

Convocation 2023

'The presence of God'

Forty or so people gathered on 14th – 15th November for the 2023 *Order for Baptist Ministry* Convocation, most of them members of the Order. This was the first truly and intentionally hybrid Convocation, with some joining from their homes on-line, while others joined in cells (small groups that meet throughout the year for mutual accountability and fellowship) that met as usual in the home of one of its members, or in two groups meeting in retreat centres — one in Honiton that gathered the three cells in the South West, while the London cell (which usually meets on-line throughout the year) met for the two days in St Columba's, Woking. This is in contrast to the more familiar fully residential in-room Convocation that was the pattern for the first ten years of OBM, or the fully online Convocations that were responses to the Covid prohibition on meeting together in 2020, and the reluctance to book a venue in 2021.

The Zoom platform held up (hurrah!) and the benefits of this pattern of gathering were recognised as providing a more inclusive Convocation, with some who could not travel or be away over-night, enabled to participate fully in the planned sessions (which boosted the numbers attending). Meanwhile, it allowed those who did meet together residentially to enjoy extended time in informal conversation over meals or during the 'community chill' session on the first evening. There are downsides to this pattern, with some who met online as individuals noting that they missed the conversations that happen 'in the cracks' of a residential Convocation, and there is always the temptation to fill those gaps with work or ministry of some kind, which lessens the overall experience of gathering away from the routine.

However, in the Community Discernment (a sort of OBM 'Church Meeting'), it was agreed that the Core Group explore a pattern of differing means of gathering in Convocation after seeking a wider consultation through a survey of members views. We hope to complete this by the end of this year, whilst at the same time exploring venues that might accommodate a larger group, either in two or three regional venues, or all together (with adequate online access for those who still want to join remotely.)

This pattern of gathering in person, either in the room or online, was an aspect of the theme of the Convocation, which explored this new world of online meeting. We explored this with the help of Dr Ruth Gouldbourne, who participates in an OBM cell in the North West, and who had, with Dr Steve Holmes, previously written about this theme of digital presence for Baptists. The second deliberative session took up the theme in the context of the Lord's Supper, enabling members to think about what it means to share in Communion when separated and online — a pattern that has become familiar to many Baptist churches.

The Convocation heard reports of a nascent cell meeting in the North East of England, following the recent move by a couple of ministers into the Association bringing with them their experience of cells elsewhere. Overall, the life of cells remains relatively stable, and attempts to help those who had moved elsewhere to find an existing cell, or form a new one, were encouraged. A revised set of questions for the Review aspect of cells was

reported to Convocation, and will be uploaded to the website. These become the 'normal' set of questions, to be offered alongside the older Review, which has served us well for a decade or more. We are grateful to the South West cells for their work on this revision.

Convocation also heard a report that we now have an almost complete suite of Daily Offices (three alternatives per day; a complete set of Mid-day Offices, and an almost complete set of Evening Prayers. Offices for particular feasts such as Ascension Day or Trinity Sunday have been written, and with two alternative Night Prayers and a Communion Service, there is now a wide range of resources which we know are used far beyond the Order.) Plans for 2024 include completing the intended set of Offices, editing them all to a common format and exploring publication.

Convocation affirmed the Core Group, with Andrew Bevan as treasurer (and much besides) and Paul Goodliff as Convenor. Hannah Freeland oversees cell groups, Andy Potter and Alexandra Elish social media, and Paul Goodliff, the Offices. Geoff Colmer, Colin Norris, Carol Murray continue to serve, and are joined by Neil Draisey, appointed by Convocation to the Core Group for the first time.

Convocation also encouraged the Core Group to explore further ways of making the Order known through the communications of *Baptists Together*, and thereby enable those who might find our pattern of daily prayer and Scripture reading; accountability for life and discipleship, ministry and mission through cells; and an annual gathering in Convocation, of benefit to their journey of faith and life of ministry. The website remains a primary means of sharing who we are, and making our resources available, but we also rejoiced in hearing of 500 followers on Facebook. The Order is open to anyone in ministry as a Baptist Minister, or training and in formation as a minister through one of our colleges, as well as those recognised lay ministers who hold pastoral and missional responsibility. From our position 'on the margins' of Baptist life, we pray that we continue to offer our distinctive contribution to the common good in a way that enriches the whole community of Christians who are Baptists.

As usual, members of Convocation prayed together throughout the gathering, using the Daily Office both days, Mid-day prayer similarly, and a newly crafted Evening Prayer for Tuesdays and Advent. The first day ended with Night Prayer, and the second with Communion and renewal of our commitment to the Order, which signifies also our commitment to be faithful Baptist disciples and ministers of the gospel.

The dates for the next Convocation are not yet fixed, as the survey will feed into those deliberations by Core Group, but mid-week and mid-November 2024 provides the framework — so hold those dates, and join us next year.

Rev'd Dr Paul Goodliff, *Convenor of the OBM Core Group*.