

Considering a Church Merger

Introduction

Church life is ever-changing. There are seasons of blessing and growth and seasons of difficulty and decline. Church Leaders and Pastors are regularly involved in reflection and vision: Where are we now? What is next for us? What is God saying to us about our present and our future? The BUV's Church Health and Capacity Building Team are available to help in such conversations.

It is in these times of reflection that leaders may consider their brothers and sisters in neighbouring churches and wonder if there could be value in greater cooperation and perhaps even in exploring a church merger. This updated guide is designed to help churches as they process that exploration. BUV Support Hub staff have worked with a number of churches in such exploration. We have observed what has worked and what hasn't and some of the reasons why. We can bring this experience to serve other churches that want to explore the possibilities of merging.

1. Reasons to consider closer cooperation or merging

Churches consider closer cooperation and/or merger for various reasons, including:

- **Two nearby churches who see the value in pooling resources:** The concept of "Better Together". Some of our smaller to medium size churches have discovered that they could be more effective if they joined together for ministry. This might be about mission to youth and children or community outreach. Serving together provides access to more people and resources and the strengths each church has to offer.
- **Responding to changes in the churches' neighbourhood:**
 - **New residential and travel patterns:** some of our inner urban churches were established before cars were common and so churches needed to be within walking distance of homes. Some of these smaller historic churches need to re-consider their life and mission now that people can travel further.
 - **Larger rural hinterlands:** Baptists were big church planters in various regions of Victoria when horseback and walking were the means to get to church. As people can travel further, schools and sporting clubs in rural areas have adapted to cover larger areas. Church may also need to consider this.
 - **Different language groups moving to an area:** Victoria is blessed by our multicultural diversity. As people from around the world move into areas, they need churches they can connect with. We see Language Other Than

English churches being planted and thriving in areas where the existing English-speaking churches have declined. There are various options for cooperation between these new and established churches.

- **A church that is “stuck” and needs a fresh vision:** At times a congregation can be caught in plateau and struggling to move forward. At times there is resistance to change for a season but then change becomes imperative to avoid decline. What to do now? A neighbouring church may be thriving and perhaps could adopt the ‘stuck’ church as a campus, bringing fresh approaches and additional resources.
- **A vibrant mission but inadequate governance:** There have been situations where a congregation has a thriving mission but lacks people with the gifts, time or energy to adequately manage governance, finances, Safe Church, etc.. A merger could enable the mission to flourish under another church’s leadership and governance.
- **Declining attendance and leadership:** sometimes there is just decline as less people attend the church, leaving a small, often-tired and aging leadership. They would love to see the church’s legacy live on and a merger might help. (However, it is important to note that some changes in thinking and actions will be needed. ***Mergers driven by survival rarely work. There needs to be a mission objective!***)

Ultimately the move from cooperation to merger will result in growth only if

- Both congregations believe that they will be more effective in mission if they merge
- The community surrounding the congregations will benefit as the Kingdom of God is advanced.

2. Exploring the options

When entering these discussions, it is important to allow time to consider things carefully. It is better for the process not to be rushed, but for the two churches to be intentional in getting to know and trust each other. It is a bit like dating before marriage!

The early stages of the exploration process should include:

- Pastors talking together about the concept of merger and what it might mean for them.
- Leadership teams meeting together for discussion, fellowship and prayer

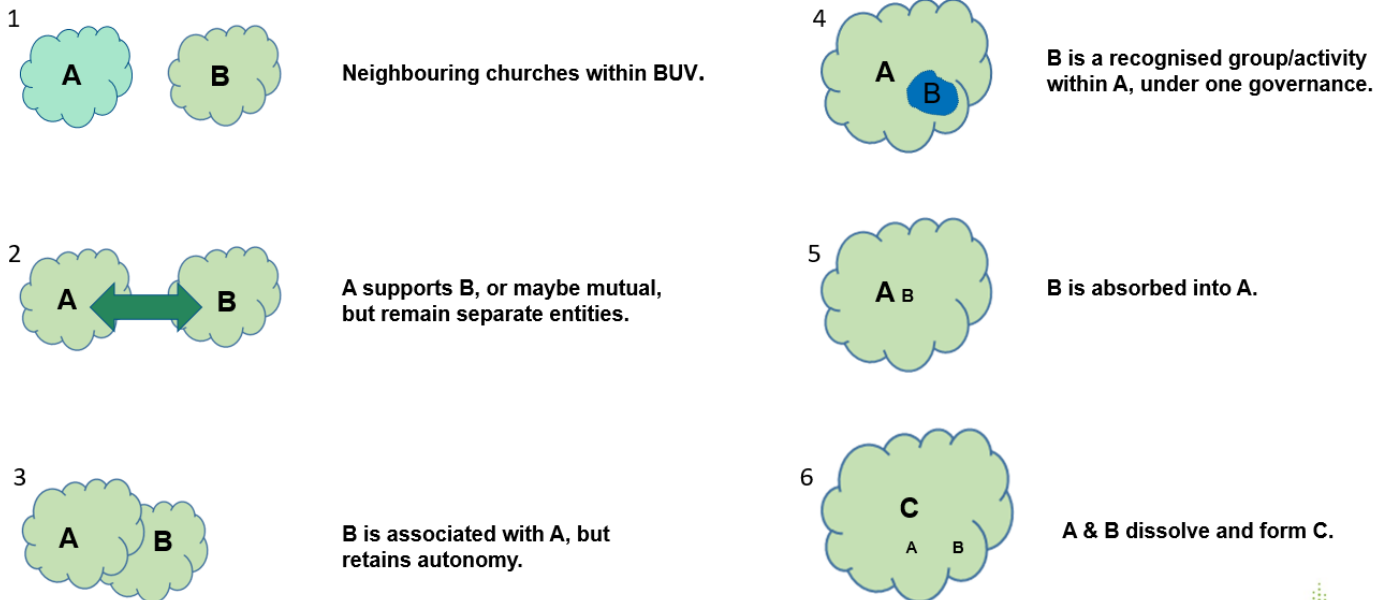
These early explorations are to see if there is synergy and a willingness to continue to explore this further.

Once both groups have decided it is worthwhile to continue the exploration, there needs to be some serious discussion about various issues including:

- **Exploring the mission:** Why are we considering this? When looking at the list above, which one most fits our situation?

- **Exploring the model:** Look at the diagram below. Which is the model that seems to be what we are exploring? Both churches should ask this individually and then compare notes.

Some Merger/Partnership Options



Other models?

Understanding the model will be important for processing all the issues that arise as churches merge. Clarity about the desired outcome early in the process helps keep the discussion focussed and reduces the likelihood of disappointment or conflict if the merger takes place. Participants need to know what they are aiming to achieve.

- **Exploring the issues:** See Appendix 1 for an extensive list of questions that should be considered. There may be other issues or questions that are specific to each particular merger.
- **What are the big issues?** Some of the key issues that are always involved are:
 - Pastoral roles – do both churches have a Pastor? What will the Pastoral staffing be post-merger?
 - Venue – will there be two sites after the merge or one? If there is one – what will happen with the other venue? Will the two churches move to a new venue?

- Meeting time – the time of worship may be adjusted? Is that OK?
- Name – what will the name of the merged entity be? A temporary merged name can be used in the short term and the longer term name can be considered later. For example when the Barrabool Hills and Moolap congregations merged, they were known as Moolap and Barrabool Hills Baptist Church for a number of years. Now they have adopted the new name “One Hope”

3. Moving toward merger

If the merger discussions are proceeding well from a leadership perspective and there seems to be momentum toward merger, experience has shown us that these next steps help move toward a successful merger.

- **Involving the congregations:** Once both leadership groups are supportive of the possible merger, congregational engagement is important. Convene forums where people can explore questions, voice concerns as well as vision and excitement. Online surveys can be conducted to give people a further voice.
- **Exploring the constitutions:** Some work will be needed to be done on comparing the church constitutions and writing a new one. We would recommend that the BUV Model Constitution be used as a basis. It is preferable for this work to be done 6 months before proposed start as the new constitution needs to be approved by Union Council.
- **Involving the BUV’s Administration.** If it hasn’t been done already, involving the BUV’s Administration Team will be critical. They will explain all the issues around buildings and constitutional requirements regarding Schedule B. It will be important to get an “in-principle agreement” from the BUV Leadership Team and Union Council regarding property matters because the BUV serves as Trustee for many churches.
- **Holding the Special Meetings to officially decide:** When the churches are ready to decide upon the merger, the 2 merging churches should hold concurrent Special Church Meetings. The existing church constitutions are the operating documents for those meetings and until the merge is finalised (See Appendix 2 notes on Special Meetings)
- **Celebrating the closing of (one or two) congregations.** In ‘equal’ mergers, both congregations should mark the closure by celebrating what has been. This helps people to process their feelings about the ending of the church they have been part of and so to prepare to enter into the new. When a smaller congregation is joining a larger one, it is likely only the smaller one will have a celebration service.
- **Celebrate the beginning of the new congregation.** Whichever the model that is utilised, there should be a significant celebration of the new entity and a dedication of the congregation moving forward.

Appendix 1 – Working document regarding merger issues

What follows is a comprehensive worksheet looking at many of the issues that commonly arise in church mergers. It may not be necessary to look at every one of the questions and there may be other issues that are important in your context.

1. Church Culture

| Issues | Questions | Notes |
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| Mission and Vision | How do each of the churches answer the following questions Honest answers to these questions will reveal how close or apart the two congregations are on the primary purpose and focus of the church. | |
| | Why do we exist? | |
| | If we succeed in fulfilling our mission as a church, what would our church look like in 5 years from now? | |
| Theology and Doctrine | How do the two churches compare theologically? | |
| | Are their heritages and traditions charismatic, reformed, traditional or progressive? | |
| | Do they share similar or divergent views on the Bible, baptism, spiritual gifts, divorce, marriage rights, the role of men and women, etc.? | |

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| Preaching styles and philosophy | What are the emphases and style of the preaching/teaching? | |
| | Is it systematic theological teaching, in depth biblical exegesis, inspirational motivational messages, or simple teaching with lots of practical application? | |
| | Who decides the preaching themes and roster? | |
| | How long is a typical sermon in each church? | |
| | Who can preach? Pastors only, Pastors and elders or church leaders, women and men, members who have a gift for teaching or anyone who wants to have a go? | |
| | Can multimedia be used? | |
| | What are the expectations around having guest speakers? | |

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| Worship styles and philosophy | How do the corporate worship services of the two churches compare? | |
| | Are you contemporary, traditional, a blend of both, or something completely different? | |
| | Is the emphasis on participation or excellence? | |
| | How much does each church use technology as part of the service? | |
| | Who can lead corporate worship including communion? | |
| | Who makes the decisions about what happens in the service? | |
| | Who chooses the songs, preaching and prayers? | |

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| Governance and Leadership styles and philosophy | How are the two congregations governed and led? | |
| | Do you have deacons and elders or just deacons? | |
| | What role do deacons or elders play? | |
| | Do you have a church board and staff who make most of the decisions? | |
| | What decisions are made by the members in a members meeting? | |
| | How often are the members meetings held? What form do such meetings take? (e.g. formal meeting, dinner discussion etc.) | |
| | Who can lead in what areas of church life? Who can be on what leadership teams? | |
| | Is the Senior Pastor 'the leader' or is there a team leadership culture? | |
| | How are leaders appointed? Is there a code of conduct for leaders? | |

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| Budget | Budgets reflect the priorities of a church. | |
| | What do you learn about each other's church from looking at its budget? | |
| | What things are given financial priority and what does that indicate about the church's values? | |

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| Membership | What are the requirements for church membership at each of the churches? | |
| | What is expected of members? | |
| Evangelism styles and philosophy | How similar or different are the two churches approaches to outreach? | |
| | Is the main emphasis on the individuals reaching out to those in their circle of influence or on running church programs for outreach, or both? | |
| | Is the strategy one of attracting people to the church or sending people from the church to reach out? | |
| | Is there a focus on social action as 'the mission' or evangelism, or both? | |
| Programs | What ministries are running that are non-negotiable and therefore untouchable? | |
| | What ministries are effective and what ministries are not? | |
| | What programs need refocusing or removing? What programs could be integrated? | |
| Expectations around pastoral care | What are the expectations in regards to pastoral care? | |
| | The pastor visits the congregants regularly or are gifted lay people empowered to provide care? | |
| | The pastor makes hospital visits or home visits to pray with the sick or are gifted lay people empowered to pray for the sick. | |

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| Safe Church | Do the two churches have policies and processes in place that comply with the Child Safe Standards? | |
| | Are the two churches part of the BUV National Redress Scheme Group? | |
| | Is either church aware of any issues in the past that might give rise to a Redress or compensation claim or other legal liability? | |

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| Affiliations | In addition to the BUV are there any organisations, networks or movements that the church is associated with? | |
| | What denominations or organisations are there commitments/partnerships with? | |
| | What missionaries, local missions or aid projects are being supported? | |
| | What commitments have been made to external groups? | |

2. PERSONNEL (BOTH PAID AND VOLUNTEER)

| Issues | Questions | Notes |
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| Pastors and Staff | What will be the status and role of any existing Pastors in the merged church? (Note: The Senior Pastors may have already discussed this earlier in the merger process.) | |
| | Are the job descriptions, pay levels, contracts, and benefits comparable or dramatically different? | |
| | What will be the staff needs in the new church entity? | |
| | What staff will remain in their current position, be redeployed to another area in the church, downsized, or released? | |
| | What are the severance policies? | |
| Volunteer Roles | What will happen with existing leadership teams and volunteer leaders, deacons/ elders/boards, treasurers, secretaries, etc.? Will they be integrated, moved into different roles or asked to resign from those roles? | |
| | What will happen with ministry leaders like men's, women's, youth and children's, etc.? Will they be integrated, moved into different roles or asked to resign from those roles? | |
| | What will happen with key volunteers helping with administration tasks like producing a weekly newsletter etc.? | |

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| Missionaries | Will all missionaries continue to receive support? | |
| | Will some be phased out over time? | |
| | How will the merged church make decisions about support of missionaries and mission agencies? | |

3. Logistics and Legal matters

| Issues | Questions | Notes |
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| Constitutions and church name | How do the two constitutions compare? What will need to change in bringing them together? | |
| | Will both church entities be dissolved and a new church name and constitution be accepted, or dissolve both constitutions and accept a new one with keeping the lead church name, or dissolve the joining church entity and have it subsumed into the lead church and its constitution? | |
| Voting | How will the decision about the merger be made? | |
| | What does each of the churches constitution say in regards to what needs to happen? | |
| | Is either church incorporated? If so, how does this affect the merger? | |
| | What will the congregations need to vote on, church name, constitution, buildings, finances, etc.? Can any of the decisions be delegated to leadership groups? Will the views of Non-Members be considered during the merger process? | |
| | What will be the percentage vote required for approval? | |

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| Property and facility | What buildings exist, church buildings, halls, manses, rental properties, etc.? | |
| | What will happen to them as part of the merger? | |
| | What advice has the BUV provided on any transfer of property as part of the merger? | |
| | Will any of the buildings be sold? | |
| | Are there any spaces being rented out to a third party? | |
| | Will new lease agreements be needed? | |
| | What is the condition of buildings and properties? Has each church complied with 'Red Book' and other regulatory requirements? | |
| | Will any significant maintenance or repair be required in the foreseeable future? | |

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| Equipment | What equipment exists, photo copiers, computers, data projectors, sporting equipment, etc.? | |
| | Is there a written inventory of all the equipment? | |
| | What will happen to surplus equipment? | |
| | Has any of it been donated under special conditions? | |
| | Can it be sold or given away? | |
| | What will the funds be used for? | |
| | Who makes these decisions? | |

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| Assets and Liabilities | What bank accounts and investments exist? | |
| | How will non-property assets be managed as part of the merger process? | |
| | Are there financial contracts or lease arrangements on any church equipment or running costs like phones, internet, photocopiers, etc.? | |
| | What debts and loans exist? | |
| | How will they be paid out or transferred to the new church entity?? | |
| | What future plans for building or financial commitments have been discussed and agreed upon? | |
| | How will this be handled if they are not going to continue? | |
| | Do any bequests or trusts exist? Will the merger have any effect on these? | |

Appendix 2: Special Meetings to decide on mergers

Introduction: There will be two concurrent church meetings occurring; they can be in different locations or the same.

Explanation of the meetings:

When would the merged entity begin?

Note that until the merged entity begins, the two churches continue to operate as they are presently doing so under the present constitutions and leadership structures.

Constitution approved

If one church is being absorbed into a larger another, this step is not necessary. If there is a new church to be formed post-merger, there is a need for a new constitution. Ideally this is done earlier in the process and approval has already been gained by the BUUV Union Council

A possible motion is “That the document presented by the Leadership be affirmed as the Constitution for the new entity of _____ Baptist Church.

Need to have the results of this before we go on to subsequent motions

Motions around Membership and Assets and Liabilities

The motions will again be different according to the model of merger but there will be motions around Church Membership and Assets and Liabilities.

We suggest you consult with the BUUV’s Church Health team to look at your specific situation. The Church Health Team will consult with BUUV Administration on any particular issues.

The following example is based upon a new church being formed post-merger

1. Membership Roll

- a. That the Membership roll of A _____ Baptist Church be transferred to the new entity of C _____ Baptist Church as at (date of merge)
- b. That the Membership roll of B _____ Baptist Church be transferred to the new entity of C _____ Baptist Church as at (date of merge)

2. Assets & Liabilities

- a. That the Assets and Liabilities of A _____ Baptist Church be transferred to the new entity of C _____ Baptist Church as at (date of merge)
- b. That the Assets and Liabilities of B _____ Baptist Church be transferred to the new entity of C _____ Baptist Church as at (date of merge)