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THE CASE FOR CHRISTIAN UNITY

Unity belongs to the very nature of the church. It is both a gift and a calling that God has given to the church. A church may not ignore the implications of this truth with impunity.

Increasingly, the fullness of the unity of the Body of Christ is being conceived in terms of communion in faith, life and witness. Yet, churches continue to face a challenge in securing agreement on the proximate form or forms that this unity may take in the churches’ historical life.

Some speak of this unity in terms of reconciled diversity. This refers to the existence of genuine fellowship between or among churches that have diverse understandings of aspects of the belief and practice of the church, but no longer regard the diversity that exists as church dividing.

In some cases, this unity is conceived in organic terms as institutional unity. This is often the case where a presumption exists that a particular Christian World Communion uniquely possesses the truth of God’s revelation. In other cases, organic unity is often predicated on reconciled diversity that finds expression in a conversion of identities.

Where do Baptists fall in the spectrum of beliefs concerning unity? Perhaps, they may be found right across the entire spectrum! And is it not sad that we spend so little time agonizing over our disunity? Indeed, we are prone to make jokes about our penchant for division.

Whatever the beliefs concerning the unity of the church that Baptists hold, many continue to insist that the primary location of the church and its unity is at the local, that is, the congregational, level. Yet, even among Baptists, the insistence on the local congregation as the primary expression of the church is disputed. The reason is that some Baptists are uncertain about the accuracy of the claim that the New Testament provides a basis for the priority of the local church, that is, the local congregation of covenanted believers, as the principal expression of the church.

One notable Baptist scholar of yesteryear, Dale Moody, is among those who have raised important questions about popular Baptist attitudes toward the local church. Moody’s argument remains cogent: “Rigid distinctions between the local assembly, especially when the general assembly as the body of Christ is rejected, is a case of not being able to see the woods for the trees.” The New Testament affirms both the local and the universal manifestations of the church. Faithfulness to this teaching proscribes the exclusion of one or the other from our understanding of the church. Thankfully, many Baptists assent to this view without embracing a nebulous notion of spiritual unity.

Yet, do not Baptists need to admit that the lived experience of the Baptist family is too often marked by a debilitating parochialism? On the one hand, this weakness threatens to deprive the Baptist community of the riches that inhere in the traditions of the other Christian World Communions. On the other hand, this parochialism tends to drain the energy from any effort at the international level to give expression to the oneness in Christ that Baptist Christians share.

All too often, the tendency exists to exalt local and regional perspectives above emerging shared perspectives that derive from a representative Baptist body seeking to discern together the way the Holy Spirit is leading the worldwide Baptist community.

Some Baptists are inclined to restrict the practice of oversight in the church to the local level and they only very cautiously extend this to the regional level within a country, or even to the national level. This is partly a sign of our failure both to take representation seriously and to appreciate the reality that structures our shared life beyond the local level to be animated by the Holy Spirit. Besides, they can make a vital contribution in the service of the communion that God’s people share.

Many Baptists who desire to guard the right of the Spirit of Christ to rule and reign in the life of the local congregation risk suffocating under a questionable presumption. They may feel that the will of Christ may better be discerned in the limited locations they inhabit than in the spaces where they gather with others who share their spiritual heritage on a much broader geographical plane.

May our churches experience a deep longing to more fully participate in, and share, communion in God’s own Trinitarian life. And may this longing both fill us with concern over the scandal of our disunity and the imperative of resolute determination to seek to manifest the unity that God wills for the church.

[Signature]

Neville Callam
Baptists find it relatively easy to articulate an ecclesiology [or theology] of the local church, the body of believers in one place who have covenanted together under God and with each other to bear witness to God’s kingdom in that locality; but they find it more difficult to extend that ecclesiology to other than local groups; that is, to regional groupings, national conventions and unions, continental fellowships and the Baptist World Alliance itself.

Nevertheless, from the earliest times the responsibility to associate with others has generally been recognized. For example, E.A. Payne affirms, “Associations, Synods, Unions and Assemblies of churches are not to be regarded as optional and secondary. They are the necessary expression of Christian fellowship, a necessary manifestation of the church visible. The local congregation is not truly a church if it lives an entirely separate life.” Early Baptists both learned to follow biblical precedents in securing mutual counsel on difficult problems, and to work together to forward God’s mission in the world.

Arguments for other than local groupings have generally been developed by attempts to try and extend the principles of local church government to the larger unit, but always with great care. When the Baptist union was founded in Great Britain it went on record as eschewing “all manner of superiority and superintendence over the churches.”

The constitution of the Baptist World Alliance reflects the same caution. In 1905 there was recognition of “the independence of each particular church,” which in 1923 was strengthened: “It being understood that this Alliance shall in no way interfere with the independence of the churches.” As recently as at Los Angeles in 1985 it was affirmed that “this Alliance recognizes the traditional autonomy and independence of churches and general bodies.”

Any fellowship wider than the local church to secure any standing with the churches will accordingly require a deliberate act of covenanting by such local churches, which thereby bestow competence on the wider body to act in the interests of the mission of the kingdom. Only thus can the wider body secure authority to act. The issue is not simply where decision-making takes place, but whence the authority for such decision-making derives. In Baptist ecclesiology that must always be from the local to the national and international, and never vice-versa, as commonly occurs within Episcopal and Presbyterian systems.

This raises the question as to whether local churches covenant to the wider family authority to act on very specific matters or whether they may give to the wider body more general delegation of authority. I incline to the former view and would add that the need for the local body to be continually and intelligently involved with the consequences of their actions by way of shared information, prayer and commitment as appropriate.

In so developing our relationships there are reciprocal principles of freedom and fidelity. That is to say, there needs to be freedom unfettered to explore the mind of Christ for his purposes in the current situation, but at the same time continuing to secure fidelity to the apostolic faith as once given. This defines the bonds of fellowship, necessarily excluding any who depart from this faith. Contrariwise, slavery to the past has sometimes inhibited some from seeing their contemporary missionary responsibilities.

The new missionary spirit that reinvigorated Baptist life at the end of the eighteenth century inevitably made its impact upon Baptist ecclesiology. Co-operative action across denominational boundaries necessarily posed questions about the practice of closed communion. How could Christians under the direction of the Spirit unite in mission and then separate at the Lord’s Table? At the same time, serious questions were posed about church order, and the necessity for baptism to precede communion and church membership.

How could Christians under the direction of the Spirit unite in mission and then separate at the Lord’s Table?

In due course, questions inevitably arose as to the relationships between mission boards and churches in the mission field, quite properly asserting the need for the younger churches to be respected as churches in their own right.

Just as Baptist ecclesiology in asserting the autonomy of the local church did not conceive of independent churches competing for members within the same community, so it is difficult to justify a multiplicity of Baptist conventions/unions existing in any given geographical area, the more especially when each is in membership with the BWA. [This was raised at the time of the BWA General Council in Harare, Zimbabwe, in 1993, in reference (Continued on next page)}
to the several competing Baptist bodies in Zimbabwe. This was strange, since the issue of competition within one domain had long been part of the scene in the United States!]

Problems are increased in an age of ecumenical relationships when other church bodies and ecumenical agencies [and sometimes the state itself], themselves invariably centrally organized, look for authoritative statements from national and even international Baptist bodies, who are in no position to make such statements or to bind local congregations.

On the other hand, the wider company of Christ’s people can hardly be ignored. George Beasley-Murray has argued, “Our discussion of Baptist identity must be set in the context of our place in the body of Christ, graciously granted to us by the Lord of the church. Our primary identity is that of members set within that Body who seek to understand what it means to be in Christ and to be his church. . . . That Baptists should join the number of those who identify only those of their order as the ‘true Church’ is quite surprising!” How then do Baptists hear what the Lord of the church is saying to them through other parts of the Christian family?

It is perhaps worth noting that when the Evangelical Alliance was established in the 1840s the most that could be achieved was an alliance of individuals and not of churches. By contrast in 1948 the World Council of Churches (WCC) brought into relationship independent (“member”) churches. In recent years it has begun to invite churches into binding covenants but Baptists as a congregational denomination find it difficult to respond to such invitations.

At the Copenhagen Assembly of the BWA in 1946, Henry Cook spoke in favor of Baptists having a formal relationship with the new WCC which was shortly to be founded; others opposed. Wisely, E. A. Payne argued that the whole debate was out of order in terms of the BWA constitution, for the BWA had no authority to commit member churches either way.

The BWA has enabled Baptists to secure a voice within international councils, beyond the capacity of both local church and national union.

I believe there is evidence to suggest that we are encountering a worldwide unwillingness to give trust to other than local bodies, or put differently, a reluctance for local groups to own the strategies of regional and national bodies as their own, a new form of parochialism if you like, which must present difficulties to the BWA when enthusiasm seems to concentrate on the local and the immediate, rather than the national and the global.

Fundamental to the life of the Alliance must be a sense of mutual need of one another, the recognition that isolated churches are churches that are denying themselves the richness of experience that Christ intends for all his people. The Christian gospel is about the re-establishment of relationships: men and women with God, and in Christ with one another.

That relationship will find expression in a variety of ways: material aid; exchange of mission personnel, including Global South missionaries working in the Global North; and mutual encouragement through shared experiences.

As a matter of record the BWA has played a particularly important part in undertaking advocacy on behalf of persecuted evangelical minorities, and has enabled Baptists to secure a voice within international councils, acting beyond the capacity of both local church and national union, doing for them what they could never do for themselves.

John Briggs was editor of the Baptist Quarterly from 1985-2008; former director of the Centre for Baptist History and Heritage at Regent’s Park College, University of Oxford; senior research fellow in church history and professor emeritus at University of Birmingham; and chair of the BWA Commission on Baptist History and Heritage.

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A joke told by my husband, a Methodist pastor: You have, perhaps, heard of the shipwrecked Baptist who is rescued after many years on a desert island. His rescuers wonder about the three huts that line the beach. “That’s my home,” he answers, “and that one’s my garden. Some prefer roses, others daisies, etc. Analogously, this thinking goes, some prefer this kind of church or denomination, others a different kind. While this image does register that unity is not uniformity, it nonetheless fails to see that being church is not about one’s preferences or needs. Rather, in the Body of Christ our needs are transformed so that we discover how we need one another. We learn to see how our gifts are given for the building up of the whole (1 Cor. 12).

A second distorted understanding dismisses our differences as unimportant. “Why can’t we just get along?” one asks. The difficulty with this question is that it fails to see that unity and truth are deeply intertwined. In the great fourth century debate between Athanasius, who defended the divinity of Christ, and Arius, who did not, neither said their differences did not matter. Athanasius, later to be known as Athanasius contra mundum (“against the world”), was exiled five times for defending the divinity of the Son.

Christian unity rests ultimately in the truth of Divine unity. Jesus prays that his disciples may be one “as you, Father, are in me
By Ross Clifford

One of the joys of my ministry role in the Baptist World Alliance and the Asia Pacific Baptist Federation (APBF) is to witness how Baptists come together beyond a local level. Whilst Baptist associations are ministering together in the local church and amongst our neighboring Baptist churches, it is much more than that.

Association for us crosses such boundaries into state, national and international cooperation and service together. For example, in my visits to Nagaland, India, I saw Baptists ministering together at a state level in a powerful way, whether it be church development, education or social services. In Fiji, a recent Pacific Nations Baptist forum was held with delegates participating from across the Pacific nations as, together, we took positive steps to do more together in church development, theological education, mission and the like.

Baptists working together beyond the local level is not a new thing. When the church in Jerusalem was suffering, other churches “made a contribution for the poor among the saints in Jerusalem” (Romans 15:25-28). Paul Beasley-Murray notes “Paul’s injunction to the Galatians to ‘do good to all people, especially to those who belong to the family of believers’ (Galatians 6:10) could not be restricted to any particular locality.”

Since our beginnings, Baptists have continued in this spirit. There has been a commitment to “interdependence” or “associationalism” as a practical expression of the “catholicity” of the Baptist church. Baptist historians such as Ken Manley point to numerous Baptist Confessions in support, including the 1677 Confession:

XXVI. 14. As each church, and all the members of it are bound to pray continually, for the good and prosperity of all the Churches of Christ, in all places... so the Churches (when planted by the providence of God so as they may enjoy opportunity and advantage for it) ought to hold communion among themselves for their peace, increase of love, and mutual edification.

Stephen Holmes concurs, “Baptists have, virtually from their foundation, held that true churches have a duty to unite together for support and structure.”

In a theological proposal for “Re-Envisioning Baptist Identity: A Manifesto for Baptist Communities in North America,” it was expressed this way:

We affirm a free common life in Christ gathered, reforming communities rather than withdrawn, self-chosen or authoritarian ones. We believe that, along with other Christians, the Holy Spirit gathers us from the nations (Isa. 56:7; Mark 11.17; Rev. 5.9-10) and empowers us to share in the gift of God’s freedom so that in our bodies the Lord’s mission of reconciling the world might continue (1 Cor. 6.19-20; 2 Cor. 5.18).

Over the years the benefits of regional and global association have been numerous, including world aid, the support of wider Baptist witness in mission and evangelism, mutual encouragement and support, promoting relationships and understanding with other denominations, learning together in conferences, expressing a united voice on moral and social issues, advocacy and promoting and disseminating information about Baptists. Servant governance structures and servant leadership oversee our associational life.

Baptist ecumenism does not imply a “uniformity of practice” or “organizational principles.” Churches and regions will develop in their cultural contexts a variety of models of leadership and government. However, as Paul Beasley-Murray states:

(Continued on next page)

Participants at BWA Youth Conference

The BWA gathers Baptists from around the world.

and I am in you. . .” (John 17:21). Christ gives this communion to the church. “As many of you as were baptized into Christ have put on Christ... for all of you are all one in Christ Jesus” (Gal. 3:27, 28). The use of the present tense is significant. Unity is a present reality because it is first and foremost a gift from God. Though clouded by our sinfulness and slowness of heart and mind, unity nonetheless is present through God’s own abundance: the Son’s self-giving in the Spirit. Our task is to allow this unity to become more fully present through the way we “look upon each other, articulate [our] faith, carry out [our] worship, and act in the world.”

One of the tasks for the church today is to name the false unities that easily determine our lives. In the United States, for example, Christians are often more united by political party than they are by their shared worship of the Triune God. In many places, race unites in a way that membership in the Body of Christ does not. National identity can trump Christian identity such that Christians are willing to kill one another in the name of their nation.

The Baptist World Alliance gathers Baptists from around the world to worship the triune God and to participate, through the Spirit, in ministry to the world. As we continue to participate in God’s mission, may we see more fully how unity is integral to the mission of the church. As Jesus prayed to the Father, may they “become completely one, so that the world may believe that you have sent me” (John 17:21).

Elizabeth Newman is the Eula Mae and John Baugh Professor of Theology and Ethics at the Baptist Theological Seminary at Richmond, Virginia, in the United States.

It is one of the fallacies of modernity that to be united we all need to be the same. Unity is not uniformity.

Before this is a human or social truth, it is a theological truth.

If we want to see how we can be a Baptist community that maintains unity, we need first of all to begin with the nature of God and God’s will for all creation.

Why do we differ? We differ because God has made us different. From the beginning of all time, God made many different creatures and, along with them, made human beings different as well. “So God created humankind in his image, in the image of God he created them; male and female he created them” (Gen. 1. 27). This fundamental insight draws attention to our likeness to God, and that’s crucial to our understanding of diversity.

Difference is not alien to God; on the contrary, this verse tells us that our diversity is part of what it means for us (together) to be in God’s image. Difference is part of who we are because difference is part of who God is. The biblical, Christian doctrine of God includes the idea of God as a community (a Tri-unity), in which there is difference without division.

Father, Son and Spirit live in loving unity, belonging to one another in a mystical relationship—and this life of God as community is given to all creation as the example and inspiration of how we might live. That promise and possibility, though, is only possible through God: it is the gift of the Holy Spirit.

Therefore, as we come together as humans, Christians, Baptists, we bring all that diversity that God has created and celebrates. Some are black and others of us are pinkies. We are male and female, old and young; some love to sing and dance in praise to the Lord, and others of us sit tight in our seats and hope no one will ask us to clap our hands. We are all sorts, but all of us read the New Testament affirmation that we are all one in Christ Jesus (Gal. 3. 28). That verse says, however, that in Christ there is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female, and therein lies an interesting puzzle. Does this mean that our Christian identity does away with our differences, and thus with our identity? I think not. It is not as if God wills to “flatten out” our differences so that we all end up “coffee coloured” as that song from the 1970s suggested.

God does not want to negate who we are, but rather wants to unite who we are in a community of rich diversity, with differences that do not divide. The clear indication of this is found in a proper reading of the story of Pentecost. On that day, there is a reversal of the story of Babel, when different languages meant that people could no longer understand each other. At Pentecost, the great crowd of witnesses all hear in their own languages. It is not that the Spirit negates their distinctive identities, but

The fellowship in the gospel cannot be restricted to Christians worshipping together in one locality. No individual Christian can afford to be a loner, neither can any local church afford to go it alone. If a local church goes its own way regardless of other churches, then by its very individualism it is denying the fullness of the gospel.

At times I have perceived a lack of focus on unity and, sadly, a willingness by some to move ahead without due consideration of the body as a whole. Some of the reasons for a lack of focus on unity are:

- Our differing theological positions and church government models lead some to form “safer” and more “insular” networks.
- We are born out of a reaction against coercive structures of ecclesiastical authority and this heritage is not always held in tension with the biblical call (and our tradition) to join in associational life. If this tension is not held the focus then moves to autonomy of the local church, region or agency at the cost of ministry together.
- We find our networks outside of Baptist associations and even become apologetic for Baptist connections in a so-called post-denominational age.
- We are drawn to a micro unification with like-minded churches and agencies in our region where ecclesiology appears “to work” against the macro regional BWA or APBF model, which involves a deeper consideration of others.

Let me encourage you to reflect on the “Affirmations: Mission and Vision Statements” of the BWA. We can miss the significance of these simple, basic statements.

“One of the joys of my ministry . . . is to witness how Baptists come together beyond a local level.”

— Ross Clifford

Mission
Networking the Baptist family to impact the world for Christ

Vision
The Baptist World Alliance is a global movement of Baptists sharing a common confession of faith in Jesus Christ bonded together by God’s love to support, encourage and strengthen one another while proclaiming and living the Gospel of Jesus Christ in the power of the Holy Spirit before a lost and hurting world

Our world is a global village and the affirmations remind us of God’s purposes in our heavenly calling together as Baptists.

Ross Clifford is principal, Morling Theological College near Sydney, Australia, and president, Asia Pacific Baptist Federation.

1. Paul Beasley-Murray, Radical Believers: The Baptist way of being the church, Baptist Union of GB, 1992, 73.
5. Paul Beasley-Murray, Radical Believers: The Baptist way of being the church, Baptist Union of GB, 1992, 73.
Baptists also have been quick to divide among themselves whenever some have become convinced that others have developed unbiblical or un-Baptist patterns of faith and practice. This happened in the earliest community of Baptists in Amsterdam, when a small group of its members, led by Thomas Helwys, insisted on the validity of their baptisms as administered by Smyth and, in 1611 or 1612, returned to England to establish Baptist ecclesial life in their homeland. Baptists ever since have often followed this precedent for division intra-Baptist in relations in local congregations, associations, national denominational organizations and even within the Baptist World Alliance.

But the impulse toward unity is also discernible from the beginnings of the Baptist movement. Smyth did search for other “true churches” with which to find fellowship, lest his Amsterdam congregation be devoid of connections with the larger body of Christ. Baptist theologian Stephen Holmes characterizes Smyth’s action on the new conclusion that the Mennonite fellowship was indeed a true church in this fashion: “Smyth, perceiving a true church in existence, believed he had no option but to join it; separation from a true church was not an option” (Baptist Theology [T&T Clark, 2012], p. 17).

That impulse manifests itself again in the origins of Baptist associational life. In their first half-century of existence Baptist churches began to form associations of multiple local congregations, in part out of the recognition that a single congregation did not possess in and of itself all the resources.
The Arunachal Baptist Church Council (ABCC) in India was accepted by the Baptist World Alliance as a member organization during the Annual Gathering in Vancouver, Canada, in July.

The current ABCC came out of a merger of two Baptist bodies in Arunachal Pradesh, one of eight states in Northeast India that form the so-called “chicken neck.” Most Northeast Indian states have a sizeable Christian presence relative to the rest of the population.

Several Baptist groups in the “chicken neck” region are part of the Council of Baptist Churches in Northeast India (CBCNEI), formed in 1950 and, at one time, a full BWA member organization. However, CBCNEI withdrew BWA membership after restructuring in 1993 to enable its own affiliate groups to gain full BWA membership. CBCNEI was, in turn, accepted as a BWA associate member in 2011.

ABCC was the only original CBCNEI member not to gain full BWA membership, unlike others such as the Nagaland Baptist Church Council, the Manipur Baptist Convention and the Baptist Church of Mizoram.

The two groups that merged to form the new ABCC in Arunachal Pradesh both came out of field work that began in the 1960s by two mission agencies in the United States – the Baptist General Conference (BGC) and American Baptist Churches USA (ABCUSA) – with BGC operating in the northern part of Arunachal Pradesh and ABCUSA in the south. However, all missionaries appointed by the two American groups were indigenous to India, with several coming from nearby states in the northeast such as Nagaland and Mizoram.

Because both groups had separate missional histories, “the churches planted were disconnected from each other,” explained Ajoy Lama, former CBCNEI general secretary. “The north was not connected to the south. Southern churches belonged to the [original] Arunachal Baptist Church Council, which was, from the very beginning, part of the Baptist World Alliance (through CBCNEI) but the northern churches were not.”

The quest to bring both groups together began in earnest in 1984, an initiative led by the young people, according to Lama: At that time we had around 300 churches. We wanted to bring all of them together under one umbrella but it did not work because the senior leaders were not willing to sit together. They were afraid of losing the support of the mission agencies. They were also having conflicts as to who would lead the Baptist Church Council.

Lama was one of those young people urging unity back in 1984. “I vividly remember attending the first conference where we invited all the senior leaders. It was actually a youth effort. All the young people wrote a letter to all the church leaders to come together,” he recalled. “There was a disagreement about who would be the general secretary. Both groups wanted to have their candidate. That was the conflict.”

Another attempt was made five years later, encouraged by the original ABCC, of which Lama was a part. “But that also didn’t work,” Lama said. “Somehow the northern churches were finding it difficult to trust us. Somehow they viewed us with suspicion. Probably they

it needed to be most fully a church and that these resources are found not only among neighboring Baptist churches but in the whole body of Christ. When seven local Baptist congregations in London together issued the London Confession of 1644, they explained their congregational interdependence in discerning the mind of Christ for their faith and practice as a corollary of being “one in Communion, holding Jesus Christ to be our head and Lord; under whose government we desire alone to walk, in following the Lamb wheresoever he goeth,” and insisted that inclusion in such an interdependent communion was their hope “for all [the] saints.”

This early Baptist consciousness of ecclesial interdependence in walking together under the rule of Christ is what would later give rise not only to larger associations of Baptist churches in the form of national Baptist conventions and unions and in 1905 the formation of the Baptist World Alliance as a Christian World Communion, but also to various forms of Baptist participation in the modern ecumenical movement. Several Baptist unions were founding members of the World Council of Churches in 1948 and many more are members today. The BWA has participated in international ecumenical dialogues with several Christian World Communions, and Baptists have participated in similar conversations in national and regional contexts.

While there is much in the Baptist story to substantiate the stereotype that Baptists are intrinsically divisive and suspicious of ecumenical alliances, our tradition is also rich in stories of “real Baptists” like denominational and ecumenical statesman Ernest Payne, a former general secretary of the Baptist Union of Great Britain and co-president of the World Council of Churches, whose passionate pursuit of church unity was deeply rooted in Baptist ecclesiological convictions. May we imitate their saintly example in our local churches, Baptist unions, the BWA and the church universal.

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felt they would lose the loyalty of the individual churches. That’s why they were not very much in favor.”

The new developments have now been greeted with joy as in 2008 the two groups formally came together as one. “I thank God that after 30 years this effort has been successful, through the insistence of the Arunachal Baptist Church Council, the encouragement of the Asia Pacific Baptist Federation (APBF) and the persistence of the young leaders.”

Lama commended APBF which, he said, “encouraged the unity of the churches.” The process was also aided by the retirement of those who resisted the move toward unity. “The new leaders who took over understood the need that more than the support of the mission agencies was needed. It is important that we have a united witness in the state.”

Lama, who played the role of a consultant to ABCC, expressed gratitude to the BWA for granting membership. “We are so thankful to BWA that they are affirming our aspiration, our desire to be united together by giving this membership.”

The move toward unity will help in confronting issues of law and freedom faced by Christians in Arunachal Pradesh, Lama emphasized. “There is an Indigenous Faith Act under which if you convert to Christianity you can be imprisoned for 10 years and be fined 10,000 rupees,” he said. “Christianity is considered an illegal religion in this state. So it was important for us to present to the government as a united body; that we are not divided.”

The enlarged ABCC comprises a sizeable membership of some 95,000 believers in more than 1,000 churches. Lama claimed that the Baptist community is substantially larger, at about 300,000. He intimated that membership may be deliberately under-reported to minimize fees, dues and payments.

“When I was general secretary of the Council of Baptist Churches in Northeast India, as soon as we passed a law that our membership fee will be based on church membership to one rupee per member, the next year the numbers reported went down,” he declared.

A challenge is to overcome unwillingness by local pastors to support the new paradigm and to meet the close scrutiny of the older guard. “It takes time,” Lama mused. Some members of “the older generation of leaders [are] still there. They’re watching us and they still have some influence.” The quest to forge unity and overcome lingering distrust continues.

To help build trust, there is a consideration that the position of ABCC general secretary will be rotated between candidates from the north and the south.

Training is now a major focus of ABCC, with plans to build a mission training center and a pastors’ training center, having one seminary. ABCC will continue its mission program, sending its own missionaries to other areas in India, such as the state of Assam.
The BWA is telling the United Nations it needs to raise the designated threat level for Nigeria and the Lake Chad Region. Declaring that the area is rife with conflict and dislocation, the BWA asserts that “violence, murder and kidnapping [have] directly impacted more than 14 million people with between three and five million being internally displaced.” This has resulted “in rampant malnutrition, leaving thousands of persons on the verge of starvation.”

The threat level, the BWA says, must be raised to Level 3, the “most severe large scale humanitarian crisis.” It notes that “people of faith and houses of worship have been intentionally targeted, including the damage or destruction of thousands of churches and numerous mosques.”

In addition, the BWA invites Baptists everywhere “to stand in solidarity with Nigeria and the Lake Chad Region, to pray for the development of transformative peace throughout the country and region and to actively work to build a context of justice, human rights, rule of law and religious freedom for all people.”

**New Members Received**

Three organizations were granted membership in the BWA by the General Council. One new country has been added to the BWA roster. Founded in 1984, the Grenada Baptist Association has six churches and 400 members. Grenada is the newest country in the Caribbean to join the BWA family.

The Arunachal Baptist Church Council in Arunachal Pradesh State in Northeast India, established in 2008, comprises 95,000 members in more than 1,000 churches. It grew out of a merger of two Baptist groups in the state, one in the north and the other in the south, and becomes the 21st BWA member from India.

The Faith Evangelical Baptist Church in South Sudan has 7,000 members in 74 churches in both South Sudan and Kenya. It was established in 2007 and is the second group from South Sudan to hold BWA membership.

The BWA now has 235 member organizations in 122 countries and territories.

**Divisional Portfolios Combined**

The divisions of Mission, Evangelism and Theological Reflection (METR) and Freedom and Justice (F&J) are to be combined. This was affirmed by the General Council after it was first approved by the Executive Committee in March.

“The person elected to succeed the current occupant of the METR director’s position will lead the Division on Mission, Evangelism and Justice (MEJ),” BWA General Secretary Neville Callam told the General Council.

METR Director Fausto Vasconcelos retired at the end of August after holding the position for a little more than 10 years. The F&J director’s position has been vacant since 2014 after Raimundo Barreto resigned to take up a professorship at Princeton Theological Seminary in New Jersey in the United States. F&J was the newest BWA division after it was formally created in 2008.

Both divisions are being merged for primarily financial reasons when pledged donor funds failed to materialize after the global financial crisis that emerged in 2008. “Both the BWA Budget and Finance and the BWA Human Resources Committees concurred on the fact that funds were not available to enable BWA to call a successor to the first F&J director,” Callam informed the General Council.

**Theological Dialogue**

A third round of theological dialogue is to begin with the Catholic Church in 2017. “On the basis of discussions between BWA and the Pontifical Council for Promoting Christian Unity (PCPCU), a third round of Baptist-Catholic dialogue will commence soon,” Callam wrote in his BWA report to the General Council.

In May, preparatory meetings were held between Baptist representatives Frank Rees of Australia, Paul Fiddes from the United Kingdom, and Timothy George of the United States, “with a team from the Catholic Church to consider the focus and methodology for the upcoming phase of the Baptist-Catholic dialogue,” Callam stated.

“This joint preparatory meeting decided that the next phase of dialogue, which could commence in June 2017, should have clear continuity with the first two phases and should focus on the subject of common witness to Jesus Christ,” Callam elaborated.

“A final statement on the purpose and plan for the upcoming dialogue is to be concluded in the near future.”

The first round of Baptist-Catholic dialogue occurred from 1984-1988 and the second round from 2006-2010. “We would be pleased to build on these two previous dialogues and explore new areas of discussion,” Cardinal Koch, president of the PCPCU, said in a letter to Callam in February. “These official dialogues were cause for great celebration and gratitude to God,” Koch declared.

A four-year dialogue between the BWA and the World Methodist Council is currently underway, which runs 2014-2017.

**Clarifying Relationships**

The formation of the Baptist Relief and Development Network, (BReaD), came in for intense discussion by the General Council after the general secretary presented an extensive report on the emergence of that organization.
Baptist World Alliance General Secretary Neville Callam made the first visit to Namibia by a BWA leader in August when he attended the 6th Assembly of the Baptist Convention of Namibia (BCN) in the tourist resort town of Swakopmund.

“What the people in Namibia wanted me to talk about were basic Baptist beliefs,” Callam explained. “What are the fundamental beliefs among Baptists and why do we believe these things? A rationale for what characterize Baptists as Baptists.”

Secondly, “they wanted me to talk about the history of the Baptist church, when did the Baptist movement begin? To characterize the spread of Baptist work around the world and help them to position themselves within the overall history of Baptists.”

In addition, “they wanted me to talk about leadership. What are some of the indices of responsible leadership?” They expressed a desire for “me to assist them in their own formation at the stage of development where they are.”

Callam explained that the requests came against the background of a lack of a theological educational institution for Baptists in Namibia; that the majority of the pastors did not benefit from theological education and training. “The convention has vast training needs,” Callam said. “They have no convention office and no paid convention staff.”

As a result, BCN lists its priorities as “teaching, preaching, educating, comforting and encouraging one another.” It has focused on leadership development and training through a series of leadership meetings and Youth Leaders Summits.

Sporadic Baptist ministry began in Namibia in about 1910, coming from South Africa, and lasting until 1959. This was after a long history of token Baptist presence in the country, beginning in the 1800s, with the arrival of German Baptists.

A greater level of organization occurred between 1959 and 1967 when government civil servants from South Africa, who were Baptists, were seconded to work in Namibia. More permanent ministry and church planting began in 1967, leading to the formation of the BCN in 1983.

Namibia was a dependent territory of South Africa and gained its independence in 1990, but South Africa held on to Walvis Bay and the surrounding region. Walvis Bay includes Namibia’s main port and only natural harbor and is an important center of tourism activity. The entire territory was returned to Namibia after Nelson Mandela became president of South Africa.

While in Namibia, Callam also spoke at the Lamb of God Baptist Church in Walvis Bay.
CALLAM ENCOURAGES BAPTISTS TO REMEMBER THOSE WHO LABOR IN THE FAITH

Baptist World Alliance General Secretary Neville Callam encouraged Christians to specially remember Christians who work and live in vulnerable circumstances.

The global Baptist leader, who was preaching at the worship service of First Baptist Church, Vancouver, in Canada, on July 3, made the case for Christian hospitality when he said, “we should treat our fellow Christians who are hungry or thirsty as we would treat Jesus.”

Callam acknowledged that Christians are to respond to all those on the margins, whether or not they are of the Christian faith. “Does Jesus tell us to take care of those in need? Of course he does. Might today’s poor be reckoned as Jesus’ own presence incognito? Certainly! Throughout the Scriptures, and especially in the Gospel according to Luke, we see Jesus identifying with those who are consigned to the fringes of society, those who are pushed to the periphery.”

However, there are Christians who are engaged in the enterprise of spreading the good news of Jesus Christ who need the prayer and support of their fellow believers. The response to their needs should be the same as Christians would respond to the needs of the incarnated Jesus.

“We should treat Christ’s messengers who are poorly clothed as we would treat Jesus,” Callam emphasized. “We should treat those fellow Christians who are ill – perhaps undergoing some physical condition occasioned by the mission they are on – as we would treat Jesus.”

Callam told the congregation that “Christians should be ready at all times to receive their fellow Christians who are messengers of the Gospel – that is, people who preach or teach the Gospel, people who bear witness to Christ – as we would receive Jesus himself.”

The congregation offered prayer that, through unity and love, Baptists may become “light to those who live in spiritual darkness” and that they “break down the barriers that divide.”

Baptists from around the world were in Vancouver for the BWA Annual Gathering from July 4-9. A number of participants worshiped and several preached at churches in the Vancouver area.

BWA APPOINTS COORDINATOR FOR MISSION AND JUSTICE

Trisha Miller Manarin of Virginia, in the United States, has been appointed Baptist World Alliance coordinator for the Division on Mission, Evangelism and Justice (MEJ).

The appointment was made by BWA General Secretary Neville Callam following a decision of the Executive Committee in Vancouver, Canada, in July that “the General Secretary will make interim staffing arrangements to continue the work of the BWA while the Executive Task Group does its work.”

The task group is to take a comprehensive look at BWA staffing and submit its recommendations not later than 2018. The general secretary can fill vacancies that arise on an interim basis.

Manarin commenced duties on September 1 upon the retirement of Fausto Vasconcelos, who was director of the Division on Mission, Evangelism and Theological Reflection (METR) from April 2006 to August 31 this year. She will work on a part time basis.

The MEJ division is a combination of METR and the division on Freedom and Justice (F&J), which has remained vacant since 2014 after Director Raimundo Barreto resigned to take up a professorship at Princeton Theological Seminary in New Jersey, in the US. F&J was the newest BWA division after it was formally created in 2008.

“Over the last nine years, I have gotten to know Trisha and her interest in, and commitment to, BWA and its mission,” Callam said. “Her intellectual gifts and her communications and organizational skills will prove helpful to the organization as we inaugurate the new Division on Mission, Evangelism and Justice.”

Manarin is executive coordinator for the Mid-Atlantic Cooperative Baptist Fellowship and director of supervised ministry and an adjunct professor at the John Leland Center for Theological Studies. She is a member of the BWA Commission on Mission and was elected a vice president of the North American Baptist Fellowship (NABF) in July 2018 after previously being NABF recording secretary.

She holds a degree in music education and vocal performance from Samford University in Alabama, a master’s degree from Eastern Baptist Theological Seminary (now Palmer Seminary) in Pennsylvania and a doctoral degree from Wesley Theological Seminary in Washington, DC, all in the United States.

Her husband, Tim, sits on the BWA Commission on Human Rights Advocacy. They are the parents of two sons and a daughter.
The Baptist World Alliance continues its support of a peacebuilding program in the New Dawn and Glory neighborhoods in the city of Buenaventura on Colombia’s Pacific coast, where rival gangs operate and often engage in violent clashes.

The Baptist World Aid funded program is a joint effort between the Baptist University of Cali (BUC) and Alpha and Omega Baptist Church, which had developed a project for youth and children in these neighborhoods.

In the first half of 2016, project coordinators Jorge Olivo and Carolina Botello visited the neighborhoods and held meetings at the church. Three training workshops in peace and conflict resolution were held, one each in February, March and April.

Job training in natural resources, including the cultivation of medicinal plants and crops for food, were conducted in June. In June and July, workshops were conducted under the direction of the wife and husband team of agronomists Amparo and Juan Carlos Angel. A number of sessions were planned to monitor the project, identifying difficulties and checking for solutions.

Several problems were identified. Family instability prevented some young people from continuing in the program while security concerns led to irregular attendance at meetings, affecting overall participation.

Workshops create other opportunities. The Alpha and Omega Church conducts weekly evangelism and youth-oriented discipleship activities. The church’s pastor, Hermin Riascos, a physical education teacher, coaches a football (soccer) team. Members of the team have shown commitment to the project and interest in church youth activities.

Training of leaders in project management continues, with a group selected to continue the process. Both Olivo and Botello, graduates of the BUC, have expressed interest in entering pastoral ministry and their future involvement in the project is thus uncertain. Other Baptist university students are being recruited to continue the program.
AFRICAN BAPTISTS PLAN FOR THE FUTURE

Delegates from countries across Africa gathered in Accra, Ghana, from August 24-27, for the Assembly of the All Africa Baptist Fellowship (AABF), one of six regional fellowships of the Baptist World Alliance.

Participants included BWA President Paul Msiza and General Secretary Neville Callam. Callam, who brought greetings several times during the assembly, emphasized the meaning of membership within the global Baptist family.

“Any convention or union that joins the BWA needs to be at a place where that particular group affirms their belonging in the wide sweep, not only of Baptist history, but the Baptist movement currently,” Callam said of what he emphasized in his presentations. “I made the point that membership is sharing the vision, mission and priorities of the BWA, and how conventions and unions display seriousness about BWA membership, such as praying for the organization and practicing the values enshrined in the vision statement.”

Callam encouraged the several hundred delegates to make full use of BWA resources available through its website and to draw from the magazine, newsletter and press releases, “sharing them and discussing them within each convention, keeping up to date with what’s happening in the BWA.”

He emphasized the importance of observing and celebrating BWA Day, held the second Sunday of February each year, “not only among the leaders of the convention but among the rank and file members of the churches.”

This, he said, “would help create an awareness of the wider participation in the vision statement.”

GHANA TAKES RADICAL ROUTE

The Ghana Baptist Convention instituted radical changes to its administration in 2013 when it elected Ernest Adu-Gyamfi as its first executive president, abolishing the office of general secretary and disbanding the Executive Committee. Adu-Gyamfi, who is one of 12 vice presidents of the Baptist World Alliance, explained the reasons behind the radical move in an interview with the BWA.

The Ghana Baptist Convention has been in existence for 54 years. Prior to that, we existed as the Gold Coast Convention. The Baptist faith came into Ghana from around 1925, brought by Nigerians who were trading along the West African coast and who gathered in homes and garages to have fellowship on weekends. Gradually, they got Ghanaian integrated into the Baptist faith.

Since 1963, Ghanaian have been in control of Baptist work in Ghana. Currently we have 2,008 churches across the country, divided into four sectors. The northern sector comprises three regions – the northern region, the upper western and upper east. The mid-Ghana sector takes care of the Brong-Ahafo region and the Ashanti region. East sector takes care of the Volta region, the eastern region and the Greater Accra area. The southwest sector takes care of the central region and the western region. Within these four sectors there are 30 associations across the country.

Administrative Changes

In the old system of administration and practice we had the Executive Committee, the general secretary and the various boards and committees. The general secretary acted on behalf of our annual sessions and the Executive Committee. Decisions taken at the annual session were implemented by the Executive Committee through the general secretary. By that process we noticed over a given period that the general secretary was not an initiator of any policy or direction.

The president who chaired the Executive Committee was not full time but held an honorary position. He just chaired the meeting; he was not a direct policy maker. Anything that came to either the general secretary or to the Executive Committee were issues that filtered from the annual session or a board or committee that made some recommendation.

We practiced this for several years and realized it was not very helpful, especially in the African context. The African by nature is used to a tribal head, a head of a family, a chief and a king. When you set up an African system without that leader you create chaos. The president chaired our meetings and after that he goes back to his church. The general secretary saw himself as just doing what the Executive Committee and the annual session anointed him to do. In between there was literally nothing.

After studying this for awhile we noticed that that process was not helpful. Rev. Kojo Osei-Wusuah, when his term as president came to an end in 2006, made the observation, after having served for a period of six years, that this was the weakness of the convention and proposed the new changes. After two years the issue came up again at one of our convention sessions. It was very clear we needed to go that way.

By this new arrangement the Executive Committee is abolished; the general secretary’s office is abolished. Everything is fused into the office of executive president. He is the leader of the convention, he’s the voice of the convention; he’s everything.

Recruiting and Succession

The recruiting process is totally different from the previous arrangement. In the previous arrangement the Nominating Committee just went and looked at the people, selected somebody, brought it, we voted. In the new arrangement, it is almost like recruiting the CEO of an organization. There is an application process. The application form alone is an 11-page document. I remember when I did mine, the whole thing came up to a 16-page document because of the information that is required. Besides that you are supposed to state clearly the vision you seek to run with when you come into office. What do you seek to achieve at the

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of local Baptists in the global movement and the significance of this for their own existence.”

African Baptists were also reminded of their fiduciary responsibilities to the BWA and the global Baptist movement through their financial and other contributions.

Gathered under the theme, “Jesus Christ, the door of Hope,” the 2016 AABF assembly was particularly concerned about longstanding political, social, and security issues on the continent, such as the threat posed by militant Islam in West Africa through the Boko Haram insurgency and the Fulani herdsmen militia, among others. Reports were received on work done to counter the Ebola epidemic and the impact of the outbreak.

Delegates saw the need to integrate Francophone countries more fully into the AABF and expressed a desire to improve AABF funding. A desire was expressed to establish Baptist work in underrepresented areas, such as the Comoros Islands in Southern Africa.

end of the period you’re going to be there and how do you intend to do those things?

The search committee looks at those things and based on all these things they do their short listing. There is a written paper to test how you can instantly think on your feet and be able to make decisions. There is an oral, face to face interview that takes a minimum of an hour and a half. This is a very rigorous process in selecting an individual. Once that selection is done we expect that what you said will be your vision will be translated into real action. Fortunately I’ve been the first person to be in this seat. I began in early January 2014.

I do understand it goes with a lot of risk. That is why the Search Committee is very, very careful in what they’re looking for. In the previous arrangement we were looking at someone who had a pastoral background. Now we are looking at not only pastoral background but a leader and manager. I have realized this is more of an administrative role than a pastoral role. If you don’t have the skill of doing that you pose a big risk.

The advantage I brought to the job was the fact that I trained as an accountant and practiced as an accountant for several years. I came into corporate circles and ran my own business for 19 years. I pastored a church for 25 years. It’s a mixture of my corporate experience, accounting practice and ministry life, which is not normal with a lot of pastors. Bringing all those together makes a big difference in the current portfolio that I hold within the convention.

It raises a challenge. Can we always find somebody with the same background? It’s a real challenge. One of my vice presidents, the vice president of administration, comes with a similar background. We’re hoping that we’re in a process of recruiting a lot more people intentionally to give them similar background training so that for the future of our convention we can have that kind of succession. We are recruiting a lot of our young graduates, bringing them into a masters program, a doctoral program, systematically bringing people in so that we can train a lot of people who have the skills to provide that kind of leadership. That is the path we have chosen.

Efforts are being made to address the shortage of educational material, such as Sunday School lessons, in parts of Africa. BWA regional secretary for Africa and AABF general secretary, Duro Ayanrinola, reported on leadership training seminars and writers conferences held in various regions. “Some of these materials were written and developed by indigenous people who partook in the training programs,” an AABF report states.

The settling of differences and conflicts among Baptists received the attention of the AABF leadership. “Many crises have been resolved and peace has returned to most of the affected conventions and unions,” AABF declared.

New leadership were elected and installed in a ceremony presided over by Callam. Among those elected were Ernest Adu-Gyamfi of Ghana as president and vice presidents Angelo Scheepers of South Africa and Kakule Molo of the Democratic Republic of the Congo. Ayanrinola, from Nigeria, continues as AABF general secretary as well as Donald Ndichafah from Cameroon as associate general secretary/recording secretary, and Moses Adebayo of Nigeria as treasurer.
Ernest Adu-Gyamfi, president of the Ghana Baptist Convention and a vice president of the Baptist World Alliance, was elected chair of the Christian Council of Ghana. In July, he spoke of ecumenical relations in his country.

In April 2016 I was elected as the new chair of the Christian Council of Ghana, which consists of 16 denominations and parachurch organizations coming together to form the largest ecumenical body in the country.

The chair of the council presides at meetings and the various activities of the council. He’s also the voice of the council in making statements to the public, issuing statements to the Christian community and leading interactions with government officials.

Baptists have always been part of the council. [Baptist pastor] Fred Deegbe served 10 years as general secretary and finished his term a little over two years ago.

Projects and Programs

Projects and programs of the Ghana Christian Council include girl child education, advocacy for women and children, poverty alleviation programs and election monitoring.

Almost everybody looks to the Christian Council for guidance, for direction and for relief. Apart from politicians, everybody...
thinks the church should be the voice of the people – we have always been the voice of the voiceless. When it comes to advocacy on some political issues, whenever there’s crisis or any form of adversity, everybody looks up to the council. When politicians are misbehaving they expect that the voices of their pastors will be heard.

We work with UNHCR (Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees) in refugee relief. When Liberia had its civil war, most of the people came to Ghana. We’ve had refugees from Somalia. When Nigeria has a crisis a lot of people move into Ghana. The council provides food, shelter and counseling.

Nigeria and Ghana are both English speaking. Ghana is surrounded by French speaking countries. On the left, on the right, on top of us, all French. You need to cross through French countries to get to Nigeria. When Nigerians have a crisis it’s easier for them to come to Ghana because they can easily be understood, they feel integrated into our society. Probably about a million Nigerians have moved into Ghana because of Boko Haram. A lot of businesses have relocated to Ghana. Six banks in Nigeria have relocated. They come with their staff, with all their people.

All these things put a lot of pressure on the resources of the council. A major challenge is funding. We are over-stretched in the things we do. Those are becoming the major issues in terms of money and vehicles to do most of our work because we travel the length and breadth of our country in most of the projects we do.

Political Engagement

In preparation for elections [on December 7, 2016], we are doing election public education through public forums. We did one in Accra (the capital city) and are trying to do 19 more across the country to educate the public on what they need to know and understand about elections, their choice of the right people and the things they need to look out for.

In Africa it’s easy for politicians to pay their way through, bribe people, pay them money just to get them to vote. We are trying to educate the public to understand that it’s not just about the money you take now or collect from people but what it means to understand that your future is in your vote, the need to vote wisely so that we get the right people to lead us. These are things we do and it requires a lot of resources to be able to do that.

In some instances, we invite political leaders to the council executive meetings when we are not too clear about what is going on or when we seek clarification or more answers or explanation of issues. Depending on what the situation is we confront the government on certain issues. We invited the head of the police service, the electoral commissioner and several ministers of state to meetings, and when we do they do show up. We sit with them to explain to us what is going on, we share our views with them and we provide our position as a council.

Sometimes we issue communiqués in the newspaper, issue press releases and do press conferences. We are always looking out for those key things that would draw attention to what the country needs to look at. It draws the attention of the public to those critical issues that the government appears to be overlooking.

We also share in the presidential breakfast where they sometimes invite a group of ministers to the presidency. We have breakfast with them, they share with us what their concerns are and we pray with them. We provide council where necessary.

Because Ghana is 71 percent Christian, it implies that a lot of politicians are coming from our churches. We’re encouraging all the denominations to bring all the politicians in their congregations to a meeting, help them to understand that they are not in politics only because of their political party but they must recognize themselves as Christians first, what it means to live as a Christian politician.

The church is becoming much more involved in trying to bring these people together, let them know that as heads of the churches we are behind them in what they do but they need to represent Christ wherever they are. That is a positive sign, unlike in the past where we saw politics as dirty. We didn’t want to be involved and so we left them to do their own thing. I would think that now we need to get involved.

The Church of Pentecost has had one such meeting. My understanding is that it was very successful. They brought all of the politicians within that denomination together, held a full day meeting with them to dialogue on key issues and we asked all the other denominations to do the same.

Other Christian Groups

[In addition to the council] there are the Catholic Church; the Council of Pentecostal and Charismatic Churches, which brings together the Pentecostal and Charismatic churches; and the Independent Charismatic Churches. There are a few other, smaller groups. The Christian Council is the largest of all those councils because we have all the evangelical churches with us.

The council has a partnership with the Catholics. For instance, once every year we hold a joint meeting with the Catholic Bishops Conference. It’s a two-day meeting where we meet to discuss Christian work in Ghana, where we need to collaborate. We discuss issues about the country and what role the church ought to play. After those meetings we hold an ecumenical service between the Catholics and the Christian Council. The Catholics hosted this year. Next year the Christian Council will be hosting and we’ve been doing that for years.

We have another relationship with the Charismatic and Pentecostal Council. We had a similar thing [to the ecumenical service with the Catholics] just about a month ago. We are gradually trying to bring all the others together. They all feel comfortable working with the Christian Council.

BAPTIST LEADS ECUMENICAL ORGANIZATION IN NIGERIA

Samson Olasupo Ayokunle, president of the Nigerian Baptist Convention, was elected president of the Christian Association of Nigeria, the umbrella body for all Christians in Nigeria.

In July, he spoke of the role of the group in the West African country.

We have a population of about 80 million Christians in Nigeria. We had, from 1936, the Christian Council of Nigeria. Before that there was no association that brought Christians together. The Christian Council of Nigeria was a bloc of 15 mainline and evangelical denominations such as Anglican, Methodist, Baptist, Presbyterian, Lutheran, etc., that came together.

(Continued on next page)
In 1976 the military government called Christian leaders and told them of the need to begin to teach people about nationalism and patriotism, and they saw the church as the medium for doing that. It got the heads of churches together, including the Catholic Church, and sold the idea to them. It opened their eyes of the need for a Christian body. It was decided to form the Christian Association of Nigeria (CAN), an association of all the churches in Nigeria, formed by the Christian Council and the Catholic Church in Nigeria.

The Move to Full Ecumenism

Later they saw there were other denominations that didn’t belong that ought to be brought in, too. The African indigenous churches came together and formed the Organization of African Indigenous Churches. There was the Evangelical Church of West Africa, which has since been changed to the Evangelical Church Winning All, as well as about 13 denominations from the north.

CAN now comprises five distinct blocs. The first bloc is the Christian Council of Nigeria to which the Nigerian Baptist Convention belongs; the second is the Catholic Church of Nigeria, which stands on its own; the third is the Organization of African Indigenous Churches; the fourth is the TEKAN/ECWA bloc, the Evangelical Church Winning All; and the fifth is the Pentecostal Fellowship of Nigeria. All these came together to be what we call the Christian Association of Nigeria. There is no church that is excluded.

I was one of two candidates for the position of president and was elected in June. The other candidate was from the Organization of African Indigenous Churches and me from the Christian Council of Nigeria. The inauguration was held on July 19 during the CAN General Assembly. The term is for three years and can be renewed for a second term.

The Christian Association of Nigeria is a complex organization. You have to work with leaders of different traditions. That’s like opening Pandora’s Box itself. You have to have a mix of intelligence and be guided from above.

CAN is the organ or the mouthpiece for Christians in Nigeria, to defend their welfare, their rights before the government, to be the link between the church in Nigeria and the government. CAN participates in many national services that have to do with the nation, such as the Independence Day Service, the Armed Forces Remembrance Service and any other service that is national.

In conjunction with the Nigerian Christian Pilgrims Commission we plan trips to the Holy Land, Israel, yearly or twice in the year. Different groups go to strengthen and boost their faith. Faith becomes sight to let them know that the stories in the scriptures are not fables, they actually happened in history.

We liaise with government in planning these pilgrimages to the Holy Land.

CAN liaises with the National Assembly, the parliament, to make sure that the legislative process is in line with the constitution and that the secular nature of the nation is maintained. CAN guards against the passing of antireligious laws and speaks as the conscience of the nation when it matters. We advise those in leadership. Whenever there is a crisis the Christian houses of Nigeria call the political leaders together and offer them advice on what to do. It takes courage to be in this position. You must defend the truth, speak the truth. You must be the conscience of the nation. You must be courageous enough to stand for what is right.

Islamic Persecution

Nigeria has one of the highest concentrations of internally displaced persons (IDPs) in the world, though the world has not shown compassion toward them. The church in Nigeria cannot neglect their own. We ask the denominations to take responsibility for the different IDP camps by providing assistance and buying supplies.

One of the challenges facing the church in Nigeria is persecution from the Islamic faith. They have been killing our people, maiming our people. We are witnessing persecution as we have never witnessed it in our land. The situation is being neglected by the international community. The IDP situation in Nigeria is such that there is nowhere else for the people to go.

There is another group, cattle rustlers who are Muslims from the Fulani tribe. They speak Fulani, a Semitic language, as well as Hausa and are related to the Arabs and the Jews. They are from Northern Nigeria and are spreading all over West Africa. They don’t settle. These are men who herd and follow their cattle and sheep in the bush. They graze their animals on farmlands and consume everything that is cultivated by the farmers. Many are dislodged Boko Haram fighters from the north with AK47 rifles. The farmers don’t have weapons. At night Fulani herdsmen burn villages, most of which are Christian villages in the south. They are everywhere, as far south as Lagos. It’s a big problem in Nigeria.

The Nigeria Inter-Religious Council comprises Christians and Muslims. The head of the Muslims and the head of CAN are joint chairs of that council. They are in dialogue together on what will lead to peace. After we have consulted, both report to their respective members.

The World Council of Churches (WCC) has adopted Nigeria as a place for critical attention. In March this year they established an international interfaith center for Christians and Muslims to form a body that will foster peace in Nigeria. WCC will be paying the staff.
International Forum in Ukraine

Baptist World Alliance President Paul Msiza participated in the 2nd International Missionary Forum of the All-Ukrainian Union of Associations of Evangelical Christians-Baptists in Kiev, Ukraine, from August 26-27.

Msiza greeted forum delegates on behalf of the worldwide Baptist family. “It is very valuable to be here and experience how the evangelical faith, despite persecution and oppression, is spreading,” he said. “This International Missionary Forum is a testimony that God continues the great work of the gospel, which engendered a powerful evangelical movement (in Ukraine) beginning in the 18th century.”

The forum focused on spreading the gospel in Ukraine and beyond its borders. The approximate 2,000 participants included representatives from Germany, Czech Republic, Portugal, Poland, Egypt, Canada and the United States. Ukrainian missionaries serving in Papua New Guinea, the Caucasus, the Middle East and Western Europe also attended.

There was an analysis of the union’s mission work and an examination of ways to establish support systems for missionaries who work in and out of Ukraine. Local churches were encouraged to be open to the possibility of missionary work for every member and that churches regard mission work as a priority. Local congregations were urged to be more aware of the mission call to reach Ukrainians and to not be indifferent to the salvation needs of other nations.

The theme, “Thy kingdom come!” was extensively discussed and explored through reports, music, video presentations, sermons and seminars. Special prayer was offered for missionaries who work in other countries and who are financially and prayerfully supported by the churches in Ukraine. Prayerful support was offered for the work being done for soldiers and their families through military chaplaincy and social services to widows, orphans, wounded and disabled veterans.

Plans were announced to establish at least 50 new churches in the regional centers and large cities of Ukraine.

During the 25 years of Ukraine’s independence, from 1991-2016, the union, which brings together Evangelical and Baptist churches in Ukraine, planted 1,096 new congregations. It now comprises 2,284 churches and 341 church groups, with a total membership of 115,000.

“The evangelical faith, despite persecution and oppression, is spreading.” — Paul Msiza

Baptist World Alliance President Paul Msiza led a Baptist delegation that met with the president of Ukraine, Petro Poroshenko, in August.

The meeting formed the occasion for the signing of a decree by Poroshenko “on the celebration of the 500th Anniversary of the Reformation in Ukraine.”

The anniversary, a global celebration, has been ongoing and will culminate, in most instances, in 2017. It marks the posting of the 95 theses by Martin Luther on the door of the Wittenberg Church in Germany, in October 1517. That act kicked off the Protestant movement, which led to one of the major breaches in Christianity.

The Ukraine decree is recognition of the significance of Protestant Christianity, including Baptists, to the Eastern European country and allows for the use of public buildings for the celebrations.

Support for the decree was granted by the Ukrainian Religious Council, which includes leaders of churches as well as representatives of the Jewish and Muslim communities. Its current chair is Valeriy Antounek, president of the All-Ukrainian Union of Associations of Evangelical Christians-Baptists.

President Poroshenko stressed the importance of the decree, which demonstrates the government’s cooperation with Protestant and other religious organizations. He noted that Ukraine is a multi-confessional country and described the creation of the Ukrainian Council of Churches as an important development for the country. This, he said, helps to ensure peace and harmony between the various faiths.

The Ukraine leader expressed a desire for chaplains of various faith traditions within the armed forces who can provide pastoral care. “It is important to ensure a high moral and psychological climate for those who stay immediately on the frontline,” he said.

Msiza thanked Poroshenko for his support and wished the people of Ukraine peace, stability and prosperity. He noted that the Ukraine Baptist union is one of the largest member bodies in the European Baptist Federation (EBF). The EBF is one of six regional fellowships of the BWA.

“We are here today to show solidarity with the Ukrainians,” Msiza emphasized. “Our hearts are broken by human tragedies and conflicts, especially which Ukraine is experiencing at the present time.”

Accompanying Msiza were EBF President Asatur Nahapetyan, Vice President Jenni Entrican and General Secretary Tony Peck. They were in Ukraine to attend the Second Missionary Forum of the Baptist union, participating in several sessions.
More than 40 persons gathered from June 22-25, on the campus of Acadia University, Nova Scotia, in Canada, for the 17th International Believers’ Church Conference. The theme was “The Tendency Toward Separation.”

The conference marked the renewal of the Believers’ Church conference series that originated in 1967. Conference papers ranged from broad historical, theological and sociological presentations to specific denominational and regional case studies.

With representations from the Baptist, Mennonite and Disciple/Stone-Campbell traditions, the gathering included participants from groups that were not ordinarily part of the earlier Believers’ Church gatherings. These include European Baptists, Hutterites, African American Baptists and Pentecostals. This was the first Hutterites had attended.

Major addresses were given by Martin Rothkegel (Germany), Karen Smith (Wales), David Goatley (US), John Roth (US), Teun van der Leer, (Netherlands), Allison McGregor (Canada), William Brackney (Canada), Paul Wipf (Canada) and Douglas Foster (US). Keynote speaker was Eileen Barker of the London School of Economics.

The separationist (or “Come-Outer”) tendency has been a significant theme in the Believers’ Church tradition, both historically and in churches today, first noted in modern times by Franklin Littell. Believers’ Church groups began as renewal movements within a larger tradition that led to a clear break, according to John Roth, a participant and co-author of the Findings Report. Even as participants celebrated the theological distinctives, Roth observed, participants noted ethical and ecclesial convictions that birthed Believers’ Churches, sometimes at great cost to early members.

These include the quest for holiness and purity of ideals, which has often resulted in separation, division and lack of clarity about the locus of authority; a commitment to the primacy of the local congregation has led to a weak theology of the church in its broader expressions and an overly negative view of ecumenism; a focus on religious voluntarism and response to religious liberty can easily become confused with modern individualism and autonomy; and the perfectionist and sectarian impulses in the Believers’ Church tradition can foster a tendency to self-sufficiency that can be narrow, schismatic and even idolatrous.

Ongoing challenges among Believers’ Churches include a more robust understanding of the nature of the church beyond the local congregation, greater attention to the nature of power and competing claims of authority and a clearer theology of church unity.

The next International Believers’ Church Conference will be at Goshen College, Indiana, in the United States, from September 14-16, 2017. The theme will be “Word, Spirit and the Renewal of the Church: Believers’ Church, Ecumenical and Global Perspectives.”

Elijah Brown of the United States was elected Baptist World Alliance regional secretary for North America and general secretary of the North American Baptist Fellowship, one of six regional fellowships of the BWA. NABF has 30 member organizations with total membership of approximately 15 million.

Brown, who assumed his position on October 1, is executive vice president of the 21st Century Wilberforce Initiative, a human rights and religious freedom advocacy group. Brown succeeds George Bullard who held the positions beginning August 1, 2009.

He is vice chair of the BWA Commission on Religious Liberty and a member of the Commission on Religious Education, the Freedom and Justice Advisory Committee, the Constitution and Bylaws Committee and the Nominations Committee. In 2007, Brown was named one of 35 global emerging leaders by the BWA.

Prior to joining Wilberforce, Brown was associate professor of religion at East Texas Baptist University where he was founding director of the Freedom Center. He is a graduate of University of Mary Hardin-Baylor in Texas and did graduate studies at the University of Edinburgh in Scotland.

Other leaders were elected along with Brown at the June 2016 NABF Annual Gathering, including Samuel Tolbert, pastor of Greater St. Mary Missionary Baptist Church in Louisiana and president of the National Baptist Convention of America, as president. Tolbert succeeds Jim Hill, executive director of the Baptist General Convention of Missouri (Churchnet).

Newly elected NABF vice presidents are Jeremy Bell, executive minister of the Canadian Baptists of Western Canada; Trisha Miller Manarin, coordinator of Mid-Atlantic Cooperative Baptist Fellowship; and Albert Reyes, president of Buckner International. Robert Cochran, executive director of the District of Columbia Baptist Convention, serves as treasurer.

Brown’s position as BWA regional secretary for North America was confirmed during the Annual Gathering in Vancouver, Canada, in July.
BAPTISTS RESPOND TO DISASTERS IN THE UNITED STATES

Baptists were among the many groups that responded to the series of disasters affecting parts of the United States.

Over several months, multiple wildfires burned in a number of western states, including Idaho and California, consuming hundreds of thousands of acres, destroying homes and businesses and endangering others. In California alone, more than 1,500 firefighters battled the flames at one time, supported by aerial firefighting through the use of aircraft.

In August, prolonged rainfall caused historic flooding in the state of Louisiana, submerging thousands of houses and businesses, forcing thousands of people to escape the damage. This followed widespread and damaging floods in the Houston area of Texas earlier in the year.

Tornadoes touched down in a number of Southern and Midwestern states, levelling dwellings and devastating communities.

Dozens of lives have been lost and thousands have been displaced from their homes. Damage has been estimated in the hundreds of millions of dollars.

Baptists responded through cleanup activities and the provision of meals, clothing and other supplies, temporary shelter, chaplaincy services and trauma counseling.

In light of the spate of natural crises, a number of groups made preparations to continue their relief and recovery activities through October or beyond.

Among the responders were North Carolina Baptist Men and Women’s Disaster Relief Ministry, Texas Baptist Men and the Baptist General Association of Virginia.

The National Baptist Convention of America (NBCA) and Lott Carey Baptist Foreign Mission Society partnered with the American Red Cross to form a Disaster Services Network (DSN), wherein Lott Carey and NBCA helped vulnerable communities to prepare for, respond to and recover from theses and other largescale disasters.

The DSN aims to educate congregations and communities toward effective disaster preparedness, encourage congregations to recruit and train volunteers to participate in disaster response, recruit churches to become certified shelters for vulnerable populations, provide spiritual care and case management in communities of color and facilitate effective church and community philanthropy in response to disasters.

BAPTISTS JOINED OTHERS IN MISSION DURING RIO SUMMER GAMES

Baptists, along with other Christian traditions in Brazil, engaged in mission outreach to the city of Rio de Janeiro and its visitors during the 2016 Summer Olympics and Paralympics. The Olympic Games formally ran from August 5-21 while the Paralympics was held September 7-18.

More than 11,000 athletes from 206 National Olympic Committees participated in the Summer Olympics.

Dubbed Open Arms Movement (Movimento Braços Abertos) or MBA, the mission initiative sought to connect and coordinate “the involvement of evangelical churches and agencies in the proclamation of gospel before and during the great sport events that will take place in the city of Rio de Janeiro in 2016.”

Declaring that “the Body of Christ will have a unique opportunity,” persons were encouraged to volunteer through prayer, training, giving and active witnessing.

It was a “unique opportunity to do missionary work or cross-cultural evangelism . . . and to proclaim the love of God in a culturally relevant way for those who are coming from other countries, including those countries considered closed to the gospel,” the planners stated.

In preparation, prayer vigils were held on the second Friday of each month. “Christians from different churches, evangelical organizations and missionary agencies [gathered] at the sanctuary of a different church denomination.” Vigils were held throughout the night, from 10:00 p.m. until 6:00 a.m.

“We pray for Rio de Janeiro city and state, Brazil, and everything else we are going to do,” the organizers stated.

Participating groups included the Carioca (City of Rio) Baptist Convention, part of the Brazilian Baptist Convention, the Salvation Army, the Assemblies of God, other Christian traditions, mission agencies, parachurch groups and Christian athletes’ organizations.

MBA reported that during the Olympic Games, “more than 1,500 volunteers shared the love of God with more than one hundred thousand people.” The group insisted that though the Olympics were over, the work was not. “The nations are still in need of our intercession. You can contribute to the formation of a new generation of intercessors of the church, teaching children to pray by the people.”

Baptist church groups from outside Brazil, such as the Seventh Day Baptist Missionary Society and Friendship Missionary Baptist Church (FMBC) in Charlotte, North Carolina, in the United States, also planned short term mission trips to Rio to coincide with the Games.

“We are having an amazingly awesome time here in Rio witnessing for Jesus as well as attending some Olympic events,” said Patricia Smith of FMBC. “We did prayer walks in favela neighborhoods. Our sports coordinator led various games. We are going to Copacabana Beach to share the gospel.”
FIJI BAPTISTS COMING TOGETHER

2016 is a watershed year for Baptists in Fiji. Two developments led the 14 congregations to cooperate more with each other, unlike what transpired in the past.

The Asia Pacific Baptist Federation (APBF), one of six regional fellowships of the Baptist World Alliance, held its annual Executive Committee meeting as well as a Pacific Baptist forum and leadership conference from February 1-3 in Suva, the capital city of the archipelago. The conference brought together 100 local Fiji Baptist delegates and 60 other Baptists from 16 other countries, including leaders from Hawaii of the United States. The gathering focused on mission, leadership development, women and youth ministry, Christian education and relief and development, among other topics.

Disaster and tragedy in the form of Cyclone Winston on February 20, just two weeks following the APBF gathering, provided further impetus for Fiji Baptists to collaborate.

The cyclone “got us together,” explained Fine Akosita Ditoka of the Fiji Baptist Convention (FBC). “It got the whole FBC to work together in response to Cyclone Winston.” Despite the loss, she described it as “a blessing that we had this because everybody came together. We put aside all our differences and we responded quickly.”

The new togetherness is evidenced in efforts to reorganize the secretariat. “It was an opportunity to set up our secretariat office,” stated Ditoka, who acted as a volunteer consultant in the process. “We didn’t have any. We never had an office. There was never a national office.”

The cyclone “got us together. . . . We put aside all our differences and we responded quickly.”

FBC leaders, including its president and general secretary, did their duties out of their respective homes or churches.

New offices for FBC were opened in early March. Ditoka identified capacity building and staff development as among the chief needs of FBC. “We want to strengthen that capacity,” she said. “We’re all volunteers. If you want something done then you’ve got to have resources.”

She expressed hope. “I envision Fiji Baptist Convention coordinating big things. We’ve seen God’s hand move, even from out of nothing. Things are coming along and we know it’s going to grow.”

FIJI BAPTISTS ASSIST CYCLONE VICTIMS

In February, Fiji and other island nations and territories of the South Pacific experienced a storm of a magnitude they had never seen before, leaving a trail of destruction that the areas affected are still recovering from.

Winston, a category five cyclone, was the strongest tropical cyclone to make landfall in Fiji and the South Pacific Basin in recorded history. It also affected Vanuatu, Tonga, Niue and Queensland in Australia.

Winston left 44 dead and caused approximately US$1.4 billion in damage, making it the costliest cyclone in South Pacific history. Two Baptist churches were destroyed and several others sustained damage. About 40 Baptist families lost their homes.

Baptists in Fiji, who have a history of not cooperating closely, saw the need to collaborate to bring about an effective and credible response.

Fine Akosita Ditoka, a former high ranking member in the country’s foreign ministry and a volunteer consultant with the Fiji Baptist Convention, explained that Koro Island, one of the 110 permanently inhabited islands of the Fiji archipelago, was particularly devastated. “The eye of the cyclone passed by Koro Island,” Ditoka said. The cyclone “really hit it.”

The displaced victims on Koro Island took refuge with relatives close to the Baptist church, and it was from that base that Baptists engaged in a concerted response. “We invited them. That’s just how it started.”

There was a gathering at the church every Monday at 10 a.m. “It was a time of prayer; just praying. They were helpless. They didn’t have anything. Everything was taken away from them. Their homes. . . . You should hear the testimonies.”

Ditoka said it was important that attention was paid to the spiritual needs. “That’s important. Every other thing will come later.”

Trauma counseling was a great need, and it helped to bring healing. In collaboration with partners in Australia and Israel, as well as from the Asia Pacific Baptist Federation, Fiji Baptists provided assistance to victims on Koro Island and elsewhere, particularly to female victims of the cyclone.

Fiji Baptist women within the seven churches in Silver City collected supplies such as clothing and food items and visited affected areas in the Rakiraki district on the northeast side of Viti Levu, the largest island in the Fiji Republic, where two Baptist churches are.

Visits were made to villages and various communities, some in difficult terrain, and assessment reports were prepared and submitted. Working closely with partner organizations, Fiji Baptist Convention and personnel learned about risk management.

The process led to an understanding as to how connected they were. Even for those not directly affected, “we have relatives, friends and friends of families who were really affected by this tropical cyclone,” Ditoka said.
MINISTERING TO IMMIGRANTS IN POLAND

By Maksym Sliazin

The Slavic Centre of Mission and Integration (SCMI) of the Baptist Union of Poland (BUP) prepares missionaries to serve in Polish churches and to reach out to immigrants. It creates Russian-speaking communities within BUP churches and engages in integration and evangelism projects.

Two years ago I moved to Poland because of the war in Eastern Ukraine. There are more than 1.5 million Ukrainians in Poland and the number is growing.

My family has come through a lot of difficulties during adaptation to new circumstances. Therefore, the matter of integration is not a theory for me. I’m experiencing its necessity every single day of my life. The Lord put a passion for integration ministry in my heart.

That passion turned into an actual ministry. At the beginning of 2015 we created a Russian-speaking community within the First Baptist Church of Gdansk. This year we started the work of SCMI under the BUP and the supervision of its president, Mateusz Wichary. Our goal is to help both Polish churches and immigrants to build relationships. We believe that those mutual efforts will bear incredible fruit for the Kingdom of God.

We made some achievements. We trained the first set of missionaries, organized the First Ukrainian Mission Conference in Warsaw, and published a book called Gdansk Project of Integration, among other things.

We understand the huge number of things we need to do. We would like to see the growth of Polish Baptist churches and fulfill God’s will of spreading the gospel. We want to be good instruments in God’s hand. We believe that the Lord Jesus sets specific tasks before us. We hope to be fully faithful to His will.

Maksym Sliazin is coordinator of Ukrainian Ministry in the Baptist Union of Poland and director of the Slavic Centre of Mission and Integration.

Left: Members of the Ukrainian community attending the 2016 Easter celebration at First Baptist Church, Gdansk, Poland (Photo courtesy of FBC, Gdansk)

YOUTH IN ISRAEL DISTRIBUTE WATER DURING RAMADAN

By Bader Mansour

The youth group at the Nazareth Baptist Church in Israel, was looking for an opportunity to do outreach in their community. They knew they needed to begin by showing interest in the needs of the people. Since most people in Nazareth are Muslim who were observing the 30-day Ramadan feast (June 5-July 5), the church youth decided to show the love of Christ in a creative way to those who were fasting.

While Muslims were rushing to their homes around sunset after a long day of fasting in the heat of the summer, the church youth were waiting for them near the Nazareth city center with cool bottles of water and some sweets. The gesture was very well received by the community, and a video of the distribution went viral on social media. The Baptist community in Nazareth, one of the smallest Christian groups in town, was praised by both local Christians and Muslims.

More than 80,000 people live in Nazareth, the largest Arab town in Israel. Around 70 percent of the population is Muslim, and the rest are Christian. Relations between both groups have been good in recent years. However, a few meters away from the same spot where the youth distributed the water and the sweets, a big dispute occurred between Christians and Muslims in the year 2000.

Muslims wanted to erect a large mosque in front of the Church of the Annunciation, while the Christians opposed it. The dispute became violent, resulting in the two communities boycotting each other’s businesses for some time. The mosque building project was halted after government intervention, but it has taken several years for the community to heal.

Many people saw the youth group’s act of kindness as one more step toward building trust between Christians and Muslims in Nazareth.

Bader Mansour is development officer for the Association of Baptist Churches in Israel.

The Baptist youth in Nazareth, Israel, distributing water and sweets at the end of each fast day during Ramadan, observed by Muslims worldwide (Photo courtesy of Association of Baptist Churches in Israel)
The Lebanese Society for Educational & Social Development (LSESD), in partnership with World Vision, has formulated a project to address the issues of gender based violence (GBV) and sexual gender based violence (SGBV) in Lebanon, using the Channels of Hope for Gender model of addressing gender issues through biblical and Christian interpretation.

Religious leaders are often great catalysts for positive change within their communities. They play an important role in raising awareness and promoting best practices for preventing and reducing GBV and SGBV. Therefore, the project is aimed at improving the capacity of church leaders to respond to such issues.

The project encouraged churches to start activities to strengthen the relationships of refugee couples. Over a six-week period, men and women had separate counseling sessions and were encouraged to do things together as a couple to strengthen their marriage. Some couples went out for a meal at a restaurant, while at one church there was a cooking competition where husbands cooked for their wives. This was done primarily so that husbands took on roles that are characterized as only for women, and that the husband would get a sense of how hard their wives work at home.

As a result of the workshops, counseling and activities conducted by the churches, the lives of 75 Syrian refugee couples are forever changed. Participants vividly described this change.

One woman said, “When we took the training and teachings about forgiveness, we saw a lot of changes in our relationship and lives.”

A husband commented, “I heard this story once: Someone asked about what the role of a wife is. Some said it is to cook and others said it is to clean and take care of the house. But I answered, ‘You are all wrong! She is the crown to be placed on top of one’s head.’”

And a woman who was severely abused physically and emotionally by her husband said, “Jesus Christ changed my life and I don’t know where I would’ve been without him. The church is standing by me and I cannot thank them enough for that.”

A longer version of this article first appeared in the June-July 2016 newsletter of the Lebanese Society for Educational & Social Development.
RESPONDING IN A TIME OF WAR:  
THE IMPACT OF THE CHURCH  
INSIDE SYRIA  

By Suzie Lahoud

In the midst of headlines from inside Syria, filled with unthinkable violence and horrific carnage, another, more hopeful story has been quietly unfolding since the onset of the crisis. It is the story of churches that have responded to the humanitarian imperative and call of God, and have been laboring tirelessly since the beginning to meet urgent needs on the ground.

Year after year they have worked to provide continuous food assistance to families with empty cupboards on the verge of starvation. In the cold winter months they have visited families who were burning sticks to keep warm, offering blankets, mattresses and fuel for their stoves. They have dug wells in besieged areas when water supplies were cut off as an unlawful act of war. They have paraded with singing children through bombed-out streets determined that even now, the voices of future generations cannot be silenced. They have offered words of encouragement, words of prayer and psychosocial support for the comfort and healing of people who have lost everything that they once held dear. They remain the pillars of faith in the midst of this turmoil and they have not closed their hands to those who are in need (Deut. 15:11).

The impact of this witness has been astounding. Although not all churches have seen growth in their congregation numbers, all have witnessed a transformation in society’s view of the church as an ezer – a help in time of great need. This shift in perception has been particularly striking for churches that have chosen to reach across sectarian lines in providing assistance, caring for the Shi’a, Sunni, Alawite and Yazidi as much as for their own.

Moreover, in some cases, the common mission has helped to unite churches across traditional and denominational boundaries that previously separated them. Many churches have chosen to coordinate and to work hand-in-hand, openly acknowledging that the task is too great for any one community of faith on its own.

Additionally, this work has been a great source of hope, not only for those on the receiving end, but also for those who are serving. Courageous souls who feel called to this ministry have chosen to remain inside Syria despite the danger and uncertainty that has enveloped their country. They actively refuse offers of asylum and safety elsewhere as they believe that the Kingdom of God is at hand. It is present in the work that they are doing. Why would they leave at such a time as this?

Over the past four years, the Lebanese Society for Educational and Social Development has been privileged to partner with over 20 churches from various confessions and denominations to help provide assistance to over 6,000 families inside Syria. This joint relief response has included ongoing food assistance and hygiene kit distribution in locations across the country, well-digging projects in besieged areas, annual winterization projects providing heating essentials in the cold winter months and child friendly spaces where war affected children can receive psychosocial support along with experiencing the right to play.

While implementing these initiatives, LSESD’s church partners have gone above and beyond in not only offering life-saving support, but likewise providing a loving community and safe haven for vulnerable families who have been battered by the storm.

This article first appeared in the June-July 2016 newsletter of the Lebanese Society for Educational & Social Development.

Right: A Christmas celebration for children in a bombed-out portion of a major city inside Syria

BOOK NOTES

Frank Rees, Editor, Baptist Identity into the 21st Century: Essays in Honour of Ken Manley, Whitley College, 2016

Rachel Lateju, Prices and Prizes of Christian Leadership, Danobish Creative Printers, 2015

Craig Keener and Medine Moussounga Keener, Impossible Love: The True Story of an African Civil War, Miracles and Hope Against all Odds, Chosen, 2016

Photo courtesy of LSESD
Lien Hwa Chow, former president of the Asia Baptist Graduate Theological Seminary (ABGTS), died on August 6, in Taiwan. He was 96 years old.

Chow was one of the leading Baptist theologians and theological educators on the Asian continent, serving in academia for much of his adult life.

He was professor at Taiwan Baptist Theological Seminary from 1954-1985 and president of ABGTS, a consortium of nine seminaries in eight countries, from 1995-2004.

He pastored Grace Baptist Church in Taipei, Taiwan’s capital, between 1954 and 1985.

Chow was a longstanding member of the Baptist World Alliance General Council and served on the BWA Commission on Religious Liberty and Human Rights and the Commission on Doctrine and Interchurch Cooperation.

Born in Shanghai, China, he was the author of more than 50 books, mostly in Chinese. He was a translator of the Today’s Chinese Version of the Bible, was chair and translator of both the Revision of Union Version and the Interconfessional (Catholic and Protestant) Bible and chief editor and author of the Chinese Bible Commentary series.

Chow was chair of the Board of Directors of Tunghai University, the first private and the second oldest university in Taiwan, on three occasions in the 1950s, 60s and 90s; chair of the Board of Directors for World Vision Taiwan between 1990 and 2004; and was a member of the Board of Directors of World Vision International from 1992-2003, being the chair of its auditing committee between 2000 and 2003.

He was a longtime chaplain to Chiang Kai-shek, former leader of Taiwan, and his family.

Chow held degrees from the University of Shanghai in China, and Southern Baptist Theological Seminary in the United States; was a visiting scholar at Princeton Theological Seminary in the US, and at Regents Park College of Oxford University in the United Kingdom; and was conferred with honorary doctorates by Samford University and Mercer University, both in the US.

He was predeceased by his wife, Marie Yuan, in 2009. He leaves sons, Joel, John and Joshua.

Desmond Hoffmeister, former general secretary of the Baptist Convention of South Africa (BCSA), died on August 20, at 56 years old.

At the time of his passing, he was pastor of Granada Hills Baptist Church in California in the United States, and served five years as executive minister for American Baptist Churches of the Rocky Mountains.

In 1989, Hoffmeister led a protest walkout during the Annual Assembly of the Baptist Union of Southern Africa, which was being held in a military barracks. He joined the BCSA that same year, becoming its general secretary in 1994 and serving until 1999.

He pastored the Ennerdale Baptist Church in a black township in Johannesburg during which time he became involved in the anti-apartheid struggle and in peacemaking initiatives. In 1998, he started Bethany Baptist Church, the first black-led inner-city Baptist church in Johannesburg, which includes members from South Africa and other African countries.

As BCSA general secretary, Hoffmeister led the group’s churches to develop initiatives in economic and community development as well as theological education. He played a pivotal role in the reconciliation process between black and white South African Baptists, calling for a historical reckoning of the white group’s complicity in apartheid before true reconciliation could occur. He participated in the South African Church Leaders Forum and was a founding member of the National Religious Leaders Forum.

Upon moving to the US in 1999, Hoffmeister became the Drexler Scholar-in-Residence at the American Baptist Seminary of the West and was appointed a NEW LIFE missionary by National Ministries of the American Baptist Churches USA. He was called as pastor of Granada Hills Baptist Church in 2009.

Hoffmeister was involved with the Baptist World Alliance in a number of capacities, including as a member of the General Council, the Executive Committee, the Baptist World Aid Committee, the Resolutions Committee, the Congress Program Committee and the Membership Committee; as well as vice chair of the Commission on Church Leadership and member of the Commission on Baptists Against Racism.

Born in Cape Town, South Africa, he held degrees and diplomas from the Baptist Theological College of Southern Africa and the American Baptist Seminary of the West.

Funeral service was held September 2 at First Presbyterian Church of Granada Hills.

He leaves wife, Beverley; and children, Sherwyn, Candice and Carmen.

Trevor Spicer, national treasurer of Australian Baptist Ministries for 15 years, died on February 26.

An accounting professional, Spicer’s leadership extended locally in the Diamond Valley Baptist Church in Melbourne, regionally in the Baptist Union of Victoria (BUV), nationally through Crossover and Australian Baptist Ministries, and globally through the Asia Pacific Baptist Federation and the Baptist World Alliance.

At the Diamond Valley Baptist Church, Spicer was chair of the Church Council. He chaired the BUV’s Council for three years and was director of its Administrative Services. He held roles with the Baptist Financial Services, the Leprosy Mission and Mobile Mission Maintenance.

After eight years of service with the BUV, Spicer moved on to Global Interaction, formerly Australian Baptist Missionary Society, and introduced a range of new processes that enhanced Global Interaction’s ministries. He provided pastoral care visits to Global Interaction staff in Kazakhstan, China, Thailand, Indonesia, Hong Kong, Malawi, Mozambique, Zimbabwe, and Outback Australia.

Spicer was a former member of the BWA General Council, the Executive Committee, the Budget and Finance Committee, the Congress Committee, the Commission on Baptist Worship and Spirituality, the Commission on Religious Liberty and the Commission on Church Leadership. He was floor event manager at the Baptist World Congress in Melbourne in 2000.

A Certified Public Accountant, he had specialty skills in finance, strategic planning, risk management and governance. He was a member of the Australian Institute of
Roger Fredrikson, president of American Baptist Churches USA (ABCUSA) from 1970 to 1971, died June 16 in Sioux Falls, South Dakota, in the United States, after a short time in hospice care. He was 95.

Prior to being ABCUSA president, he was vice president from 1960-61; president of the National Baptist Youth Fellowship from 1944-46; president and chair for the Board of Managers, Board of Education and Publication; and chair of the Committee of Seventeen, which studied and made recommendations for theological education in ABCUSA.

He served the Baptist World Alliance in several capacities, including on its Executive Committee, the Youth Committee, the Long Range Planning Committee, the Memorial Committee, the Promotion and Development Committee, the Church Health and Effectiveness Workgroup, the Mission and Evangelism Workgroup and the Commission on Baptist Worship and Spirituality.

In the early years of the World Council of Churches, he was a member of its Youth Committee. In 1948, he was the youth representative of ABCUSA to the foundational meeting of the World Council of Churches in Amsterdam, Netherlands.

Fredrikson was an advocate for the church renewal movement nationally and was influential in Renovare, a national renewal organization.

He headed the Department of Religion and Philosophy at Ottawa University in Kansas, in the United States, from 1949-54, before becoming pastor at First Baptist Church in Ottawa. He served as pastor of First Baptist Church in Sioux Falls, in South Dakota, in the US, beginning in 1959 until 1975, and became pastor of First Baptist Church in Wichita, Kansas, where he remained until he retired in 1988.

Fredrikson was deeply concerned about social justice issues such as juvenile justice reform. During 1966-67, he chaired the Minnehaha County Citizens’ Committee on Problems of Youth, during which time the county voted to build a Juvenile Court Center, and was active in working at the Minnehaha County Juvenile Detention Center.

He helped to found Glory House, a halfway house initiative for men leaving prison, and was active in serving mental health and alcohol treatment centers in the area including the Carroll Institute for chemically dependent persons.

Canadian by birth, Fredrikson earned degrees and diplomas from Ottawa University, Andover-Newton Theological Seminary and Union Theological Seminary in New York City. He received honorary doctorate degrees from the University of Sioux Falls, Ottawa University in the state of Kansas, and Judson College in Illinois, in the US.

In 1989, Fredrikson received the Luke Mowbray Ecumenical Award from ABCUSA. He was predeceased by wife, Ruth, in 2003.

A memorial service was held June 24 at First Baptist Church, Sioux Falls.
Between 1986 and 2003, Jones was repeatedly named as one of the 100 most influential black Americans by Ebony Magazine and received numerous other awards and recognition.

Funeral services were held on June 16 and 17 at Galilee Baptist Church.

Jones is survived by wife, Leslie, sons, Deryl and E. Edward II, and daughters, Carolyn and Donna.

Chhangte Lal Rema, former head of mission and representative to the North Bank Baptist Christian Association (NBBCA) in India, died on August 3. He was 91 years old.

In January 1969, Rema left his government position to take over much of the mission work in Assam after the Indian government expelled western missionaries from the Northeast Indian region. He had turned down a position in the government’s Department of Defense in Delhi, India’s political capital, to do so. That government appointment covered oversight of all military construction in India, and his acceptance of the new role in the church was regarded as a personal and family sacrifice.

The invitation to take over the mission in Assam came from the Baptist General Conference, based in the United States, which had started work in the region in 1946. Assam was one of eight major provinces in India during British colonial rule but, in the 1970s, was broken up into several Indian states, including the state that still retains the name of the province.

Rema’s responsibilities included two hospitals, three clinics, several dispensaries, a nurses’ training school, two high schools, a boarding school and a radio ministry. An important achievement was his ability to register church properties in Assam, a task missionaries had previously failed to accomplish.

He founded and chaired the Evangelical Fellowship of India Committee on Relief and the North East India Committee on Relief and Development, organizations that have been involved in relief and development in Northeast India and have partnered with international nongovernmental organizations.

At least twice he made personal representation to former India Prime Minister Indira Gandhi on issues related to religious freedom and the status of Christians in Assam. Christian churches were attacked and burned, Christians were threatened or treated with physical violence and overseas workers faced expulsion.

Rema galvanized the Christian community in India to protest persecution and a legislative bill in Arunachal Pradesh state, aimed at Christians, which was introduced to prohibit conversion from one’s religion.

A longtime member of the Baptist World Aid Committee of the Baptist World Alliance, Rema also served on the BWA Commission on Christian Ethics, the Commission on Freedom and Justice, the World Evangelization Strategy Workgroup and the Evangelism and Mission Workgroup.

Prior to taking up his position as mission director, he was director of Panchayats (local self government) and Community Development in Assam and was later promoted to deputy development commissioner for the state. Rema was an Indian Administrative Service officer, a prestigious and selective title in India.

He held degrees and diplomas from St. Paul’s Cathedral College in Calcutta and Calcutta University, both in India; and the International College in Honolulu, Hawaii and Bethel Seminary in St. Paul, Minnesota, both in the United States. While a university student in India, he was active in Youth for Christ Ministries and student evangelization.

Funeral services were held at the Baptist Church of Shillong in Meghalaya state in India, on August 5, and in Aizawl in Assam state, on August 6.

He leaves wife, Hrangkungi, sons, David and John, and daughters, Lalrinpuii, Lalnutangi and Rothangliani, former director of Baptist World Aid.

Kenneth Norquist, a Baptist General Conference minister who was assigned by the Baptist World Alliance to oversee post-World War Two refugee relief in Europe, died on August 29 in Isanti, Minnesota, in the United States. He was 95 years old.

In 1950, Norquist was sent to Germany as the CRALOG (Council of Relief Agencies Licensed to Operate in Germany) representative for the BWA. CRALOG, comprising 11 relief agencies including the BWA, was a nongovernmental organization formed in the United States in 1946 to help coordinate relief efforts in Europe following the war.

Norquist worked closely with German Baptist Union leaders to setup relief and to identify refugees who may be resettled into Canada and the United States, as well as into West Germany, from Eastern Europe, that was particularly devastated by the war.

“Norquist estimated that 29,000 Baptist refugees had come to West Germany since 1945,” wrote James Enns in his 2012 dissertation for St. Edmund’s College of the University of Cambridge in the United Kingdom. He “believed that by working in harmony with the [West German] government’s economic resettlement incentives, the BWA would help bring a permanent solution to the ongoing relief needs of refugees and restoring a sense of dignity to their lives.”

Among Norquist’s responsibilities was a home the BWA had opened in Munich to care for aged and infirm Baptists who could not qualify for admittance to the US. The home was eventually transferred to the care of German Baptists.

He oversaw the construction of church buildings for refugee congregations and the rebuilding of existing churches. “Norquist argued that an important step in the resettlement process for Baptist refugees would be the provision of a church building of their own which could provide them with a sense of both stability and identity,” Enns wrote. “Since the government plan involved group resettlement, it was possible to establish new Baptist centers and strengthen the fledging ones which had recently sprung up in south-western Germany.”

Norquist provided hospitality and assistance to visitors. “He would pick up the sailors from the ships and take them wherever they wanted to go, shopping, amusement parks, and if they were interested and time allowed, the German (Baptist) Immanuel Church, where the Norquists were members,” said Manfred and Anita Niemetschek.

At various points in his life, he was pastor at Eastern Heights Baptist Church in St. Paul, Minnesota, in the US; was director of America Haus, American Military Government in Heidelberg, Germany; taught at Bethel College and Seminary in the US; taught at College of Marine, California and Manchester College, Indiana, both in the US; and, in 1970, founded a mission for foreign speaking Merchant Marine in Long Beach, California, in the US.

“There is a special place in our hearts for those that helped refugees,” Anita Niemetschek said. “My parents were helped to come to America by the BWA after WW2, from Germany. My husband’s father (as a child) fled Poland, after WW1 to Argentina, also through the Baptists.”

Norquist held degrees and diplomas from the University of Minnesota, Bethel Seminary in the city of St. Paul, the University of Stockholm in Sweden, and Tübingen and Heidelberg Universities in Germany.

Funeral service was held on September 4 at Elim Baptist Church in Isanti.

Norquist leaves wife, Elisabeth, son, Vaughn, and daughter, Ramona.
THE DOOR OF SALVATION

On February 21 this year we had a baptism service at Peniel Salem Baptist Church. It is like listening to the first cry of the baby after birth, when you hear a new believer tell how God led them to walk through the door of salvation. All the candidates who were baptized on the day were between 25 and 39 years old except for one senior lady who was in her late seventies. We adhere to this good practice by Baptist churches that those who are going to be baptized are given a time to present a brief testimony about their conversion. The congregation listened with much interest to every testimony and there is that shout of Amen and Hallelujahs. This is one of the most special moments in the church.

The whole service is charged with emotions, as the new converts stand before the congregations. Some tremble with fear as they stand for the first time before the congregation. But when the teacher of the class calls the names of the candidates and presents them so that they may give their testimony, there is that moment of cheering and praises to God. The cheering and praises put the candidates at ease, making them know they have taken a noble step. The Lord Jesus said these words: "I tell you, there is rejoicing in the presence of the angels of God over one sinner who repents."

On that Sunday all candidates gave their brief word of testimony but when Ms. Qothiwe Maria Mahlangu (the oldest candidate) took the microphone to give her testimony, time stopped as the church listened to her story of conversion. With tears pouring down her face, she began her testimony by thanking God for salvation. She was a very committed member in her church, which is one of the African Initiated denominations. For the past 18 years she lived with her sister who relentlessly witnessed to her about the Lord Jesus Christ. Her sister was driven wide open for her, even when she was stubborn and resisting the grace of salvation.

She thanked God that for 18 years her sister did not give up but kept on talking to her about the gospel. Her sister was driven by the conviction that there is no other door that leads to life except Jesus Christ. Ms. Martha thanked God that her life did not end before she entered through that door of salvation. The church listened as she expressed how she had to fight her own doubts and fears. She had lived many years following a certain belief and now she was convicted and convinced to take a step and put her faith in Christ. It was a battle for her to forsake her old faith and walk through the door of salvation. The day she came forward in response to the invitation to accept Christ as her Lord and Savior, her sister cried tears of joy. On this day she was going to be baptized, to be united with Christ in his death and resurrection. Oh! What a blessed day of celebration.

After listening to these testimonies and especially Ms. Martha’s, I felt reluctant to preach. I just wanted to go on with praise choruses and go to the pool to baptize these lovely new believers. Every time we have these special moments it is a reminder to the church to evangelize. The challenge is that evangelism is gradually dying in some churches. This happens when we go on with our church programs for months and sometimes for the whole year without baptizing new converts. The door of salvation is wide open and the church must lead people to the door. This is the core of our belief, that salvation is found only in Jesus Christ our Lord and Savior. That those who come to Christ through faith should be baptized in the name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit, so that they are completely united with Christ and are added to the body, which is his church.

Since Peniel Salem does not have a church building, we use swimming pools for baptism. We conduct our baptisms in the afternoon, on a nice hot summer day. The congregation gathers by the pool and chants choruses as the new converts enter the water of baptism. This is a special moment for new converts but also for the members. We are reminded of that day when we walked through that door for the first time. This is the moment to renew our commitment and our faith is revived. Above all, heaven rejoices, Christ is lifted high and glorified. Those who hear these testimonies of conversion and witness the baptism are convicted.

My prayer is that we will continue with the work of evangelism and be patient with people because God is at work. We shall see the results in due time. May these words from the Lord Jesus sound fresh at all times: "Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you. And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age” (Mat 28:19)

Amen.