

Andy Goodliff on how Baptist churches in Southend have sought to work and walk together.

aptists have always affirmed the primacy of the local congregation. In almost the same breath, we believe the local congregation should recognise it is not good to be alone, hence the importance of associating with other Baptist churches. We know this, and hopefully we seek it, but the practice of associating is one that often feels less than what it should be.

In the Southend area, there are more than ten Baptist congregations. Ten years ago,

in November 2012, we had a first joint service in a while. This was part of a renewed desire amongst the local ministers to discover ways of working and being churches together. We invited Roy Searle to speak and each church brought a hexagon reflecting its life, which we displayed together as part of a desire to live a more honeycombed life.

Two years later, in June 2014, eleven Baptist congregations made a covenant together to

be more than independent churches. The Southend Area Baptist Network (SABN) was launched. The covenant was a commitment to share in worship, mission and mutual support. There was genuine excitement about what might emerge going forward.

The reality has been much harder to realise. Yes there have been some good things emerge. For a season there were regular joint services. In the early years after the covenant service, there were

shared moments of mission and learning. Particular partnerships between some churches within SABN have been encouraging. Ministerial clusters have given good support between colleagues.

At the same time, during these last ten years, there has been a difficulty in knowing how to take further steps in establishing a deeper sense of partnership and shared life, to live up to the covenant made. Getting everyone together has always been tricky. Decisions made by some churches have produced tensions in relationships. The life of SABN has waxed and waned.

Reflecting on the last ten years, one of the difficulties — one I recognise not present for most Baptist churches — is the size of the Network, partly why some churches have focused on a smaller partnership between two congregations. It's both a gift having so many churches

in a small area, but a challenge to make a Network work meaningfully.

Another issue is what might be called oversight. In the ten years we have tried passing responsibility between ministers for initiating and organising, but this has had mixed success. Perhaps the great difficulty is: it so easy to be consumed by the life of the congregation in which you are a part, that energy and time for something wider is squeezed.

Looking forward as Baptists, we need to come to value our networking and see it as an integral part of our being a Baptist church, and not just as an add on.

In the last 12 months, as SABN we are trying again to seek some of the 'honeycomb life'. We had a joint service with seven churches in October where, although not physically present, different

ministers offered recorded prayers and all shared the same sermon. We have plans for something similar in the summer. Likewise the circumstances of one church in the Network has initiated some getting together to see how they might mutually support something new emerging, and we are talking again on how we might partner together more.

SABN still exists. It will always have moments of both intentional action and fallow periods. I hope the future is one which generates a shared fellowship, and values the gifts each congregation can make to the whole. Covenant life requires humility, patience, trust and friendship — characteristics that have to be nurtured and looked after. My prayer is that across our Union of churches, associations, colleges, networks, clusters and partnerships, the Holy Spirit will be growing in us that kind of covenant life.



The honeycomb life – how Baptist churches in Southend expressed themselves in relation to each other in 2012