other great strength we have is that compared to the Church of Scotland or the Free Church [of Scotland] we are theologically fairly monochrome... So we can rely on unanimity about the basics even though there’s quite a lot of diversity about women in ministry and ecumenical things that are still our theological hot potatoes... Where I think we’re weak, is that we have a fierce autonomy, still, of the local church, and a built in, “We *really* don’t like the Baptist Union of Scotland even though they’re Baptists.”²⁵

Others might not be as sanguine about the monochromatic nature of Baptist churches, but it is clear that a number of key leaders saw an over-developed autonomy as a weakness, and looked for a greater harmony and cooperation in both Baptist circles and a wider evangelicalism. Slack declared in an address to the Baptist Union Assembly in 2005, ‘We’ve churches in conflict that confirm how fragile our unity with fellow Baptists is, never mind with other churches!’²⁶

23. ‘Final report’, p.133; ‘Report on developing church networks’, *SBY 2002*, pp.138-9; cf. William K. Kay, *Apostolic Networks in Britain: New Ways of Being Church* (Milton Keynes, 2007), pp.287-92.

24. Bill Slack, ‘136th annual report of the Baptist Union of Scotland’, in *ibid.*, p.123.

25. Rollinson, interview 17.3.2011.

26. Slack, ‘Assembly Message 2’, p.88.

Scottish Open Brethren too had contemporary issues with cohesion. One that had worked in their favour was the almost absolute separation between the sectarian and denominationalising tendencies that had been a characteristic of the movement throughout its history that now became final.²⁷ The latter sector no longer wanted to continue in separation from the wider evangelical world nor from society and culture. Churches of this complexion felt increasingly free from the watchful eyes of the more traditional assemblies to introduce a number of changes such as a family service in place of the gospel meeting, the NIV for the AV, praise bands, public roles for women and resident full-time workers within congregations.²⁸ The changes were represented by a shift in vocabulary. They were no longer 'gospel halls' or 'assemblies', but 'evangelical churches', and it was not long before the full-time workers were known as 'pastors'—though by this something different from Baptist ones was intended.²⁹ The break from the past also meant a loss of the traditional associational means, such as had been offered by magazines, Saturday conferences and the regular itinerancy of preachers. Brethren were in serious decline. By 1995 it was estimated that there were about 10,530 Open Brethren members throughout Scotland,³⁰ the number of assemblies falling by one quarter after 1951 and the total membership by perhaps as much as a

27. Dickson, *Brethren in Scotland*, pp.364-5, 367-71.

28. *Ibid.*, pp.334-43.

29. One of the papers which emerged out of the conversations stated: 'Baptists have a clear view of the pastor. The title has more meaning and richness than 'full-time worker'. He/she is set apart to lead and teach the flock of God.': John Rylands University Library of Manchester, Christian Brethren Archive, Neil Dickson collection, GB 133 NDC/17 [hereafter NDC], 'Independent Evangelical/Baptist Dialogue in Scotland', [p.3].

30. A calculation done by the present writer for Peter Brierley et al. (eds), UK Christian Handbook 1994/5 Edition (London, 1994), Table 9.4.2; as the Brethren movement has no central mechanism for collecting membership data, all such figures are estimates.

third after 1960.³¹ However, a survey of UK assemblies conducted in 1998 showed that the Scottish ones sampled had grown on average by 2.7 members over the previous two years. The growth, however, was not evenly spread, and the majority of congregations in the sample had actually experienced no growth or were in decline. It was generally the larger churches, those which had innovated, which produced an overall increase in membership in the statistics.³² There were, then, a group of changing churches which comprised about only a fifth of the 226 Scottish assemblies in 1997, and those open to the more radical changes possibly comprised no more than a tenth—in other words between some twenty to forty churches. Nevertheless, despite being a small alignment, they struggled to find cohesion among themselves. A Scottish ginger group, which sought to bring them together was formed in 1989, and in the new millennium it had merged with its English equivalent, Partnership, to create Partnership Scotland. There was, in addition, Gospel Literature Outreach (GLO), which had a centre and training college in Motherwell from which elders' days or short courses for Christian workers were run. However, there was a distinct lack of enthusiasm among many for such inter-church links, partly because these churches no longer saw themselves as 'Brethren', and partly because one of the things they shared, ironically, was a fierce attachment to a very Brethren concept of the autonomy of the local church. Increasingly their congregations drew their membership from a wide variety of ecclesiastical backgrounds. For example, in 1994 at Riverside Evangelical Church, Ayr, one of the largest of such congregations, only a quarter of the new members in the previous five years had a Brethren background while of the rest, one third had no church background at all and the

31. Neil Dickson, 'Brethren' in Scotland: the present situation', in Harold H. Rowdon (ed.), *The Strengthening, Growth and Planting of Local Churches* (Carlisle, 1993), pp.109-110.

32. Graham Brown, *Whatever Happened to the Brethren? A Survey of Local Churches in 1998-1999* (Carlisle, 2003); the Scottish sample is discussed in Dickson, *Brethren in Scotland*, pp.333-4, 364.

others were from non-Brethren churches.³³ A number of the dissatisfactions of the previous decades had been addressed, and these congregations were highly similar to many Baptists churches, and by the turn of the century this new state of affairs had introduced what might be regarded as a third phase of Baptist-Brethren transfers. There was a two-way traffic with members switching easily from one to the other replacing any earlier sense of denominational rivalry or criticism, and this was especially the case with the small group of just over twenty of the most progressive evangelical churches. Some of their new pastors were recruited from Baptist circles.

Process

The conversations between the Baptist Union and evangelical church leaders began with some personal chemistry. Bill Slack had preached in several evangelical churches in mid-Scotland and it had struck him how similar they were to his own tradition.³⁴ In addition, one evangelical church leader, from Deeside Christian Fellowship, had already served on a Baptist Union task force. Slack had also been brought into contact with one of the key Brethren activists, Alastair Noble, who was at that time a part-time educational field officer, but was also engaged in work for a number of evangelical para-church agencies. In addition Noble had preached at the Baptist church in which Slack was then a member.³⁵ The two men had warmed to each other, and at one of their meetings, probably in 2003 to discuss the Billy Graham School of Evangelism in Scotland, Slack proposed initiating a set of conversations between representatives of their two traditions. Bilateral approaches such as this have been increasingly seen as the way forward in ecumenical relations. Scottish Baptist involvement in ecumenism has stalled due to its repeated failure to win acceptance at the Baptist Union Assembly, while Brethren in

33. William Gilmour, *Riverside Evangelical Church. 100 years 1906-2006* (privately printed, 2006), p.31.

34. Bill Slack, interview 1.2.2011.

35. Alastair Noble, interview 23.2.2011.

Scotland had not participated in the earlier British Council of Churches process. Both, however, had congregations, which participated in the later localised Action of Churches Together in Scotland.³⁶ Bilateral dialogue, however, is seen as allowing for a thorough examination of specific issues of similarity or dissimilarity, and it is expected that its official nature will allow the dialogue to carry a certain amount of authority.³⁷ As would become apparent, the latter would become a sticking-point for at least one of the partners in the Baptist Union-evangelical churches dialogue. Slack had hoped that evangelicals in Scotland had reached what he calls a ‘*kairos* moment’.³⁸ The Greek word had entered ecumenical dialogue through South Africa where a key document had defined it as ‘the moment of grace and opportunity, the favourable time in which God will challenge to decisive action’.³⁹ Slack’s vision was for evangelicals to become a much more cohesive, dynamic force in Scottish public life,⁴⁰ an aspiration that had also long animated Noble. When Slack broke the idea of a closer association between Baptist and evangelical churches to Noble, the latter confesses:

I hadn’t honestly before that conversation thought about that at all, but I was immediately attracted to the idea because I thought that that made a great deal of sense, and perhaps I was attracted to it particularly because the conversation took place in the context of a discussion about a conference on evangelism. So my first thought was in terms of the extension of the Kingdom in Scotland by evangelicals. I thought that does make a lot of sense. So it was one of those ideas that was fortuitous and I was immediately attracted to it.⁴¹

36. Edward W. Burroughs, *To Me to live is Christ: A Biography of Peter H. Barber* (Milton Keynes, 2005), pp.163-77.

37. Harding Meyer, ‘Dialogue, Bilateral’, in Nicholas Lossky *et al.* (eds), *Dictionary of the Ecumenical Movement*, 2nd edn (Geneva, 2003), pp.310ii-311i.

38. Slack, interview 1.2.2011.

39. Charles Villa-Vicencio, ‘Kairos document’, in Lossky *et al.* (eds), *Dictionary of the Ecumenical Movement*, p.640i.

40. Slack, interview 1.2.2011.

41. Noble, interview 23.2.2011.

After this initial contact, a meal and discussion was arranged at the Royal Hotel in the Bridge of Allan in June 2004.⁴² An audience of some twenty people composed of equal representation from each body heard Slack and Noble gave presentations on their respective traditions which were followed by ‘a warm and positive exchange of views’.⁴³ But then the process seemed to fall into abeyance. The difficulty was in arranging a further meeting with Alastair Noble.⁴⁴ Although retired from being an educational administrator, Noble was the Field Officer of The Headteachers’ Association of Scotland; an Educational Consultant with CARE in Scotland, the evangelical pressure group for public policy issues; he also worked for Mission Scotland, an affiliate of the Billy Graham Organisation—as well as trying to stimulate interest in Partnership Scotland; being an elder in a large evangelical church; and as an itinerant lay preacher, undoubtedly delivering as many sermons in a year as any church pastor.⁴⁵ Slack restarted the process by writing a discussion paper which was published in the briefing documents for the Baptist Union Assembly in October 2005. He was now attempting to broaden the process of inclusion to a number of Scottish Baptist churches which existed outside the Union, some of the new charismatic fellowships and two of the larger independent mission halls, Carrubers Christian Fellowship in Edinburgh and the Findlay Memorial Tabernacle (now Findlay Church) in Glasgow.⁴⁶ He would also eventually attend the initial meeting of the network for evangelicals in the Church of

42. Slack, ‘135th Annual Report’, p.119.

43. Bill Slack, ‘Future association between Baptist and Evangelical Churches in Scotland: a discussion paper’, Appendix 6, in *Baptist Union of Scotland Assembly. Live Connections 25th to 30th October Albert Halls, Stirling* (privately printed [2005]), p.94.

44. *Ibid.*, p.94; Slack, ‘136th report’, p.124.

45. <<http://www.missionscotland.org.uk/Dr-Alastair-Noble>>, accessed November 2011.

46. Slack, ‘Future association’, p.94.

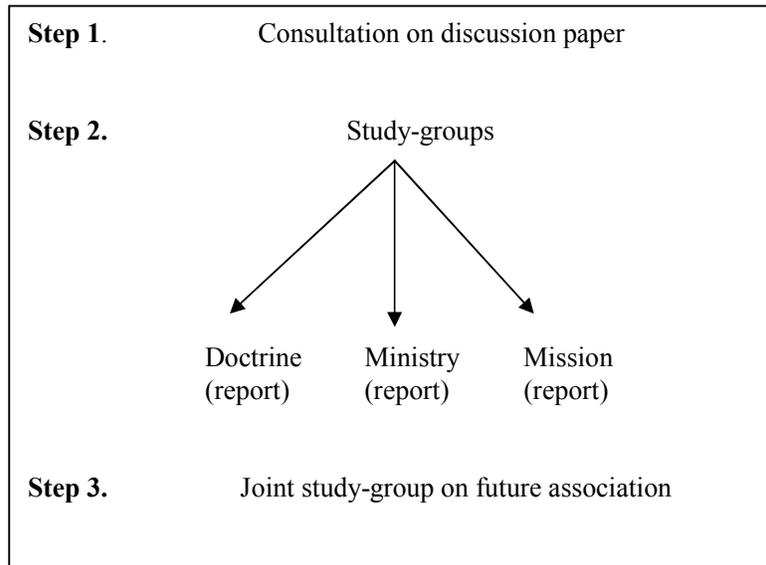


Figure. *The planned conversation process, 2005.*

Scotland, Forward Together, and attempt to engage them in correspondence.⁴⁷ It would become clear that he also wanted to form a media office for evangelicals in Scotland, which would develop links with the news media and respond to current issues. The Union in association with CARE began actively in 2006 to investigate the possibility of appointing an officer,⁴⁸ and the person they had in mind was a member of an evangelical church. Slack was a council member of the Evangelical Alliance in Scotland, and possibly he was unconsciously influenced by the greater public role it had staked out in England under Clive Calver, its entrepreneurial General Director.⁴⁹ He certainly had in mind the thinking of Nigel Wright,

47. Slack, '136th annual report', p.124; Slack, interview 1.2.2011.

48. NDC, Bill Slack and Bill Baird, circular letter, 5 May 2006.

49. Cf. Rob Warner, *Reinventing English Evangelicalism, 1966-2001: A Theological and Sociological Study* (Milton Keynes, 2007), pp.41-66; a forceful

the Principal of Spurgeon's College. The English Baptists had successfully incorporated a number of new charismatic fellowships into their Union and were engaged in a process with the Independent Methodist Connexion, which it was envisaged would end in union.⁵⁰ In the discussion paper he quoted Wright's claims that Baptists were 'well positioned as a bridge-building denomination to provide a home for others. We have institutional resources and can bestow a sense of place, belonging and credibility on others.' He also cited Wright's suggestion of the new category of associate membership for churches which do not have 'all the Baptist bits and pieces in place', but were 'baptistic' in their practice. He went as far as to prepare a paper for the Baptist Union Council, the body composed of representatives from local clusters of churches to which the Core Leadership reported, on forming a category of associate membership.⁵¹

He now envisaged the conversation between the Union and evangelical churches as a three-step process (see Figure). After re-engaging Alastair Noble in the process, three joint study-groups, on doctrine, ministry and mission respectively, would be held to research how close the two bodies were in actuality, but they would also provide an environment in which the leaders could 'grow together in mutual fellowship, understanding and respect.'⁵² Bill Slack anticipated in the discussion paper that some might feel threatened by the process—Baptists because they might feel they were being asked to surrender their principles, and churches in the other streams because they might feel that the Union was concerned with only its own institutional growth. When the discussion paper came before the Assembly, one Baptist layman noted that the intent behind the initiative was good, but was worried that 'the reality might be a watering down of our Baptist tradition.' Seizing on

case for a Church of Scotland media office, or even an ecumenical one, had also recently been made by a former editor of *The Herald*, Harry Reid, in his book, *Outside Verdict: An Old Kirk in a New Scotland* (Edinburgh, 2002), pp.73-90, 117.

50. Slack, 'Future association', p.94.

51. Slack, interview 1.2.2011.

52. Slack, 'Future association', p.95.

Wright's phrase, 'Baptist bits and pieces', he went on, 'not to have all the bits and pieces was not to be a denomination.'⁵³ But in general, it was felt that the delegates at the Assembly 'enthusiastically endorsed' the proposal.⁵⁴ Likewise, when Slack's discussion paper was issued with an invitation to the potential future participants in the study-groups in January 2006, beside the suggestion of the Union as a 'home', one evangelical church member noted in the margin 'this is more than co-operation'.⁵⁵ When Alastair Noble explained the initiative to his fellow elders in his own congregation one prominent individual commented, "Oh I don't think there's much future in that, for Brethren don't do that sort of thing!"⁵⁶ It was clear that there would be grave doubts in both constituencies. Maybe some of the doubts arose because Slack's discussion paper threw out several options as the end product of the conversations such as assistance, cooperation, associate membership and union. Slack, however, was clear at the time, as he assured the worried Baptist at the Assembly, 'The initiative was not about structure, but how to advance the Kingdom in Scotland.'⁵⁷ Alastair Noble, for his part, was sure from the outset that formal union was never a possibility, but felt evangelical churches might make use of Baptist central resources and training.⁵⁸ One enthusiastic participant who had been involved since the meeting at the Bridge of Allan was the pastor of Riverside Evangelical Church in Ayr, Alastair Simmons, and he feels of Slack's initiative that:

I'm not sure if he had a clearly defined principal aim. I think he was very much throwing the stone into the water to see what happened. I think very much, they'd not come—from my understanding—with

53. 'Relationship with other Baptist & Evangelical Churches in Scotland', in *SBY 2006*, p.208.

54. NDC, Mary Sinclair to Beth Dickson, 17 January 2006.

55. NDC, holograph notes on photocopy of word-processed MS of 'Future association'.

56. Noble, interview 23.2.11.

57. 'Baptist & Evangelical Churches', p.208.

58. Noble, interview 23.2.11.

any great preconceptions of where this might lead to. I think it was case of let's see...⁵⁹

The details of the initiative were not widely known in the Union,⁶⁰ and Bill Slack was aware how alarmed some Baptists might have been if they had known how important to him was 'a need for openness' which he referred to at the Assembly. While in Europe, as one possible way forward, he had taken the opportunity to investigate the *Bund* which German Baptists and Brethren had been compelled to establish in the Third Reich, and in which many churches from both streams remained after the war.⁶¹ The emergence of a new body was clearly an option for him. He realised that some might find threatening the use of 'Union', with its overtones of institutionalism. He states:

...we did toy, we did question whether we should be changing our name and various other things. We went through all kinds of different processes to sort of look at all these things so that we could be in the best place we could to facilitate the development of evangelical life within Scotland... [The creation of associate membership] was certainly a radical suggestion looking at possibilities, but I think that it would have been valuable for us all to have been able to look at a lot of these things and see what we were willing to give up—what was going to be fundamental and the other things that were incidental and where we could actually find areas of common agreement to go forward...⁶²

An openness to the creative and new are clearly very important to Slack. The shift of subject in the first-person plural pronoun in the above quotation shows that this was something he wanted both Baptist churches and the wider Scottish evangelicalism to share. The conversations would test this vision against others' sense of their identities.

59. Alastair Simmons, interview 9.2.2011.

60. The discussion paper when it was printed among the Assembly briefing ones was marked 'Highly Confidential'.

61. Slack, 'Future association', p.94.

62. Slack, interview 1.2.2011.

Conversations

The second step was commenced when Alastair Noble identified a number of individuals within evangelical churches who might be willing participants in the study-groups. Nine individuals were appointed from each of the conversation partners, which were equally divided into the joint study-groups, with two women on each side, making eighteen people in total.⁶³ Two individuals on the Baptist side had served in evangelical churches and one other had grown up in the Brethren. There was, however, some feeling of imbalance on the part of the evangelical church leaders on what they had to offer. Noble says:

I think maybe I thought on balance the Baptists had more to give us than we had to give them. I felt they had structures and approaches that we could have benefitted from. I'm not quite sure that I was all that clear what we would have contributed in return—although I guess I felt that we might have quite a bit to say to them about the motivation of the laity and lay members where I felt we had something to give, but I did feel we were probably in terms of input the junior partner.⁶⁴

Alastair Simmons feels there was one other potential disparity in the Baptist participants' attitudes:

I suspect many of them would still see the Brethren in the historic, traditional gospel hall, 'everybody gets a shot' set-up. So difficult for the Baptists too, coming from that background which can, rightly or wrongly induce a feeling of ecclesiastical superiority. I think it can do—again that can be part of Brethren paranoia, not quite sure where they stand in this whole area... I don't think probably it was an equal partnership. No I don't think the perception would be it was—I

63. There were eight evangelical churches represented (Alastair Noble selected a fellow elder from his own church).

64. Noble, interview 23.2.11.

mean, right from the start the people that chaired the groups were Baptists.⁶⁵

However, as this quotation shows, Simmons is not sure whether the Baptist participants did feel superior, or if thinking this was more due to a subjective sense of inferiority on the part of the Brethren. What is clear is that there were some doubts in the minds of those evangelical church leaders participating, which is where the intention of forging 'mutual fellowship, understanding and respect' during the conversations would be key.

The joint group on doctrine met twice in March and July 2006. Intriguingly it was not felt necessary to explore two key theological issues 'because of a commonly shared experience.'⁶⁶ These were charismatic experience and the ministry of the Spirit and eschatology. Both partners affirmed they had the three common branches of evangelicalism among them: charismatic, mainstream and reformed; and the evangelical church representatives maintained that they now had the same breadth of views on eschatology as were found in Baptist churches. The issues on which papers were presented had a distinctly missional and ecclesiological flavour: 'The Baptist understanding of the church'; 'Leadership in evangelical (Brethren) churches'; 'Church and culture'; and 'Responding to the challenge'.⁶⁷ Perhaps this reflected the activist nature of evangelicalism. As Ken Brown, then an evangelical church pastor in the Borders and a theology graduate of London University, who participated in this group, notes of himself:

I'm not a theologian, so for me it wasn't the neatest of fits for me to be to be in a group on doctrine. You talk about an activist, that's

65. Simmons, interview 9.2.2011; however, Andrew Rollinson had written in one of his introductory letters, 'In no way do I want to assume the direction we may take as a group, nor presume on who will chair the group', NDC, Andrew Rollinson to Beth Dickson, 20 March 2006.

66. 'Conversations between the Baptist Union and Evangelical Church leaders', Appendix 5, in *World Service: The Baptist Assembly in Scotland 27th to 29th October, 2006* (privately printed [2006]), p.99.

67. *Ibid.*

more who I am, a practitioner. So that's where I was coming from. I must admit I found some of the papers quite: "Oh right! So that's where we've got to!" So just from memory it was quite strange... But I enjoyed interacting with these guys and meeting with them.⁶⁸

The topics selected for the papers do suggest that the participants had found a large degree of commonality between both streams represented which had allowed them to eliminate most doctrine as beyond contention, and that by looking at issues of church and culture they were intent on pressing ahead to make evangelicals a dynamic force in Scottish life. However, this group met a serious obstacle when, unknown to the rest of the group, Ruth Noble, Alastair's wife, was diagnosed with a life-threatening condition, and her hospital appointments coincided with scheduled meetings. As a result, Noble, who was a member of this group, only attended the first meeting,⁶⁹ and the lack of contact with him meant that the group apparently floundered. It failed to proceed to the final stage of step two of producing a summary report.

The group which was examining ministry met initially at the same time as the doctrine one in the Baptist Union offices in Aytoun Road in Glasgow, and after the discussion both groups had lunch together. The ministry joint study-group met on one subsequent occasion in June and then tidied the discussion up in an e-mail correspondence. The discussions were free and frank and there was a business-like approach, according to several who took part in it, because of the complementary diligence of two of its members, one from each of the conversation partners.⁷⁰ As well as producing two papers on the distinctives of Christian ministry in each tradition, the group circulated several published papers, which were relevant to the subject of the conversation partners' conception of ministry.⁷¹ As

68. Ken Brown, interview, 1.11.2011.

69. Noble, interview 23.2.11.

70. Simmons, interview 9.2.2011; Rollinson, interview 17.3.2011.

71. These were: Dickson, 'Brethren and Baptists in Scotland'; *idem*, "'The Church itself is God's clergy': the principles and practices of the Brethren", in Deryck W. Lovegrove (ed.), *The Rise of the Laity in Evangelical Protestantism* (London,

these latter papers were 4-1 in favour of the Brethren model, it is possible that there was a degree of unconscious compensation in the distribution for the 'Brethren paranoia' which Alastair Simmons had hinted at, although more probably it was because Andrew Rollinson's agenda for the first meeting encouraged the evangelical church representatives to identify secondary texts setting out their position.⁷² Simmons was a member of this group, and he found two aspects of Baptist theology, which emerged, rather surprising. One was the primacy, which is given to the Lordship of Christ, in the Baptist theology of authority,⁷³ and the other was the sacramental conception of ordination that emerged from the paper which was circulated on Baptist ministry by the theologian Stephen Holmes. With the former he was uneasy, as it seemed to him to give supremacy to the Gospels over the epistles and he was concerned that the Baptist formulation could lead to ethical or doctrinal issues explicitly stated, for example, in the Pauline epistles being questioned from their apparent absence in the Gospels. Simmons saw this as being a potential stumbling block for evangelicals from a Brethren background who would hold that all Scripture is revealed, objective truth.⁷⁴ However, there was a complete lack of tension in the discussion, and he did find the central resources the Baptist Union had to offer for ministry very attractive. He reflects:

...one of the real weaknesses of the Brethren scene in terms of full-time ministry which is obvious is the lack of back-up, of resource. Who pastors the pastor? So it seems to be that you probably won't know if you're strong enough constitutionally to cope with it until you're actually in the situation and doing the work of a pastor... The

2002), pp.217-35; Stephen R. Holmes, 'Towards a Baptist theology of ordained ministry', in Anthony Cross and Philip Thompson (eds.), *Baptist Sacramentalism* (Carlisle, 2003), pp.247-62; Neil Summerton 'Team Ministry', in Harold Rowdon (ed.), *Serving God's People: Re-thinking Christian Ministry Today* (Carlisle,2006), pp.19-35; *idem*, 'Staff leaders and other leaders', in *ibid.*, pp.36-48.

72. NDC, 'Suggested agenda for 28 March 2006'.

73. Baptist Union of Scotland Constitution, III.1.

74. A brief paper on the topic was circulated: NDC, [?Andrew Rollinson], 'How our understanding of authority shapes our understanding of ministry, church and leadership'.

discussions I found very helpful and I found quite insightful because they did identify a sort of different perception in given areas. I suppose the overwhelming observation would be that Baptist pastors have a very real sense of who they are and what they do.⁷⁵

Rollinson, who chaired the group, was at the time engaged in writing a booklet, *That Journey Called Ministry* (2008), and he was aware of the interest among the evangelical church leaders in the process of continual professional development which he was evolving. “They were saying slightly wistfully,” Rollinson feels, “there are things here that, perhaps, we could benefit from”.⁷⁶ The group produced a final summary report setting out with great clarity what it saw as the similarities and differences between the two views of ministry. These included the key dissimilarities that ‘Baptists enjoy a model where one pastor teaches and pastors the congregation to which he also gives account’, whilst ‘In E[vangelical] C[hurches] a group of elders/leaders lead the church, where all members are encouraged to use their spiritual gifts (which may include teaching and pastoring), and give an account to fellow-elders/leaders.’⁷⁷ The document concluded, ‘the suggestion of a forum where pastors and leaders of both traditions could experience peer-support, met with warm approval.’⁷⁸

The third group was the one on mission, which met in May, separately from the other two groups. It might be expected that hopes would have been highest for this group. The dialogue had been born out of the shared concern for mission of Bill Slack and Alastair Noble, and mission is close to the heart of both denominations. The most recent historian of the Baptist Union has shown how much it was forged out of a desire for cooperation in evangelism.⁷⁹ Likewise mission, whether home or overseas, has been the one concern on

75. Simmons, interview 9.2.2011.

76. Rollinson, interview 17.3.2011.

77. NDC, ‘Independent Evangelical/Baptist dialogue in Scotland: distinctives of a Baptist [*sic*] understanding of ministry’, [p.7].

78. *Ibid.*, [p.8].

79. Brian R. Talbot, *The Search for a Common Identity: The Origins of the Baptist Union of Scotland 1800-1870* (Milton Keynes, 2003), pp.322-3.

which Brethren have happily formed cooperative ventures. But from the outset, it would seem, the group got off to an unpromising start. Jocelyn Anderson, one of the evangelical church representatives, had been involved in ‘The Big Idea’, an inter-church outreach in Edinburgh, in which her church cooperates with some Church of Scotland congregations. She recalls of her first experience at the Baptist Union offices in Glasgow:

I remember walking in and it all being a weird atmosphere—it wasn’t very relaxed or welcoming. We didn’t know where to go, there was nobody much there, to lead us to where we had to go, it was a bit odd. So in a sense from arriving I didn’t feel this was a very—organised?—or helpful atmosphere? Anyway, then I remember we went upstairs to this room and all sat down and felt it was all slightly awkward, just because I think none of us were quite sure what was going to happen, or who were all these people?⁸⁰

The discussion also failed to excite her, for she felt it concentrated on the theoretical, on which she felt they were all agreed, at the expense of the practical. She was more comfortable with sharing examples of inter-church mission, something that Noel McCullins, who had retired from being the minister of Ayr Baptist Church, also feels he was able to do. He had eagerly anticipated the discussion, for he had a long experience of cooperating with Brethren and evangelical churches in mission over many years in Lanarkshire and Ayrshire. There was broad agreement in the group, he feels, on the necessity of mission and on sharing resources, but he too felt the awkwardness. He thinks that an insurmountable obstacle was encountered during the discussion:

...there was an uneasiness with—and I have to say it wasn’t with all of those representing the evangelical churches—there were some who put, I felt, an over-*strong* emphasis on the independence of the local church, and of course, autonomy is very much on our hearts as Baptists, but there was, I felt, an over-emphasis on this, and that led on to an inability on their part to communicate, or shall I say, the willingness to even *try* to communicate and encourage closer

80. Jocelyn Anderson, interview 22.2.2011.

participation between the churches... I felt there was a barrier being raised, a very strong barrier.⁸¹

This sense that obstacles were being constructed was shared by other participants, including some of the evangelical church representatives. The group had no further meetings and did not produce any joint papers. An on-line correspondence was suggested instead to accommodate the full schedules of the group members, but apparently there was only one response to the initial e-mail, and the activity of the group ceased.

Conclusions

There was some embarrassment that only one group had completed the second step in the envisaged process. The final report of the ministry group was quietly buried and only an oral report went to Council.⁸² There were also several urgent issues, which arose in the Union about this time, and Bill Slack's energy was devoted to them. Alastair Noble, due to the lengthy nature of his wife's medical care, had lost track of the conversations, and by the time the treatment had finished, the talks had collapsed, and he had moved on to another of his interests by becoming the Director of the UK Centre for Intelligent Design.⁸³ Most of the papers, which were produced by the doctrine group were shredded and deleted from hard drives; only the ministry papers survived in their entirety. The dialogue sunk without trace, until it was salvaged for this paper.

Writing from his own ecclesiological perspective, the then Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger made the point about the stalled ecumenical process that:

A unity negotiated by men and women could logically only be an affair *iuris humani* [of human law]. It would not involve at all the theological unity intended by John 17 and as a result it would not be able to be a witness for the mystery of Jesus Christ but merely a

81. Noel McCullins, interview 3.11.2011.

82. Rollinson, interview 17.3.2011.

83. Noble, interview 23.2.11.

token of the diplomatic skill and ability of those conducting the negotiations.⁸⁴

The ecclesiology of both Baptists and evangelical churches holds that the unity of John 17 pre-exists between them, and so possibly the human unity is not so very significant. But as voluntary bodies with scarce ecclesiological resources and with an ever-shrinking place in society, such institutional unity is important. These points seemed to be grasped by those whom I interviewed for this paper, so why then did the dialogue between the Baptist Union and evangelical churches sink?

One reason is the role of contingency in human affairs. A sudden illness—traumatic and unanticipated—the exigencies of diaries isolating a discussion group, the soulless nature of a converted villa in Glasgow, all played their part; so too, perhaps, that the considerable strengths of the two principals lay in being visionaries. These accidental factors, often below the grand historical narrative, have their effects. But efficient processes should be able to accommodate the arbitrariness of things. The gap between the initial ice-breaking event in the Bridge of Allan hotel and the conversations was significant, as was the fact that very few of the later participants in the joint study-groups had been at that face-to-face gathering. It meant that whether the groups bonded or not when they met was left to chance and goodwill. There is evidence, too, that not all the participants had been sufficiently briefed in advance, or that all were

Table. Employment of participants in the joint study-groups, 2006.

comfortable with the variety of potential out-comes of the process. It

84. Joseph Ratzinger, *Church Ecumenism and Politics: New Essays in Ecclesiology*, Eng. trans. Robert Nowell (Slough, 1988), p.137; translation in parenthesis mine.

Baptist Union of Scotland (BUS)	Evangelical churches
BUS core leader	Bible college principal
BUS core leader	consultant paediatrician
church worker	educational officer & consultant
pastor	itinerant evangelist
pastor	pastor
pastor/ BUS core leader	pastor
retired/BUS mission networker	pastor
retired	secondary teacher (part-time)
solicitor	university senior lecturer

is clear that Bill Slack viewed the range of options on offer as an *à la carte* menu, but it would seem that not all the participants grasped this, and probably there was some suspicion of the Baptist Union's motives. Maybe offering only starters—such as participation in the ministry accreditation scheme or membership of a task group or a regional mission partnership—would have been initially more appetizing. There was a feeling of inferiority on the part of some evangelical church participants—although most from among them entered into the process in a spirit of trust. One crucial decision from their side, which backfired, was the one to include individuals from the spectrum of views found among them so that the Union might see with what it was dealing. It is clear that not all were happy with taking cooperation much further than discussion in principle, which had serious consequences for the work of the mission group and the eventual collapse of the entire process. There were those from the evangelical church side who commented to me that they did not feel that all their fellow-participants were equally committed to the conversations which does suggest a residual sectarianism among some evangelical churches. Hindsight, of course, is wonderful, but one other factor which my interviewees from both sides identified as significant and over which they had little control, was the busyness of their lives. The Table lists the employment of all the participants, and it can be seen from it the demanding occupations almost all had. Among the evangelical church participants, that pressure was increased for the lay people—over half their cohort—who were additionally heavily involved in leadership or maintaining church

activities. These were evangelical activists who were trying to fit the conversations into already over-full lives. As Andrew Rollinson says:

... we are all exhausted. We're all incredibly busy. We are all so busy maintaining and trying to develop in this post-Christian world a Christian way of being Church, that our agendas are *just* full, and it's not that there's not the will—and I know where there's a will there's a way—but it is much more a default mechanism, that we just *go* back to our ways of being, because we just can't *bear* the thought we might spend *significant* energy doing lateral thinking, and I think that's a big factor, particularly for busy pastors and Christian leaders... I think that we as evangelicals are not good at saying, "God can do something quite new here—there are new wineskins that we need to discover together," but for that to happen we *really* do need to create significant, disciplined time for creative lateral thinking.⁸⁵

Closer association between churches takes considerable amounts of time and dedication, as can be seen from the formation in the nineteenth century of the Baptist Union of Scotland itself.⁸⁶ The religious environment of both partners was not conducive to freeing individuals to devote themselves to such a process.

It was not only the conversations between the Union and evangelical churches which failed at this time. None of the other churches, which Bill Slack had sought to engage with, responded to the overtures. The Forward Together group of Church of Scotland evangelicals he found more interested in their own institution than pursuing a wider engagement with Scottish evangelicalism. His dearly cherished project of a Scottish media office, to his deep disappointment, found no responsive echo from other churches.⁸⁷ Slack feels that the ethos of Scottish churches was significant in these failures. As he says, "...the spirit of independency amongst evangelicals in Scotland is not only a blessing but it can be a real

85. Rollinson, interview 17.3.2011.

86. Talbot, *Common Identity*, pp.191-311.

87. Slack, interview 1.2.2011.

blight on the progress of the witness.” Rollinson, a Yorkshireman who spent a large part of his adult life in England, thinks being in a small country has advantages and disadvantages for closer cooperation:

...in Scotland because we are such a small constituency, the Christian constituency, we do know each other, or of each other, across the board... In Scotland you can rely on the networks. We know Alastair Noble. We don't need to formally join with Alastair Noble's groupings, because we know Alastair Noble, and he'll show up at our events and we'll show up at his events, we know each other as friends and as trusted colleagues... I think the Scottish independent thing is quite strong. There is a self-preserving thing in Scotland—this is me and you're there, and we just respect each other.⁸⁸

This independency is particularly acute for the Open Brethren, and not only from the ethnic context, but because of their ecclesiology. In the joint study-group on mission, congregational autonomy had been presented as an insurmountable obstacle, but others were aware of the potential difficulties it might create. Alastair Noble, for example, had made this clear to Bill Slack from the outset:

I think I said to Bill that [the support agency] Partnership is about the closest we would get to any representation, but even at that, it's not formal representation. So I think Bill was aware of that, that there wasn't a mechanism to represent the Brethren, and I did say to him, “You know, that's the reason why I don't think we can have a formal association, because there is nobody can speak for the Brethren, and churches would just have to simply opt-in or not.”⁸⁹

This was especially acute for the two lay women from evangelical churches who participated. As none of their congregations in Scotland have ever appointed a woman elder, it was questionable who they were perceived to represent. Quite who is the dialogue partner in any conversation with ‘the Brethren’ is a moot point.

88. Rollinson, interview 17.3.2011.

89. Noble, interview 23.2.11.

If the Baptist Union initiative was a stone dropped in the water, then its ripples were revelatory of both of the conversation partners as they entered the new millennium. Both bodies were concerned with unity beyond the congregational as a solution to the need for support in contemporary church life. As a supra-congregational body the Baptist Union was interested in widening how it might provide support; the evangelical church members, perhaps especially those in the new role of pastor, were interested in exploring where they might find it. Alistair Purss, who recently left an evangelical church in England to take up a Scottish Baptist pastorate, has no difficulty identifying one central problem:

...one of the attractions for me when this opportunity came up for Baptist ministry was to belong to a denomination that firstly was prepared to acknowledge that it was a denomination, and secondly, although each congregation is autonomous in the sense that it's self-governing, they've not got this fierce independence in the sense of not willing to have an obligation towards others within the Baptist family and to the Baptist Union... we're living in an increasingly secular world where it seems to me that it's to be anything other than a Christian... so I feel that the need—if we're talking about Brethren churches, which I still have a great deal of love and care for—is to be moving *away* from independence.⁹⁰

This is a vision which closely corresponds to that of the Baptist Union under Slack's leadership, and Purss would like to see an equivalent body to the Union in the Brethren, with a wider sharing of resources and ministry both within the movement and across the denominations.⁹¹ Nevertheless, there are those who feel that some evangelical churches have made better progress than many Baptist churches in adapting to the altered conditions and new ways of communicating the gospel in a secular society than have many Baptist churches.⁹² Alastair Noble also feels that Scottish Brethren are developing networks relevant to their church life. In the course of

90. Alistair Purss, 16.11.2011.

91. Alistair Purss e-mail to the writer, 26 November 2011.

92. A point made in Simmons, interview 9.2.2011; and Brown, interview, 1.11.2011.

describing The Joshua Project, a training course for aspiring preachers at the GLO Bible College, he reflected how such emerging networks obviate the need for renewed dialogue with the Union:

I've sometimes wondered if it would be worth re-visiting it, but I think the position is now as it was then. In fact I now detect that GLO are emerging as a significantly strong force in Scottish Brethren, much stronger than Partnership Scotland... GLO run full-time workers annual meetings and other events. GLO has suddenly become, I would have thought, the key network in Scottish Brethren and therefore probably works against the need to link with the Baptists.⁹³

Others, however, still wistfully regard what Partnership Scotland and the Baptist Union conversations had offered. But perhaps a more cautious mainstream is beginning to emerge within the evangelical churches that, among other things, looks to consolidate its identity with its strong sense of congregational autonomy, whereas attempts to renew a move towards closer links with the Baptist Union would tend to diminish identity markers. Since 2006 two of the participants in the conversations from the evangelical churches have left the movement, one to become a Baptist minister, and one additional individual, who was a pastor, has demitted his office. It might be felt that this is scarcely a troubling of the waters, but equally it might be a sign of troubling undercurrents in some evangelical churches.

Bill Slack, for his part, is still hopeful that the conversations might be revived.⁹⁴ The restructuring of the Baptist Union had enabled the creative vision to emerge which could imagine the potential effects of ripples in the waters of Scottish evangelicalism. The Union initiative came in a period when evangelicals were increasingly aware that they were less publicly visible, which was something that fitted ill with their vision of capturing the whole of the nation for their faith. The new structure was a deliberate attempt to avoid bureaucracy and was a move towards a relational approach

93. Noble, interview 23.2.11.

94. Slack, interview 1.2.2011.

which would leave local identities intact and which would facilitate mission. The invitation to the evangelical churches articulated with these concerns in that it offered as a possible outcome a network rather than union and would strengthen the place of evangelicalism in Scotland. It also fitted well with the new ecclesiologies, which were emerging in Britain.⁹⁵ In 2009 Bill Slack moved back into the Baptist pastorate, ironically at Culduthel Christian Centre, Inverness, the former Holm Evangelical Church, which still retains some Brethren features in its ecclesiology. For him the lapse of the initiative had a spiritual root, which has implications for Baptist churches. The last word must go to him:

...there needs to be a real passionate desire and a recognition that God's in this and that it's the moment to move, and I think when it all came together there wasn't the sense of this being the moment, and we were all perhaps still rather comfortable in where we were, both our own Baptist constituency and the evangelical churches. Other things were the priority, and so it was the lack of the *passion to drive* this I think being *widely* felt. If there had been that passion it would have happened, we would have moved forward, things would have come, but I think on both sides there was a lack of passion. If there had been the passion then the problem of the institutional structures would have been able to be overcome. I think it was the lack of passion [laughs ruefully].⁹⁶

95. Kay, *Apostolic Networks*, pp.288-90.

96. Slack, interview 1.2.2011.