Neville Callam completes North American Tour • see page 28

BWA
President Meets
Leaders in the Middle East
Texas Collegiate Baptists Sign Petition for Freedom and Justice

More than one thousand Texas Baptist college students took a stand for human rights and religious freedom by signing a Baptist World Alliance (BWA) petition in support of freedom and justice worldwide.

The BWA petition was launched at the ‘Focus’ event for college students held in Arlington, Texas, September 7-9, 2007. Focus is a worship, equipping, and service experience sponsored by the Baptist General Convention of Texas.

By signing the petition, the students stated their agreement with the BWA Centenary Congress Goal of Religious Freedom and Justice for all people:

We oppose all forms of slavery, racism, apartheid and ethnic cleansing and so will do all in our power to address and confront these sins.

The students also pledged to “Urge all Christians to pray, to unite and to speak out to protect the rights of every person to worship God without fear of death, torture, imprisonment, or economic exclusion.”

The BWA seeks to have 10,000 signatures for the petition that will ultimately be presented to the North American Baptist Fellowship, the BWA Freedom and Justice Commission and the BWA representative to the United Nations.

Persons can sign the petition in support of freedom and justice on the BWA website, www.bwanet.org.
BWA OFFICERS
David Coffey . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . President
Neville Callam . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . General Secretary

BWA EXECUTIVE STAFF
Patsy Davis . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . Women
Emmett Dunn . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . Youth and Congress
Eron Henry . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . Communications
Paul Montacute . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . BWAid
Alan Stanford . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . Advancement
Ellen Teague . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . Finance/Administration
Kathe Traynham . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . Promotion and Development
Fausto Vasconcelos . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . Evangelism/Research

BWA REGIONAL SECRETARIES
Harrison Olan’g (Acting) . . . . . . All Africa Baptist Fellowship
Tony Peck . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . European Baptist Federation
Peter Pinder . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . Caribbean Baptist Fellowship
Alberto Prokopchuk . . . . . . . . . . . . Union of Baptists in Latin America
P. Bonny Resu . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . Asian Baptist Federation
Alan Stanford . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . North American Baptist Fellowship

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What if we were creatures subject to the vicissitudes of fate, unable to will to break out of hideously sinful ways? What if we could not find, in the Holy Spirit, the enabling to live victoriously in this world?

What if we were prisoners of the past, confined to it as if in stocks, harmed by its sad memories, imperiled by its record of disappointment, shackled by its lamentable mistakes?

But we are not! Each day is a new day, each month a new one, and with each New Year we receive an opportunity to start all over again.

As the years roll on, we reflect on the past, without being imprisoned by the failures it holds. We also look to the future, and reach out to grasp the privileges it brings, becoming in the process children of hope.

Our hope rests assuredly on well-founded confidence in the one who is the same yesterday, today and forever – the God who loves and values all of creation.

As we cross the threshold into a New Year, may we recoil from the fear that our past could evince, and incline our souls to the fresh opportunities and great possibilities that lie ahead. This is the path for all who know the font of grace that marks out our liberty in Christ Jesus.

The truth is that, as we march into the future, we are blessed to go in the company of the one who shields us from reliance upon our own strength. The Holy Spirit also enables us to see the doors God opens for growth in Christ, and supplies us with strength to persevere to our journey’s end.

We go forward with the reminder that Gardner Taylor issued during his sermon at the Eighth BWA Congress in Cleveland, Ohio, in 1950, that, “God has set authentic evidence for the validity of our way in history. He has given sign and token that he will, at all hazards, stand fast by our way, will not forsake our way, will not abandon it, though the iniquities of hell spill over the earth.” With such a God, what have we to fear?

May yours be a New Year rich with the consciousness of the grace in which we walk – all because of Jesus!
The Australian government is being urged by Baptists in that country to increase foreign aid to 0.7 percent of the country’s gross national income (GNI).

Baptist Union of Australia (BUA) President Ross Clifford bemoans that, at present, only 0.3 percent of the country’s GNI goes toward international aid. “We have a moral responsibility to use the abundant resources God gives us to help those less fortunate than ourselves,” he said. “It is within our power to do this. The time to act is now.”

Drawing attention to the fact that Australia is one of several countries that committed to increase overseas aid to 0.7 percent of GNI by 2015, in fulfillment of the United Nations Millennium Development Goals (MDGs), the Baptist leader is disappointed that “Australia has reached only about half that figure.”

The MDGs aim to eradicate extreme poverty, achieve universal primary education, promote gender equality and empower women, reduce child mortality, improve maternal health, combat HIV/AIDS, malaria and other diseases, ensure environmental sustainability, and work toward the development of a global partnership for development. The MDGs were adopted by 192 countries in September 2000 during the UN-sponsored Millennium Summit.

An increase in aid by Australia to 0.7 percent of GNI, Clifford says in a November 4 release, would result in “70,000 less child deaths each year and 15,000 fewer AIDS deaths each year, and 100,000 more children receiving basic education.”

Explaining that Baptists in Australia are strong supporters of the Micah Challenge and the “Make Poverty History” campaign, he said, “Alleviating poverty in the world’s poorest regions literally saves lives and ends terrible human suffering.” This, he said, “is not a political issue but a moral and humanitarian issue.”

The Micah Challenge is a global campaign to mobilize Christians against poverty. It aims to fulfill the MDGs, and brings together international and national church bodies, including Baptist World Aid, the relief and development arm of the Baptist World Alliance (BWA).

In September 2007, 24,300 postcards, signed by people all over Australia, were presented to Prime Minister John Howard encouraging the government to help halve global poverty by 2015. This act was an initiative of the Micah Challenge, with participation from the BUA, a BWA member body.

In reference to the goal to halve poverty in the world by 2015, Clifford urged “the Prime Minister and the Leader of the Opposition to do all in their power to achieve this ambitious but socially responsible goal while maintaining strong national economic growth targets.”

Ross Clifford, BUA President
A mission agency is to be established in the Caribbean.

Norva Rodney of the Jamaica Baptist Union (JBU) made the proposal for such an agency at a mission conference sponsored by the Jamaica Baptist Union Mission Agency (JBUAMA), held at the island’s north coast tourism city of Montego Bay.

Rodney stated that such an agency would strengthen the capacity of Caribbean congregations, facilitate the recruitment and training of missioners, as well as encourage and support the efforts of Caribbean partners to actively address the causes and effects of social injustice.

The Montego Bay Accord, the final document produced after a series of presentations, deliberations, and discussions, speaks to the intent to create a Caribbean Mission Plan and Agency, as mooted by Rodney, and the fulfillment of “the missional mandate of the Ocho Rios Declaration.”

The Ocho Rios Declaration was issued in 2003 at the end of the last mission conference hosted by the JBU. Among the results of the Ocho Rios Declaration was the launch of a Mission Endowment Fund by the JBU, which has grown to several million Jamaican dollars; the establishment of new congregations, especially in new and expanded urban areas,” which resulted in the establishment of almost 20 new congregations in Jamaica; and the opening of a halfway house for HIV/AIDS patients in Kingston, Jamaica’s capital, as part of the pledge to accept and “care for those living with health conditions that invite discrimination.”

In response to a mandate from the 2003 declaration to reach out to Caribbean immigrants in other countries, the Caribbean Diaspora Baptist Clergy Association (CDBCA), based in the United States, was formed to aid in “facilitating mission in both regions of the world.” The move, inspired by the JBU, led to the signing of a partnership agreement between the JBU and the CDBCA in April 2007 at the Grace Baptist Church in New York City.

The JBU, CDBCA, and the Caribbean Baptist Fellowship (CBF) signed the Montego Bay Accord and pledged the fulfillment of its commitments. Other provisions of the accord include the development of “meaningful ministries with cultural relevance” to “families – singles, aged, youth, children, and families of the incarcerated, and those impacted by substance abuse;” the creation of a mechanism for information sharing; and better stewardship of resources, including the environment. The parties also pledged “to submit ourselves to periodic reviews, and to hold each other accountable under God.”

The mission conference, held October 24 to 28, brought together more than 450 delegates from Jamaica, Panama, Haiti, Turks and Caicos Islands, Belize, Bahamas, and the United States of America.

Special guests, speakers and presenters at the conference included former mayor of the American city of Philadelphia, Wilson Goode, whose paper was titled, “Ministry to the families of the incarcerated;” Keith Troy, president of Lott Carey Foreign Mission Convention in the US who delivered the keynote address on the opening night, and who was accompanied by 50 Lott Carey delegates; and Peter Pinder, Baptist World Alliance Regional Secretary for the Caribbean and Executive Secretary/Treasurer for CBF.
Residents of the Baptist Village in Sri Lanka welcomed Baptist World Aid (BWAid) director Paul Montacute who toured the new development in late October.

The community in Ampegama, built with funds from BWAid, the relief and development arm of the Baptist World Alliance, provides homes to persons who were displaced by the devastating tsunamis that struck close to a dozen countries in Asia in December of 2004.

The 72 houses were constructed in partnership with BMS World Mission in Britain, the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship in the United States, and the Baptist union in Sri Lanka, the Sri Lanka Baptist Sangamaya (SLBS). A community center was also built. In total, BWAid spent approximately US$300,000 on the new housing development.

Carey College, a private school operated by SLBS in Colombo, Sri Lanka’s capital, assisted in expanding the government-run school in Ampegama by donating funds for additional classrooms to accommodate children who otherwise would not have been in school.

Montacute also visited HELP homes in Kahawa, a coastal village in Sri Lanka. The facility of five houses was built to accommodate children orphaned or affected by the tsunamis. BWAid contributed approximately US$400,000 to the HELP homes, and Hungarian Baptist Aid and other partners also participated in the project. The homes are managed as a charity with a board, on which Montacute sits as a member. There are approximately 25 children living in the homes.

BWAid has so far spent close to US$2 million on tsunami-related relief in Sri Lanka, Indonesia, India, and other countries in Asia. Projects funded include temporary and permanent housing, food and water distribution, medical teams and other medical assistance, farming equipment such as tractors and farm tools, fishing boats and other fishing implements, and support for search and rescue teams after the earthquakes and tsunamis.

BWAid has partnered with various national and international Baptist groups and relief agencies, and performed a coordinating role for the relief efforts.
At least 16 Baptists, including Baptist World Alliance General Secretary Neville Callam, participated in the Global Christian Forum (GCF) in Limuru near Nairobi in Kenya, held November 6 to 9.

The forum brings together Christians from the confessional, ecumenical, evangelical, and Pentecostal/charismatic movements from across denominational, regional, ethnic and cultural boundaries. It includes members of the World Council of Churches, the World Evangelical Alliance and the Pentecostal World Fellowship, in addition to parachurch organizations, and is aimed at creating new opportunities for contact between Christians and discussions of common concern.

First begun in the late 1990s, the 2007 GCF had 245 delegates from 72 countries, and considered the theme, “Our Journey with Jesus Christ, the Reconciler.”

“The Global Christian Forum was an historic event,” said Callam. “The fact that so many people from so many Christian traditions were able to assemble in one place for a week is itself the great achievement of the Forum. Who would have thought that this was a possibility even 10 years ago?” Callam’s hope is “that God will enable and sustain the relationships, contacts and networks that have emerged from the Forum.”

In its final statement, the GCF declared its intent “to create an open space wherein the representatives from a broad range of Christian communities and inter-church organizations… can gather to foster mutual respect and to address common challenges together.”

The statement claimed that the meetings were conducted “in an atmosphere of trust and openness,” and expressed a “commitment…to press on in promoting ever greater understanding and cooperation among Christians, while respecting the diversity of our identities, traditions and individual gifts.”

The delegates, the statement says, “acknowledge that we have often allowed prejudices to shape our understanding of different Christian traditions” and they now “repent of past failings.”

Accepting that “we have differing views on substantive issues such as ecclesiology, the scope of evangelism and mission,” the GCF nevertheless pledged to work together in the sharing of the gospel, the love of neighbor, the pursuit of justice and peace, and “to deepen this journey toward the goal of reconciliation.”

Two other important meetings were also held in Limuru, taking advantage of the gathering of most of the leaders of world Christianity. The Conference of Secretaries of Christian World Communions met, which groups 14 general secretaries of churches around the globe, including the BWA’s Callam. In addition, there was a gathering of the 30 members of the International Council of the World Evangelical Alliance.

Baptists attending the GCF included Fausto Vasconcelos, BWA Director of Evangelism & Education and Study & Research, Denton Lotz, BWA General Secretary Emeritus, as well as others from Europe, Latin America, Asia and the Pacific, Africa, the Caribbean and North America.

Baptist World Alliance (BWA) President David Coffey and General Secretary Neville Callam have welcomed a letter from Muslim scholars for Christians and Muslims to cooperate in engendering peace and religious freedom.

Signed by 138 Muslim academics, theologians, intellectuals and clerics, the 29-page letter declared that “Without peace and justice between these two religious communities, there can be no meaningful peace in the world. The future of the world depends on peace between Muslims and Christians.”

The letter was dated October 13, which marked the end of the Muslim holy month of Ramadan, and was sent to 27 named world Christian leaders, including Coffey.

Coffey, in a personal response to the letter, said, “I welcome the letter from the
For ten years the Baptist Women’s Union of Sierra Leone (BWUSL) has been crying out to God and praying for peace after 11 years of war that almost destroyed the country. Now Sierra Leone experiences relative peace.

The BWUSL seeks to empower women, especially underprivileged women, and is teaching skills in tailoring and evangelism.

The Baptist women’s group has also embarked on a project called “Breaking the silence,” which deals with domestic violence and female genital mutilation (FGM). FGM is the process of circumcising women and girls.

FGM is legal and widely practiced in Sierra Leone. Many women are afraid to talk about the issues of domestic violence and FGM, and are suffering quietly.

The BWUSL group seeks to stop the practice by working with women who hold onto the tradition of FGM by helping them understand the dangers and complications associated with the procedure.

Muslim scholars and leaders and commend it as a groundbreaking initiative which could make a major contribution to a better understanding in Christian-Muslim relations, the cause of religious liberty and global peace.”

Callam, in emphasizing the BWA’s support for groups and persons that work for peace and religious liberty, said, “The principle of religious freedom is a time-honored value among Baptists. It is predicated in part on our conviction that all human beings are created in the image of God who calls us to love one another and to foster mutual care and goodwill.

“For this reason, the Baptist World Alliance welcomes the call by Muslim scholars for conversations that will advance the cause of religious liberty and peaceful coexistence among all members of the human family.”

Both Coffey and Callam have indicated that a more fulsome response to the letter will be forthcoming from the BWA at an appropriate time.
Young Pastor Ministers

Marko Grozdanov is the first theologically trained Baptist pastor to be ordained in his country, Macedonia. The young pastor began his training at the Evangelical Theological Seminary in Osijek, Croatia. Grozdanov went on to earn a Magister in Theology from the International Baptist Theological Seminary (IBTS) in Prague, Czech Republic. Upon graduating in 2006, he returned to Macedonia and was ordained as pastor for the Baptist church in the capital city of Skopje. The church is one of only two Baptist congregations in the small country.

The church has experienced such numerical growth that the small church building is proving to be inadequate. Besides having plans for expanding the outreach and other ministries of the Baptist church, Grozdanov also hopes, in the coming years, to expand the physical space where the church gathers for worship.

In addition to his work in Macedonia, Grozdanov is involved in global Baptist life as a member of the Baptist World Alliance Emerging Leaders Network (ELN), designed to develop young Baptist leaders who are in their 20s and 30s. With membership drawn from around the world, the ELN met for the first time in Accra, Ghana, in July 2007.

Grozdanov’s wife, Tina, also graduated from the Evangelical Theological Seminary in Croatia, and has a Magister in Theology from IBTS. Both are ministry partners, working in their community, offering basic Bible instruction, and providing various types of social justice programs.

Tony Peck, General Secretary of the European Baptist Federation (EBF), wrote that Marko Grozdanov is “exactly the kind of young leader we in the EBF should identify, train and encourage.”

The Grozdanovs are expecting their first child.

Julie Justus contributed to this story

Congo

Baptists Among Displaced in Conflict

Heavy fighting in North Kivu in the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) has displaced hundreds of thousands of persons, including Baptists.

The conflict between government forces and rebel groups intensified in late August, and has made worse a situation that has been unstable for some time.

Reports are that on August 25, dissidents ambushed an army convoy, killing four Congolese soldiers. The government, in retaliation, sent thousands of troops into the region that led to persons fleeing their homes in terror.

Pascal Ndihokubwimana, projects officer with the Union of Baptist Churches in Congo (UEBCO), reported that “the situation is becoming bad. Some villages are falling under rebel control and others under government forces. Both sides are killing persons (civilians), accusing them of collaborating with the enemy.”

According to Ndihokubwimana, 210 Baptist families, or a total of 563 persons, were at the Mugunga refugee camp. These families belong mainly to Baptist churches in the villages of Mizeituni, Karuba, Ngungu, Matanda, Rubaya and Ruhegeri. Others, he said, are hiding in the bush.

The United Nations, which has a peacekeeping force in the region, claimed that more than 220,000 persons have been displaced in North Kivu since the beginning of 2007. An estimated two million more Congolese are displaced in neighboring countries such as Tanzania, Uganda, Burundi, and Rwanda from previous conflicts.

Ron Redmond, spokesperson for the United Nations High Commission for Refugees, said further fighting could provoke “The displacement of hundreds of thousands of additional Congolese civilians.”
BWAid Hunger Month Observed

Responding to the call by Baptist World Aid to observe October as Hunger Month, the Town Church in Madhira, Andhra Pradesh, India, collected a special hunger offering. Each family of the congregation, many who live on daily wages as farm laborers, brought a fistful of grain as a contribution.

Pastor of the church, B.M. Sudheer, reported that the money used to purchase the grain would be sent to BWAid as a contribution toward the hunger fund. He said, “We praise God that the village congregations in our fold are responding to the call of the world Baptist family.”

Contributions made to BWAid for hunger relief are used in times of emergency as funds are made available to give immediate assistance for people who have no food. Funds are also used in hunger-related development projects.

BWAid has a $100,000 annual funding goal for hunger. More information about hunger-related projects of BWAid can be found on its website, www.bwanet.org/bwaid.

North Kivu is a volatile and highly unstable area. Africa’s deadliest war in recent decades was fought in the DRC with much of the instability in eastern Congo, which includes North Kivu Province. Fought between 1998 and 2003, the war led to the death of an estimated 3.8 million persons and the displacement of millions more. Despite the formal end of the war in July 2003, skirmishes and intermittent conflicts have occurred in the area, leading up to the latest conflagration.

Baptist World Aid (BWAid), the relief and development arm of the Baptist World Alliance, has made interventions through some of the conventions and unions in the DRC. BWAid has given grants to UEBCO, the smallest of the eight Baptist conventions in the country, for poverty reduction, orphan education, and assistance to disabled persons, among other projects.

There are almost two million Baptists in the nation of 63 million people.

United States

Baptist Named to Senior Government Position

Thomas Corts, former president of the Baptist-affiliated Samford University in Birmingham, Alabama in the United States, and a member of the General Council of the Baptist World Alliance (BWA), has been appointed by the United States government to coordinate US foreign aid efforts to support education around the world.

The appointment of Corts was announced by First Lady Laura Bush in late September.

Corts, who also served as executive director of the International Association of Baptist Colleges and Universities which represents 52 Baptist higher learning institutions, works out of the Washington, DC office of the United States Agency for International Development (USAID) and coordinated with the State Department, the Department of Education, and other agencies, with focus on education programs in developing countries.

The 65 year old lifelong Baptist educator is also a member of the BWA Study and Research Executive Committee, the Academic and Theological Education Workgroup, and the Baptist Heritage and Identity Study Commission.
The defense of human rights are one of five “clusters of commitment” adopted by the Baptist World Alliance, the others being to unite Baptists worldwide, to lead in world evangelism, to respond to people in need, and to promote theological reflection.

The defense and promotion of religious freedom is the key plank of the BWA’s human rights mission around the world. To this end, the international organization that represents 36 million baptized believers in more than 130 countries takes seriously any and all forms of violations of religious freedom.

Among the BWA’s objectives is to promote and defend the freedom to believe, the freedom to worship, the right to change one’s religion, the freedom to build community, a faith that is not coerced, and a faith that can be practiced publicly.

The international body has taken several steps and put several programs in place to help guard and advance religious liberty. One such program is that of recognition. Individuals that are at the forefront of the defense of human rights are recognized for their work. This recognition is done chiefly through the BWA’s human rights award, which is given out at the General Council meeting every year, and at each World Congress, held every five years.

Recipients of the BWA human rights award include former US president Jimmy Carter, recognized for his work in peace initiatives around the world; Saw Simon, founder of the Kawthoolei Karen Baptist Bible School and College in the Mae La refugee camp on the Thai-Burmese border, for his work among Burmese refugees; and Lauran Bethell, missionary for International Ministries of the American Baptist Churches USA for her ministry among exploited women and children in Thailand.

Gustavo Parajon of Nicaragua who founded two organizations, PROVADENIC, a primary health care program that offers training to local health workers to treat and prevent common illnesses, and CEPAD, an interdenominational relief organization engaged in emergency relief, development, and reconciliation programs, was the first recipient of the annual award in 2006, given by the BWA General Council, and named for Denton and Janice Lotz. Joao and Nora Matwawana from Angola were honored in 2007 for their pivotal role in reconciliation and peace efforts since the 1970s in Burundi, Rwanda, the Democratic Republic of Congo, and Angola.

Human rights visits and representations

The BWA makes human rights visits on a yearly basis to countries and regions where religious freedom is under threat or absent. Countries and regions visited include Cuba, North Korea, Vietnam, Bangladesh, the Chiapas region in Mexico, and Azerbaijan.

Representation by the BWA has been made, in person and through communication, with leaders around the world. BWA leaders personally visited kings, presidents, prime ministers, and other senior political leaders in Poland, Cuba, Vietnam, Jordan, Israel, Lebanon, the Palestinian National Authority, Kenya, and other countries.

It is the aim of the BWA to create a new division of Freedom and Justice with full time staff.

The BWA also funds human rights causes. The worldwide body has assisted in the defense of pastor Zaur Balaev from Azerbaijan who was convicted and imprisoned
in 2007 on what is widely regarded as false and trumped-up charges aimed at shutting down his church. Baptist World Aid, the relief and development arm of the BWA, often funds projects that are designed to minimize or reverse human rights abuses and violations related to health, education, and the disabled.

Conferences and meetings hosted by the BWA often address human rights issues. At the very first World Congress, held in 1905 in London, the human rights prerogative was put squarely on the table by J.D. Freeman of Canada. “We affirm the right of every human being to exemptions in matters of faith and conscience from all coercion or intimidation by an earthly power.”

The Commission on Religious Liberty was inaugurated at the World Congress in Copenhagen in 1947, one year before the United Nations Universal Declaration of Human Rights. Other BWA initiatives include the Golden Jubilee Declaration on Religious Liberty in 1955; the Manifesto on Religious Liberty in 1960; the Declaration of Human Rights in 1980; the Harare Declaration against racism in 1993; and the adoption of the Atlanta Covenant in 1999 as part of the BWA-sponsored Baptists Against Racism Summit in that city.

The Freedom and Justice Commission, a successor to the Commission on Religious Liberty, continues to receive papers, studies and reports on human rights issues around the world. Resolutions addressing issues of human rights are discussed and passed at the BWA General Council meeting every year.

It is the aim of the BWA to create a new division of Freedom and Justice with full time staff to give full time attention to human rights causes.

The new division will be vested when funding is in place.

In 1974, the BWA gained special consultative status on the UN Economic and Social Council. Since that time, the BWA has secured membership in the Conference on NGOs and the Committee of Religious NGOs. The BWA also has accredited status in the Department of Public Information and has participated in both the Ecumenical Working Group and the Commission on the Status of Women. Furthermore, the international Baptist body has collaborated with the Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs and the UNAIDS program in Geneva.

The BWA General Secretariat is currently organizing for more active BWA involvement through the UN. The future office of the Director of Freedom and Justice will coordinate the ministry opportunities that the BWA has through the UN.

By far, the greatest work in the area of human rights, broadly speaking, and religious freedom, more specifically, is being done by the BWA through the more than 200 Baptist conventions and unions that are member bodies. These national conventions and unions are the ones in the trenches, and are both in the vanguard and at the rear guard to uphold religious liberty in their respective locales. It is to the Lord, and to them, that the BWA owes its deepest gratitude.

National conventions and unions are the ones in the trenches to uphold religious liberty in their respective locales.

A BWA delegation including President David Coffey met with government leaders in Vietnam to discuss the need for greater religious freedom in the country.
Baptist World Alliance President David Coffey called on Israeli President Shimon Perez to assist in shortening the “lengthy process of applying for formal registration as a recognized Christian denomination.”

Coffey, who visited the Israeli leader on September 25 while on a trip to Israel, made the appeal on the behalf of all Christians, in particular Baptists, noting that “Baptists worldwide are committed to be peace builders.”

The BWA president also expressed his concern that Palestinian pastors living in the West Bank are not allowed to travel to Jerusalem or other parts of Israel without permits. “I am disturbed to discover that pastors have had difficulty in gaining permission to visit the site of Jesus’ baptism,” Coffey complained. “None of the pastors I am representing has ever been accused of acts of violence or incitements against Israel. These pastors consistently teach the gospel of peace, justice and reconciliation.”

As part of his visit to the Holy Land, Coffey had a meeting with pastors in the West Bank, which is part of the Palestinian National Authority. He also attended the opening ceremony of the Nazareth Center for Christian Studies. “I am disappointed that pastors from Bethlehem were not able to attend the opening of the Nazareth Center for Christian Studies,” he said to Perez.

BWA President David Coffey visits with Israeli President Shimon Perez.

Perez, former three-time Prime Minister of Israel, promised to consult with the Israeli general in charge of security to share the concerns of the Palestinian pastors that Coffey had conveyed.

The BWA leader also met with Abdel Razak Al-Yahya, the Minister of Interior for the Palestinian National Authority (PNA) in Ramallah, on September 26, and shared with him the good work being done by Baptists and other Christians in Palestine.

“I have been deeply impressed by the ministry of these Palestinian pastors and their care for your people through their schools and orphanages and institutions,” Coffey said. “These Baptist pastors and their churches make a vital contribution to helping the needy families of Palestine. I hope the PNA will recognize and honor their ministries.”

Coffey Shares Vision of Peace with Arab Leaders

As an expression of Baptists’ continued concern for peace and stability in the Middle East, Baptist World Alliance President David Coffey visited two Arab leaders, Lebanon President Emile Lahoud and Jordan King Abdullah II bin Al Hussein.

Coffey, in his meeting with Lahoud on September 20, said, “It grieves us to see this beloved country struggle, and, as such, Lebanon is in our prayers today more than ever before.”

Lebanon has been affected by a series of wars and conflicts in recent times. In the summer of 2006, a month-long war between Israel and the Islamic group Hezbollah led to widespread shelling of the southern part of the country, causing the death of many and the displacement of hundreds of thousands.

In May of 2007, fighting broke out between the Lebanese Armed Forces and Fatah-al-Islam, an Islamic militant organization, which continued into early September. There has also been a series of bombings, claiming several lives. The BWA president expressed condolences to the Lebanese president on the death of politician Antoine Ghanem and at least six other persons who were killed in a car bomb on the day before Coffey met with the leader.

The meeting gave Coffey the opportunity to tell Lahoud of the work the Lebanese Evangelical Baptist Church has been doing in Lebanon and the wider Middle East in education, culture and relief and development in the 150-year history of the Baptist church in that country.

During his Middle East tour, Coffey also traveled to Jordan. In his meeting with King Abdullah II on September 23, Coffey endorsed the views expressed by the king in his address to the United States Congress in March 2007 in which he challenged the international community to work together to address the Middle East problem, and to strive

...
Human rights are entitlements to certain freedoms, and immunities from unwarranted interference, that fall due to every single human being as a member of *homo sapiens*.

The idea of human rights, which has enjoyed a long history, is often traced to the literature of the Stoics. By the time of the Enlightenment, the idea became routinized in Western thought and, with the writings of social contractarians such as Locke, Hobbes and Rousseau, the notion of human rights was integrated in the stream of political philosophy. Yet, the church had not yet engaged in a thoroughgoing assessment of the idea.

It was especially in the work of the successors to the tradition of the Radical Reformation that advocacy for human rights, especially religious liberty, became a notable feature of ecclesial witness. Not surprisingly, John Locke in his 1609 work entitled *A Letter of Toleration*, declared, “The Baptists were the first and only proponents of absolute liberty, just and true liberty, equal and impartial liberty.” Celebrating this tradition, Baptist Way Press published, a few months ago, a useful “study book” entitled *Baptists and Religious Liberty* which the author, William Pinson, Jr., invites us to read “not so much as a tranquil consideration of the past but as a clarion call to action in the present and the future.” The book offers a helpful introduction to the subject it surveys.

In earliest Roman Catholic works, the idea of human rights was largely wedded to the notion of natural rights deriving from natural law philosophy. When the World Alliance of Reformed Churches assembled scholars in 1977 in London for a consultation, the first thoroughgoing analysis of the grounding of the idea of human rights in theological thought appeared. This provided a solid foundation on which to mount justificatory biblical and theological arguments for the idea of human rights. The churches were able to add, as a corollary to their advocacy for human rights, a theological grounding for human rights in “God’s right to – i.e., [God’s] claim on – human beings, their human dignity, their fellowship, their rule over the earth, and their future.”

At the fifteenth Baptist World Congress in Los Angeles in 1985, the BWA Commission on Human Rights explained that human rights are derived from God’s nature, creation and commands. The Commission argued that biblical support can be found for the claim that rights are intrinsic in the nature of the world as created by God. It asserted also that violation of human rights stems from human beings turning away from God and so turning against each other and against nature.

Of course, within the tradition of the United Nations, ideological presuppositions nurtured visions of human rights as applicable in contexts variously defined. In the liberal democratic tradition, reflected especially in developments in the United States, and which continued to build on the legacy of social contractarianism, especially in Lockean forms, the idea of human rights was applied especially in the realm of individual and political concerns. Meanwhile, in the context of the existing countervailing political philosophical outlook, the application of human rights to the cultural and economic sphere was considered far more compelling and urgent.

In this edition of *Baptist World*, we focus on human rights, and specifically religious freedom. Because the idea of human rights finds grounding in our faith, respect for rights is a matter of Christian stewardship. Advocacy on behalf of religious freedom finds its place within the prophetic tradition which has so powerfully marked Baptist witness in many parts of the world.
The Caribbean has had a long history of religious tolerance. Except in isolated instances, the church, more often than not, does not suffer religious persecution and other types of violations in the Spanish, French, and in particular, the English-speaking islands and territories in the region.

Trinidad and Tobago is about the only country in the English-speaking Caribbean that places some restrictions on missionaries. While missionary and other religious groups are generally allowed to operate freely, the government restricts the number of visas to a maximum of 30 to any one group at any one time, and this has to be a registered group. Such missionaries can stay in the country for a maximum of only three years, and will have to wait at least one year to reapply. This is unlike most other countries in the Commonwealth Caribbean, such as Jamaica, where there is no restriction on missionary or any other religious activity.

Churches in Jamaica are keenly watching a proposed legislation for a flexi-work week, heavily promoted by business interests, which would treat all seven days of the week equally, for employment purposes. If passed as proposed, employees would be obligated to work on days assigned by their employers, including days normally set aside for Sabbaths or days of rest. Churches insist that the law, if passed, would be discriminatory against regular worshippers.

CUBA

For the Caribbean, Cuba is a special case. The government of the Spanish-speaking, communist-ruled island of 11 million people has long been accused by governments, human rights organizations, churches and others, of committing serious human rights abuses, including placing severe restrictions on religious freedom.

There are strong indications, however, that there is a relaxation of government policies and attitudes toward churches and religion in general. In 2000, a Baptist World Alliance (BWA) delegation led by the BWA president and general secretary met with Cuban president Fidel Castro and other government officials. This meeting resulted in the distribution of Bibles in the country.

Cuban Baptists have also experienced growth in the number of churches and membership over the past 10 years, with plans for further growth. The Baptist Convention of Eastern Cuba (BCEC) plans an evangelistic thrust to reach 500,000 people by 2010, while its counterpart, the Baptist Convention of Western Cuba (BCWC), aims to plant 1,000 new house churches within that time period.

Notwithstanding, there are still some restrictions on religious freedom in the island nation, the largest in the Caribbean. The 2007 International Religious Freedom Report (IRFR) by the United States Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights, and Labor, alleges that “the Ministry of Interior, through its state security apparatus, continues to engage in efforts to control and monitor the country’s religious institutions, including surveillance, infiltration, and harassment of religious professionals and laypersons.”

In addition, even though churches, by law, are allowed to construct new places of worship and other buildings, permits for construction are rarely granted. As a result, worship is mostly done in private homes as house churches, which have seen massive expansion in recent times, as evidenced by plans of the BCWC to plant 1,000 new house churches in three years.

But even such house churches are reportedly under scrutiny. A 2005 government directive was issued requiring house churches to register, a move that is viewed as restrictive, and possibly invasive. According to the law, a house church cannot host more than three meetings per week; it must
The church is growing rapidly on the Asian continent, but persecution there is on the rise.

Christians in India, Pakistan, Indonesia, Sri Lanka, Bhutan, Myanmar, and other Asian countries, are beset by threats, attacks, and various forms of intimidation in Muslim-Hindu- and Buddhist-majority countries.

The Baptist World Alliance has kept close tabs on the experiences of Baptists in Myanmar/Burma, a country with one of the most repressive political regimes in the world. Baptist witness in that country, which flourishes among marginalized groups, is growing rapidly, with the number of Baptist believers increasing from less than 600,000 in 1995 to approximately 1.1 million today. Christians are under constant scrutiny and often face attacks. Hundreds of thousands of Burmese flee their homeland and live in refugee camps in countries that border Myanmar.

Baptist witness and ministry have taken hold in some of these camps, such as at the Mae La camp along the Thai-Burmese border, where approximately 50,000 refugees live. More than 240 Baptist churches have been established in these camps, along with educational institutions, such as the Kawthoolei Karen Baptist Bible School and College. Its founder, Saw Simon, was the recipient of the BWA Human Rights Award in 2000.

Sri Lanka, a country beset by a virtual civil war that has led to 68,000 deaths since 1983, has seen large numbers of violent attacks against Christians and the church. In March 2007, Pastor Victor Emmanuel Yogarajan and his two sons, Daniel and David, went missing. In January, 38 year old pastor Nallathamby Gnanaseelan was shot dead by security forces. A church was attacked and stoned in November 2006. A mob of more than 50 demanded that worship cease at one Christian church in October of that year. Two young church workers from another congregation were injured during an attack. Several churches and Christian schools were told in 2006 to cancel Christmas programs, or “stern action would be taken” and they would “suffer severe repercussions if they went ahead with any Christmas programs.”

But the Christian church in Sri Lanka, a country with a 70 percent Buddhist population, is growing. The Baptist union, Sri Lanka Baptist Sangamaya, reported 3,500 members in 2005, but has grown to more than 5,000 in 2007. The ministry of the BWA member body has far outstripped its size, having involved itself in tsunami relief projects such as housing construction, education, and care ministry of various kinds. Baptist World Aid (BWAid), the relief and development arm of the BWA, has spent close to US$700,000 in tsunami-related relief in Sri Lanka in collaboration with the Sri Lanka Baptist union.
Persecution in Indonesia

Indonesia is the fourth most populous country in the world with more than 234 million people, and is the country with the largest Islamic population, estimated at between 86 percent and 90 percent, or more than 200 million Muslims. In contrast, there are only 630 Baptist churches in Indonesia with less than 200,000 members, part of a Protestant population of roughly six percent.

This numerical disadvantage places Baptists and other Christian churches at risk in an environment of increasing and widespread Islamic radicalism. In February 2007, a group of radical Muslims attacked a Baptist church in the city of Bandung, approximately 112 miles southeast of the Indonesian capital of Jakarta, traumatizing approximately 200 children in Sunday School who fled the scene. Much of the church building, including contents, was destroyed.

An International Religious Freedom Report released by the Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights, and Labor in the United States stated that in Indonesia “there is widespread tension between Muslims and Christians that has erupted into localized violent conflicts.” The 2001 report indicated that nearly 400,000 persons were displaced due to conflicts between Christians and Muslims. The 2007 report alleged that “the government arrested and charged individuals with heresy, blasphemy, and insulting Islam.”

Specific abuses include the sentencing of three women to three years in prison in September 2005 for allegedly seeking to convert children to Christianity. More than 30 churches in West Java were shut down in 2006 by militant groups. In September 2006, a church was burnt down for allegedly planning a revival meeting. In June 2007, a militant group stormed and vandalized a small church in a housing complex.

Despite this, Baptist work in Indonesia is growing. BWAid, working closely with Indonesian Baptist conventions and unions, has contributed almost US$300,000 since 2005 to assist with earthquake, flood, and tsunami relief, most often in Muslim communities affected by these disasters. The five Baptist conventions and unions in that country have formed an alliance, the Union of Indonesian Baptist Churches, and are cooperating in missions, evangelism, and

BWAid has worked closely with Indonesian Baptist conventions and unions to assist with earthquake, flood, and tsunami relief.

Letter from Asha Sanchu

Asha Sanchu is a member of the BWA Emerging Leaders Network that had its first meeting in Accra, Ghana, in July 2007.
I landed safely in the Philippines the third week of September and I’m loving it. This time I’m working with sexually abused children and child prostitution. It’s another eye opener for me. I’m amazed at the cruelty and insanity of humanity. At the center where I’m working there are children as young as four years old who are abused sexually. Can you believe that? Children below 14 are fully involved in the sex trade. At times I just don’t know how to react after seeing and hearing so much of this inhuman treatment. Of course, working with adults is no different, but I feel at least with adults I can talk and make them understand. But with these children I find myself so helpless at times. When I hear their stories I hug them and cry. But when I cry they ask me why I’m crying. What am I supposed to answer? I don’t know.

Everyday is a big battle for me spiritually, emotionally, physically and also the battle of hatred for the perpetrators and abusers. I love and enjoy my work and I feel honored to be sharing my life with these broken people. But I also cannot go on with my own strength. It’s so tiring and scary at times. I need so much of your support and encouragement, and as always, I covet so much your prayers. Friends... will you join with me in this warfare by praying for me and these precious afflicted lives?

You all have been so supportive and encouraging in my work in Bangkok and I’m truly humbled and grateful to each one of you. I ended well in Bangkok and I want to end well even here. Please continue to keep me in your prayers. You are all in my mind and I do pray for you. I’m also still cherishing the sweet memories of our times together in Ghana. I pray and hope we’ll see each other again next year.

Hindu backlash in India

India has the largest Baptist population of any country in Asia. However, while India has more than two million baptized believers, this is in a country of more than one billion people. Christianity is a small minority in the vast country dominated by Hinduism, with significant pockets of Islam and Sikhism.

In general, there is strong and often violent opposition to conversion from the Hindu religion in parts of the country, and Christians and churches have suffered attacks from hard-line Hindu radicals.

Restrictions and abuses of religious freedom, forced religious conversion, persecution by terrorist organizations, societal abuses and discrimination, and attempts to provoke religious conflicts characterize much of the abuse against religious freedom in India.

In October 2007, a Christian farmer in Gujarat state was attacked and beaten and his pastor and the church he attends were threatened and told to cease worship services. In February 2007, a local political leader and his followers allegedly attacked three pastors in Chhattisgarh state in central India while the pastors were holding a prayer meeting. In August 2006, one person was killed and five others wounded when government forces fired upon a Baptist church during a Sunday evening service in the Northeast state of Manipur. And, in the same month, police officers allegedly pressured a Christian convert to convert back to Hinduism in Karnataka state in the southern part of the country.

But with more than 20 Baptist conventions and unions spread throughout the country, and with Christian churches taking a proactive missionary stance in India, Christianity has more than a foothold. There are more than 20,000 cross cultural missionaries in India alone, with an estimated 1,000 of those being Baptists.

The above is a sample of the state of religious freedom in Asia. But as the evidence suggests, not only is the church on the largest continent surviving, it is thriving, and, in some instances, it is growing rapidly despite, or perhaps because of, persecution.

In some instances, the church is growing rapidly despite, or perhaps because of, persecution.
Evidence suggests that Latin America is among the freest regions in the world in the practice of religious freedom. Where abuses occur, they are rarely coordinated, government-inspired, or sustained.

This was not always the case. Many countries in Central and South America were ruled by right wing military and other forms of dictatorships up to the 1970s and 1980s, restricting religious freedom and, oftentimes, directly or indirectly, brutally clamping down on churches and church officials. Specially targeted were church leaders who sought to address the parlous state of marginalized groups, such as indigenous populations, which were mostly impoverished and oppressed.

The most famous example was the 1980 assassination of Roman Catholic Archbishop Oscar Romero of El Salvador, who was killed while he celebrated Mass. Romero had formed a group that took up the cause of the poor and victims of human rights abuses. At his funeral, a bomb blast and heavy gunfire caused a stampede that resulted in the deaths of at least 30 mourners. Romero’s assassination and the attacks at the funeral were allegedly caused by the military, or supporters of the military, which ruled the country in conjunction with the economic elite.

Today, tensions that exist, and abuses identified, result mainly from friction between the Roman Catholic Church, the dominant faith in the Spanish-, Portuguese- and French-speaking countries in the region, and Protestant evangelical Christianity, which is growing rapidly in some of these countries.

The southern state of Chiapas in Mexico is possibly the one place in Latin America where religious freedom is most widely abused. This, partly, may stem from the fact that most of Mexico’s Protestant Christians are in the south of the predominantly Roman Catholic country, and stand at almost 22 percent in Chiapas. It may also be due to the large numbers of marginalized indigenous groups within the state, as well as a relatively large immigrant population from other countries in Central America that have entered the country illegally.

Chiapas, possibly the poorest state in Mexico, also experiences religious freedom abuses because of the close correlation between religion and politics in the south of Mexico, where local leaders allegedly manipulate religious tensions for political or economic benefit. These local leaders, according to the 2007 International Religious Freedom Report (IRFR) by the United States Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights, and Labor, use “religion as a pretext for conflicts related to political, ethnic, or land disputes.”

The town of Zinacantan, for instance, has experienced conflicts between Catholics and Protestants. Even with
attempts to resolve these disputes, “an inclination towards violence persisted,” the 2007 IRFR says. The report noted that in August 2006 “tensions emerged again during the gubernatorial campaign.” In that same year, Catholics associated with the Institutional Revolutionary Party allegedly destroyed an evangelical church that was attended by members of the Party of the Democratic Revolution, and “threatened to expel or kill eight evangelical families if they attempted to rebuild” the church, the IRFR states.

The state of Chiapas received a human rights visit from the Baptist World Alliance in 1999.

Catholic Church Favored

In other parts of Latin America, concerns largely surround what, in some instances, amounts to the favored position and treatment of the Roman Catholic Church. In El Salvador for instance, the constitution gives explicit recognition to the Roman Catholic Church and grants it special legal status.

In Peru, even though the constitution prohibits discrimination on the basis of religion, “the Catholic Church receives preferential treatment in education, tax benefits, immigration of religious workers, and other areas…. Buildings, houses, and other real estate owned by the Catholic Church are exempt from property taxes, while other religious groups… may pay property taxes for schools and clergy residences” (IRFR 2007).

Venezuela is one of the few instances in Latin America where government action has, at times, adversely affected the practice of religious freedom. This, primarily, is due to a standoff between Venezuelan President Hugo Chavez and some leaders of the Roman Catholic Church. In 2007, a Catholic-operated television station’s license was withdrawn, a matter that was later partially resolved through negotiations. Chavez also warned Roman Catholic bishops at his 2007 presidential inauguration to refrain from publicly commenting on political issues.

In isolated instances, restrictions on missionaries or on missionary activities have raised concerns. The Venezuelan government, in 2005, rescinded more than 100 permits granted to a missionary organization to work among indigenous groups. In Panama, foreign missionary workers are initially granted a three month visa that can be renewed for another 12 months. But complaints have been raised that the application process for an extension is unjustly long, and can take as long as four months. Those who wish to stay longer than 15 months have to repeat the entire process. Catholic missionaries however, are granted a special five-year visa in Panama.

Growth in Evangelical Christianity

Latin American Christianity has seen unprecedented growth in recent decades with Protestant churches, particularly Evangelical Christianity, experiencing superior growth.

Evidence suggests that in Guatemala, the number of Protestants moved from 25 percent to 40 percent of the population between 2003 and 2005; in Nicaragua, Protestants numbered almost 17 percent in 2005 as against 10 percent in 2003; and in Paraguay, Protestants were 3 percent of the population in 2003 and 10 percent in 2005. It is estimated that 8,000 new Evangelical Christians are added every day in Latin America.

Among Baptists, significant growth is seen in several countries, such as in Brazil, the country with the largest Baptist population in all of the Americas except for the United States. The Brazilian Baptist Convention grew by approximately 100,000 new members and more than 450 additional churches between 2003 and 2006 and now has more than one million members and more than 6,700 churches.

One thing that drives the growth of Evangelical Christianity in Latin America is poverty. The region has one of the widest income disparities in the world and the message and activities of Evangelical and Pentecostal churches appeal particularly to the poor.

Latin America, over the past two decades, has seen a lessening in abuses of religious freedom, which has occurred simultaneously with the increase in the number of democratically elected governments in the region. As political tolerance has improved, so has tolerance toward religion.
North America

Erosion of Religious Freedom?

North America, especially the United States, is often portrayed as the bastion of religious freedom, and has become a watchdog of religious freedom in other regions and countries, most notably with the passage of the International Religious Freedom Act by the US Congress in 1998.

The US commitment to religious freedom is grounded in the First Amendment of the constitution. “Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof.”

The Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms guarantees freedom of conscience and religion; freedom of thought, belief, opinion and expression; freedom of peaceful assembly; and freedom of association.

Yet there is concern that religious freedom on the continent is being eroded. In the United States, erosion of religious freedom, according to some critics, has come about through legislation, but more commonly, through decisions by the United States Supreme Court.

Critics cite as examples a 1948 ruling by the Supreme Court that made religious instruction in public schools unconstitutional, and a similar decision in 1962 that ruled school prayer unconstitutional.

Other decisions of the court used as examples of the erosion of religious freedom in the US include declaring Bible reading over a school intercom unconstitutional (1963); outlawing the posting of the Ten Commandments in a school even if it is done for a secular purpose (1980); prayers said in state legislatures are not unconstitutional (1983); a moment of silence in schools has a religious purpose and is therefore unconstitutional (1985); and that school officials may not invite and direct clergy to give prayers at school-sponsored graduation ceremonies, though there may be exceptions where students initiate or lead such prayers (1992).

As is seen, most of these decisions have to do with the conduct of religion in the educational system.

Supporters of the Supreme Court’s rulings make an exact counterclaim. Rather than restricting religious freedom, these decisions enhance and expand such freedoms. By virtue of not giving special place to any one religion, the court’s rulings guarantee the freedom of all religions.

Hate Speech and other Violations

There are concerns that religious freedom is being eroded in other ways. Hate speech is sometimes directed at some religions and Christian groups. On the other hand, in both Canada and the US, criticism of certain groups and their lifestyle by Christians can be interpreted as hate speech. Those in the church who take a strong stance against such groups and their lifestyle, complain that regarding their criticism as hate speech is a restriction on religious expression and hence, religious freedom.

Christians, churches and Christian groups have been forced to comply with lifestyles that churches often reject. In 2002, the Ontario Supreme Court in Canada ordered a Roman Catholic High school to allow a male student to take his male partner to a prom. Also in Canada, a Christian couple in Prince Edward Island who operated a bed and breakfast in their home were charged and convicted for refusing to rent their bedroom to two homosexual men.

In July 2005, Canada passed the Civil Marriage Act that legalized same sex marriages. Though officials of religious groups are free to refuse to perform marriages that are not in accordance with their religious beliefs, some churches and Christian leaders are concerned that the law does not guarantee such a protection. There is also the fear that Christian institutions, such as halls and auditoriums, can be sued for refusing to allow wedding ceremonies and receptions by gay couples.

In the US, the Employment Non-discrimination Act of 2007, which is under consideration, would make it illegal for organizations that employ 15 or more persons to refuse to hire or promote persons on the basis of their sexual orientation. Though churches are supposedly exempted, this law has the potential to affect church organizations and institutions, such as Christian schools, Christian bookstores and relief and development agencies run by churches that employ a staff of 15 or more persons.

Commercial interests sometimes violate the freedom of religious practices, and persons have lost their jobs as a result, such as when an employer fires a worker for refusing...
Eastern Europe, Central Asia and the Middle East are identified as areas in which religious freedom is often times compromised.

Reporting on a religious freedom survey conducted in 2007 in the areas served by the European Baptist Federation, (EBF), Christer Daelander, International Secretary of the Baptist Union of Sweden, indicated that arrests and imprisonment, violent attacks, discriminatory religion laws, as well as restrictions on worship, evangelism and building construction, among other forms of harassment, characterize attitudes toward Christians and churches in some countries in these regions. Some one dozen countries responded to the survey.

In Turkey, “Violence toward Christians is accepted. Christians are viewed as enemies.” In Macedonia, churches are “not allowed to build or renovate buildings for worship” and are often “treated as foreign sects” with “government restriction at all levels – local, city and state.” In Lithuania, “only ‘traditional religions’ can teach in schools, purchase land, or enjoy benefits.” Moldova has restrictions on open evangelism, registration of churches and acquiring a place for worship.

“Secret police attend the worship services and ask questions” in Serbia where a discriminatory religion law was passed that recognized only seven national churches. Severe restrictions are imposed on all other churches that did not receive this recognition, including the Baptists.

Even in Western and Northern Europe, regions with a better reputation for religious freedom, there are concerns. The Church of England in the United Kingdom still enjoys a privileged position by virtue of being the established church.

(Continued on next page)
The “Catholic Church is privileged by the constitution” in Italy, the survey shows. “Italian Baptists are trying to make the parliament approve a new law on religious freedom which could (replace) the laws about religious confessions issued during Fascism.”

Similar to Italy, Baptist conventions and unions in other nations are taking steps to improve religious freedom in their countries. The Serbian Baptist Union has started court proceedings against the Ministry of Religious Affairs that introduced the discriminatory religion law, has published a book against the law, and has held several conferences.

Moldova Baptists have written their government, made contacts with human rights organizations, the Council of Europe and the European Union (EU), and made representations to western embassies in that country.

Several countries, such as Bulgaria and Albania, are appealing to the EBF to make representations on their behalf to the EU or to the governments in their countries. The EBF, one of six continental federations of the BWA, represents Europe, Central Asia and the Middle East.

Daelander made his report on religious freedom to the council of the EBF in Budapest, Hungary, in September 2007, on which he serves as a member of the Division of External Relations.

**Imprisonment of Azerbaijan pastor**

A violation of religious freedom was brought forcibly home to the EBF council meeting with a report on the imprisonment of Azerbaijan Baptist pastor Zaur Balaev. Balaev was arrested in May last year when police raided the house church meeting he was leading. He was given a two-year prison sentence in August on charges of beating up five policemen and damaging a police car door. Eye witness accounts from Baptists and other villagers dispute the allegations made against the pastor.

Both the EBF and the Baptist World Alliance (BWA) “have been active on his behalf to protest his innocence,” said EBF General Secretary and BWA Regional Secretary for Europe, Tony Peck. BWA President David Coffey said of the conviction of the 44 year old pastor, “I express my profound concern at the news of Pastor Balaev’s unjust two years prison sentence. The BWA will be supporting the Azerbaijan Baptist Union as they submit an appeal against the court verdict.”

During the EBF council meeting last September, a resolution was passed that calls on “governments, national and local authorities to change legislation and practices that limit or restrict religious freedom and human rights.”

The EBF also appeals to “Baptists to seek dialogue with other Christian traditions and other faiths to work together for religious freedom and human rights.”

The EBF has taken several steps to address violations of religious freedom. Funds received from the Jimmy and RAMI AYYAD, a member of the Gaza Baptist Church in Palestine and the manager of the Bible Society bookstore in Gaza, was found murdered Sunday morning, October 7.

Ayяд went missing the previous day after closing the bookstore he managed. A source inside Gaza gave the following details:

“On Saturday afternoon Rami closed his shop as he always did at 4:30. He had told his brother that three days earlier he had sensed he was being followed home after work but had not made much of it. Two hours after closing up he called his wife and told her with much uncertainty that he hoped to be home in two hours and not to worry. He was not able to say where he was or why he was there. Rami never came home.

“Friends and family searched for him until late into the night. At 5:30 on Sunday morning his body was found beaten, a bullet through his head, another through his chest. His wallet, ID and watch were gone.”

Hanna Massad, pastor of Gaza Baptist Church, called the father of two a martyr and claimed Ayяд “was under severe pressure to leave his faith and convert to another faith; but he refused and he was willing to pay the ultimate price – his own life.”

In informing the Baptist World Alliance of the incident, Massad said that “even though we are proud of Rami’s faithfulness, we are nevertheless going through a very difficult time.”

The Gaza Bible Society, which is run by Massad’s wife, Suhad, has been attacked several times in the recent past. On April 15, the building was damaged by a bomb blast. The bombers first kidnapped the security guard, took him to another area of the city and beat him before setting off the bomb at the Bible Society building. The Society was previously attacked in 2006 when two pipe bombs exploded, damaging the building.

Massad indicated that “the Bible Society team will need to leave Gaza for a while,” and that “life is very dangerous in Gaza. We do not know who will be next.”
Roslyn Carter Offering in the United States will be used to “fund fact-finding visits to places where there are difficulties with religious freedom,” Peck said.

The resources available to the EBF in its support for religious freedom causes are also being built up with “the move of the Thomas Helwys Centre for the Study of Religious Freedom from Bristol Baptist College (in England) to IBTS in Prague,” Peck reported. “We hope that this will build up a good background resource as we continue to monitor religious freedom in our region.” The International Baptist Theological Seminary (IBTS) in the Czech Republic, formerly located in Switzerland, is owned and run by the EBF and is also where the EBF has its administrative offices.

Peck indicated that the European Baptist regional body is “looking at ways to provide more EBF staff time to deal more thoroughly with issues of religious freedom,” and added that the “External Relations Division Core Group has been hard at work on an EBF religious freedom strategy.”

Problems in Gaza stem from the blockade and the occasional bombing imposed by Israel, as well as from fighting among Palestinians, most notably the often violent standoff between the two major parties, Hamas, which controls the parliament, and Fatah, which controls the presidency of the Palestinian National Authority. Small radical, hard-line Muslim groups have bombed offices and businesses that they believe aid debauchery and adultery, such as Internet cafes where it is believed pornography may be accessed.

Ayyad, buried on October 7, but for whom a memorial service was held at the Gaza Baptist Church on Sunday morning, October 14, leaves wife Pauline who was four months pregnant at the time of his death, and two young sons. Ayyad would have turned 30 on October 23.

Baptist Pastor on Hit List

A Baptist pastor in Turkey has been placed on a death list.

Ertan Mesut Cevik, pastor of a Baptist church in Izmir, the modern name for biblical Smyrna, and Turkey’s third largest city by population, has received increased police protection after his name was found on a list carried by three suspected terrorists. The three, who are arrested, are suspected of planning wide scale attacks after a large cache of weapons was found in their possession.

Cevik has been under police protection since April 2007 after he hosted a funeral service for one of three Christians that was killed in Turkey on April 18. Two of the murder victims, Necati Aydin, 36, and Ugur Yuksel, 32, were Turks who converted from Islam to Christianity. The third man, Tillman Geske, 46, was a German citizen.

The Baptist pastor was also protected after he and the Baptist congregation were accused in a Turkish newspaper article, published after the three murders in April, of engaging in “coercive evangelism” by using money and drugs to attract young people. These charges were denied by the church.

Cevik was ordained by the Union of Evangelical Free Churches in Germany, a member body of the Baptist World Alliance (BWA). The Izmir congregation was founded in 2001 and is an associate member of the European Baptist Federation (EBF), one of six continental federations that are part of the BWA.

EBF General Secretary Tony Peck and General Secretary of the German Baptist union, Regina Claas, are appealing for prayer for Christians in Turkey and for the Baptist congregation in Izmir in particular.
Religious Freedom and Africa

In simplistic terms, it could be said that there are two Africas – a Muslim north and a Christian south. The same description may apply to some countries on the continent – a Muslim north Nigeria and a Christian south Nigeria, and a Muslim north Sudan and a Christian south Sudan.

Both religions are dominant on the African continent, and increasingly, tensions are rising. Much of the tension comes from the determined push of Christianity northward, as well as a determination by some Muslims to impose strict Islamic or Sharia law.

During the 20th century, Christianity experienced its fastest growth in Africa. While figures on religion are rarely precise and oftentimes lack clarity, statistics suggest there were nine million Christians in Africa in 1900, while in 2000, there were an estimated 380 million Christians. While only five percent of northern Africa is Christian, Christianity makes up approximately 64 percent of central Africa, 60 percent of both eastern and southern Africa, and more than 34 percent of western Africa. It is projected that by 2025, Africa will have 633 million Christians.

Baptist Christianity is also on the rise on the continent. The Tanzania Baptist Convention more than doubled its membership from roughly 200,000 in 2001 to almost 490,000 by 2005. The Baptist Convention of Kenya had approximately 400,000 members and 2,036 churches in 2001 and grew to almost 625,000 members and almost 3,000 churches by 2006. The Baptist Union of Uganda reported 37,000 members in 2003 and by 2005 it showed 60,000 members with the number of congregations increasing from 1,000 to 1,700.

The phenomenal growth of Baptists and other Christians in Africa puts Christianity on a collision course with Islam. There is a growing presence of Christianity. In Algeria, a law was passed in 2006 that banned the embrace of any religion other than Islam. Violations of this law may result in a prison sentence of between two and five years. Five Christians were sentenced in June 2007 for violating the law, charged with preaching Christian doctrine and committing public order offences.

Attempts to impose Islamic law are increasing. Since 1999, some 11 northern states in Nigeria have adopted and have sought to enforce, to varying degrees, Sharia law. This has created conflict and controversy. Riots occurred that allegedly had their source in religious affiliation and policy, the worst being two confrontations that took place in Kaduna state between February and May of 2000. In Kano state, attempts have been made to make “Islamic Law supreme over provisions of the constitution” (http://www.wwrn.org).

Repressive actions have been taken against Christians in several countries. In September 2007, a 33 year old Christian woman in Eritrea was tortured to death for refusing to recant her Christian faith.

A torture technique known colloquially as “the helicopter” is commonly used against Christians in that country. The technique involves having the victim lying contorted on the ground, balanced on the stomach, hands clutching the feet behind the back while the legs are bent backward, almost double.

One victim, who was tied in this position for more than 130 hours, relates his story. “They kept asking me to sign a document, and agree to not participate in church activities or express my faith in any form. I was told I would be untied and released the minute I agreed to their requests.” More than 2,000 Eritrean Christians are reportedly locked up for their faith.

In northern Africa, there are attempts to push back the growing presence of Christianity. In Algeria, a law was passed in 2006 that banned the embrace of any religion other than Islam. Violations of this law may result in a prison sentence of between two and five years. Five Christians were sentenced in June 2007 for violating the law, charged with preaching Christian doctrine and committing public order offences.

Even though the constitution grants freedom of religion in Egypt, a law passed in May 2007 prevents Christians in
Egypt who convert to Islam and wish to revert to Christianity, from having their Christian status on identification papers. But Muslims who convert to Christianity and who wish to go back to being listed as followers of Islam are not barred from having their Islamic status on identification papers. An Egyptian Muslim who converted to Christianity reportedly went into hiding in August 2007 after receiving death threats following his attempt to get official recognition of his change of religion.

But even in predominantly Christian countries in Africa, there are concerns that some laws, or proposed legislation or government action, may encroach, or have encroached, on religious liberties. In April 2007, the Kenya minister responsible for constitutional affairs proposed a law to regulate churches because “churches must be accountable since some of them have been commercialized.” In Rwanda, police detained scores of “street preachers” in early 2007.

In Zimbabwe, where the church is increasingly being seen as an opposition force to the Robert Mugabe-led government, at least 15 pastors were arrested in August 2007 for attending an unsanctioned meeting. Earlier in January 2007, nine pastors, including Bulawayo Baptist Church pastor Raymond Motsi, were arrested after attending a meeting of 300 pastors and church leaders. Under Zimbabwe’s Public Order and Security Act, designed to clamp down on opposition activities, it is an offence to gather in groups of more than three without first seeking approval from the police.

**The complexities of Africa**

The two primary forces that appear to affect religious freedom on the African continent are what appears to be the growth of Christianity on the one hand, and, on the other, increasing attempts by Muslims to establish, or maintain Islamic rule. This is only part of the explanation. Tied into this are the complexities of ethnic group rivalry; the establishment and control of economic interests, including valuable resources such as gold, diamond and oil; and the capture and maintenance of political power.

In Nigeria, the oil rich Niger Delta lies in the Christian south which, for the most part, remains impoverished without great benefit from the country’s petroleum wealth, the backbone of the national economy. Political power, for the most part, remains with the Muslim north. Ethnic rivalries between the Hausa-Fulani group (mainly Muslims in northern Nigeria), the Yoruba (Muslims and Christians in the southwest), and the mainly Christian groups such as the Igbo in the south, abound.

Similarly, the political center of Sudan is in the Muslim north, but the wealth of the country’s resources, oil, lies in the Christian south. Muslim Arabs in the north often engage in conflicts with Christian tribal groups in the south.

Such rivalries and conflicts may be chiefly regional (geopolitical), ethnic, religious, or a combination of all or some of these. Many clashes and wars often have economic undertones (the control of resources). Hovering in the background is the legacy of imposed, often cruel, colonialism by European countries such as Britain, France, Portugal and Belgium, which sets the foundation and tone for much of what happens on the continent today. The intrigue of international politics and rivalry, and the interests of multinational corporations, play a significant role as well.

Regardless, a net effect is that religious and other freedoms are often a casualty of many of Africa’s conflicts and rivalries. But the evidence suggests that Christianity, rather than retreating, is on an untrammeled advance. **BW**

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**Tied into this are the complexities of ethnic group rivalry; control of economic interests including gold, diamond and oil; and the capture and maintenance of political power.**

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Baptists in Rwanda
Neville Callam, Baptist World Alliance General Secretary, has completed a North American tour that included cities in Canada and the United States.

The tour, which began September 24 and ended October 29, took in more than 20 cities and included meetings with denominational leaders, pastors of churches, university and seminary presidents, deans and students. Public rallies and services where hundreds of Baptists attended were also held in the various cities.

The trip, an introductory tour, gave the Jamaican, who was elected in July in Accra, Ghana, in West Africa, an opportunity to interface with Baptists, the largest Protestant body on the North American continent.
Left: Callam preaches at Hodges Chapel at Beeson Divinity School in Birmingham, ALABAMA

Top: TEXAS. Duane Brooks, pastor of Tallowood Baptist Church, gives Callam and Alan Stanford a tour of the construction of the church’s new worship center.

Middle above: ATLANTA. (Left to right) Callam; T. DeWitt Smith, President of the Progressive National Baptist Convention, Inc.; Cleopatrick Lacy, President of the New Era Baptist State Convention of Georgia; and Daniel Vestal, Coordinator of the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship.

Left: LOS ANGELES. Callam meets with Indian Baptist leaders from South Africa (left to right) Alan Stanford, BWA Director of Mission Advancement; Brian Naidoo, Baptist Mission of South Africa; Callam; Harold Paul, Baptist Mission of South Africa; Samuel Chetti, Director of the American Baptist Churches of Los Angeles and the American Baptist Congregations of the Southwest and Hawaii.

Above: ATLANTA. Emmanuel McCall, Cooperative Baptist Fellowship Moderator and BWA Vice President, and Callam at the gravesite of Martin Luther King Jr. and Coretta Scott King.

Left: MISSOURI. Callam and Jim Hill, Executive Director of the Baptist General Convention of Missouri.

(Left): FLORIDA Callam with pastors from South Florida.
Wayne Dehoney, a former member of the Executive Committee and General Council of the Baptist World Alliance, died on November 15 in Louisville, Kentucky. He was 89.

The former pastor of Walnut Street Baptist Church in Kentucky and other congregations in other states was elected twice as president of the Southern Baptist Convention and served in that position from 1964 to 1966. He also sat on the Executive Boards of the Kentucky and Tennessee Baptist Conventions.

In addition to his pastoral and other responsibilities, Dehoney was well known for organizing trips to the Holy Land, and was co-founder of Dehoney Travel. In 1998, he received the 50th Anniversary Travel and Tourism award from the Israeli government in recognition of his promotion of tourism in the Holy Land. He also led mission trips to Russia, Ukraine, Brazil, China, and to the continent of Africa.

Dehoney, who was a member of the BWA Promotion and Development Committee, was predeceased by 23 days by his wife, Lealice, who died on October 23. He leaves children Rebecca, Katherine and William, along with four grandchildren and two great grandchildren.

A memorial service was held on November 19 at Walnut Street Baptist Church with private burial at the Cave Hill cemetery.

Special gifts and offerings are being received by the BWA for the Baptist World Alliance Wayne and Lealice Dehoney Fund for Middle East Peace.

Jack Snell, formerly of the Freedom and Justice Commission of the Baptist World Alliance, and director of global field ministries for the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship (CBF), died on October 2, of pancreatic cancer.

A pastor for almost 40 years, Snell served congregations in Alabama, Florida, Georgia and Kentucky, and joined the CBF in 2000 as associate coordinator for mission teams in Asia. He later became director of global field ministries supervising field personnel and support teams.

Snell worked closely with the BWA on freedom and justice issues, and was a member of the BWA team that made a human rights visit to Vietnam in May, 2006.

He is survived by his wife, Anita, a member of the BWA Commission on Worship and Spirituality; his son, Charles; and daughter, Stephanie. He was 66 years old.

Our grateful thanks to the following friends for their gifts to the Baptist World Alliance

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- Rev. David Benjamin, Kings Cross Church, Tullahoma, TN in memory of Ralph McIntyre
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- Mountain Grove Baptist Church, Hickory, NC in memory of Rev. Fred Tho

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**Gifts to the Baptist World Aid Hunger Fund, in memory of Mr. Dwight Gladfelter, were given by:**

- Paul & Marsha Lewis
- Robert & Becky Williams

**Gifts to the Baptist World Alliance William J. Cumbie Emerging Leaders Fund, in memory of William J. Cumbie, were given by:**

- Harry Ng
- Neal and Betty Jones
Talking with Muslims

Let me share my story of two men called Abdullah. One man is His Royal Highness King Abdullah II of Jordan. The other Abdullah hires horses to tourists in the ancient city of Petra.

King Abdullah II of Jordan granted me an audience during a recent visit to the Middle East when our delegation shared with him the concerns of Jordanian Baptists for full religious liberty and recognition by the state. We congratulated the King on his eloquent address to the US Congress and shared our mutual concerns for peace in the Middle East. The King gave advance notice that 138 moderate Muslim scholars were writing an open letter to the Pope and the leadership of the Baptist World Alliance would be included as named recipients of this significant letter. The King shared that without peace and justice between Christians and Muslims there can be no meaningful peace in the world. We are now in receipt of the open letter from the Muslim scholars and the BWA General Secretary and I are consulting on a considered response to the important issues raised in the letter.

I met the other Abdullah during a visit to the ancient city of Petra. I had walked the hot and dusty trail into the heart of this amazing “rose red city half as old as time,” and felt I had stumbled on to the film set of Indiana Jones and the Last Crusade. I opted to hire a horse for the return journey which was how I met Abdullah. His first question to me was “Are you a Christian?” which was swiftly followed by the enquiry “What, aren’t you a Muslim?” My answer to his friendly questions was returned while balancing on the back of a horse – my first time in the saddle for over 30 years! Abdullah was passionate about sharing his Islamic faith and I was sending up arrow prayers as I shared with him the reason for the hope I have in Jesus Christ (1 Peter 3:15). My encounter with two men called Abdullah was a reminder that talking with Muslims presents us with an opportunity to hear their concerns as well as express our own faith in Jesus Christ. I suggest that the following should shape our conversations:

- We need a bold humility in sharing what our Christian faith means to us. When there is a meeting of different faiths, it requires every party to be faithful to their own convictions and respectful of others.
- We need to give greater attention to mentioning the Bible in our conversations. Other faith traditions have a place of honor for their sacred scriptures and frequently quote from a relevant passage. When Christians fail to do this it appears we do not honor our own holy scriptures.
- We need to be unafraid to confess our sins. Christian history includes bloody crusades and inquisitions, social intolerance and intellectual bigotry. Vinoth Ramachandra suggests that any sharing of the gospel has to begin with the humble acknowledgement of betrayals of the gospel by the church itself.
- We need to demonstrate the virtues and graces of Christian discipleship in the power of the Holy Spirit. In the history of the Church, the most fruitful witness is always the demonstration of humbly following Jesus with a spirit of joyful and loving service.

In a recent survey conducted at Fuller Theological Seminary in California, 750 Muslims who have decided to follow Christ were invited to answer an extensive questionnaire based on the single question, “What attracts Muslims to follow Jesus?” (See the article by J Dudley Woodberry, “Why Muslims follow Jesus?” Christianity Today, October 2007).

The majority of those Muslims responding ranked the lifestyle of Christians as the most important influence in their decision to follow Christ.

In the words of St Francis of Assisi: “It is no use walking anywhere to preach unless our walking is our preaching.”
“[The last conference] was excellent and we hope to return as a force in 2008!!!”
— Trevor Garhardt, England

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