ANTICIPATING

South Africa
Contents

5 World Congress
5 Anticipating South Africa
6 Congress Notes
8 Embracing “the Other” through the BWA
10 From Copenhagen 1947 to Birmingham 2005

17 Merger Proposed
17 Callam Proposes Merger of Baptist Congress & Youth Conference

18 Worship, Fellowship & Unity
18 Callam Lauds Nigerian Baptists on Centenary
19 Newly Formed: Fellowship of Baptists in Ethiopia
20 Liberians Celebrate Centenary Session
20 BWA Director Receives Honorary Doctoral Degree
22 Newly Formed: Alliance of Turkish Baptists

22 United States: The Need for Solidarity, Hospitality and Fidelity in the Church
23 Latin Americans Launch 100-Day Prayer Campaign, Hold Peace Conference

25 Disaster Response
25 Serbian Baptists Appeal for Help after Deadly Flooding
25 Baptists Respond to Tornadoes and Flooding in the US

26 Human Rights
26 Prayer Appeal for Ukraine
26 Ukrainian & Russian Baptists Seek Common Ground
27 Nigerian Christians Pray for End to Terrorism
28 BWA Re-elected to NGO Board at the UN

28 Book Notes

29 In Memoriam
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Thank you for showing the
love of Christ to the world!
Since the inaugural Baptist World Congress in London, England, in 1905, the Baptist World Alliance has ranged far and wide in its choice of congress venues. The United Kingdom hosted two additional congresses – the Golden Jubilee Congress in London (1955) and the centenary congress in Birmingham (2005). All this was for understandable reasons. Continental Europe has welcomed four congresses – Stockholm, Sweden (1923 and 1975); Berlin (1934); and Copenhagen, Denmark (1947). According to past BWA president and general secretary, J. H. Rushbrooke, the Berlin Congress “worthily expressed the convictions of the great Baptist people.” Yet, that congress stirred controversy since tragically it took place when Hitler’s National Socialist German Workers Party was in power. Meanwhile, congress organizers did all they could so as not to offend the Nazis.

North America has hosted its fair share of Baptist World Congresses. Toronto, Canada, hosted two congresses (1928 & 1980). Six congresses were held in the United States – in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania (1911); Atlanta, Georgia (1939); Cleveland, Ohio (1950); and Miami Beach, Florida (1965). More recently, congress participants have met in Los Angeles, California (1985) and Honolulu, Hawaii (2010). Mention is often made of the Atlanta Congress that took place during what is sometimes referred to as the era of segregation in the US. At one of the events at that congress, more than 60,000 people were in attendance as the existing US segregation laws appear to have not been enforced fully in the city.

Three congresses have taken place in Asia Pacific. The first was in Tokyo, Japan (1970), and the second in Seoul, Korea (1990). Since then, BWA returned to the region for its 18th congress in Melbourne, Australia (2000). Many observers have commented on the memorable service during the Korean Congress when 10,000 persons were baptized in the Han River during a Saturday afternoon service.

Rio de Janeiro, Brazil (1960), and Buenos Aires, Argentina (1995), are the two South American cities that have hosted BWA congresses. At the Baptist World Congress in Philadelphia, Brazilian Baptists issued an invitation for the BWA to convene the third congress in Rio, but they had to wait for 49 years to host their first congress. The closing celebration of this congress took place in the Maracanã Stadium at which Billy Graham was the preacher. The approximately 200,000 people in attendance – the largest gathering at a Baptist World Congress to date – listened to Graham’s sermon on John 3:16.

The 21st Baptist World Congress will take place July 22-26, 2015, when, for the first time, this premier BWA quinquennial event will be held on the continent of Africa.

When Durban was chosen for the 2015 Congress, South Africa had already distinguished itself as a world class destination and had successfully hosted various international sporting events including the Rugby World Cup (1995); the cricket’s ICC Champions Trophy (2009); and the 19th FIFA Football World Cup (2010).

The unanimous decision to convene the 21st congress in South Africa is a sign of at least two significant facts. First, it represents BWA’s growing affirmation of its global dimensions. Second, it acknowledges that nearly 25 per cent of Baptists associated with the organization reside on the African continent.

Expectations are that the upcoming BWA congress will provide opportunity for immersion into the positive dimensions of South African life. South Africa’s historic demonstration of what it means for people to forgive one another emerged on the anvil of costly obedience undergirded by ubuntu. According to a white paper on welfare, issued by the South African government in 1996, ubuntu is:

- the principle of caring for each other’s well-being...and a spirit of mutual support....Ubuntu means that people are people through other people. It also acknowledges both the rights and the responsibilities of every citizen in promoting individual and societal well-being.

I hope that, in Durban, God will “do a new thing” in the life of the BWA. Let us prepare to enter fully into contemplation of Jesus Christ, the Door, with our eyes wide open to the new vistas that will come into view as we pass through the gate that Christ Jesus opens up to those who believe.

Neville Callam
The 21st Baptist World Congress begins on the evening of Wednesday, July 22, 2015, and officially concludes at noon on Sunday, July 26, with Bible study and worship. The theme is *Jesus Christ, the Door.*

The program includes inspirational evening plenary sessions. These will be times of celebrating God’s love when thousands of participants sing songs from various countries and cultures. Worship will be enriched by musical offerings presented by singers drawn from the worldwide Baptist family. There will be moving testimonies and inspired preaching.

Morning Bible studies will enable persons to participate in a language of their choice. The Bible studies will be enriched by the diversity and many perspectives that will be represented at the congress.

Afternoon seminars, workshops and fringe festivals will include streams focused on worship and Christian fellowship, mission and evangelism, freedom and justice and aid and development.

There will be a pastors’ stream, a children’s program for those under 11 years old and a youth track.

The Congress Arts Program comprises dynamic concerts featuring rich, varied musical talent from around the world, creative drama, art exhibition and visual displays.

A dedicated Prayer Room offers comfortable space for silence and reflection in the midst of the bustling congress program.
CONGRESS NOTES

CONGRESS WEBSITE
All details concerning the Baptist World Congress are available on the BWA website at:

www.bwanet.org/congress

PROMOTING CONGRESS
The BWA encourages Baptist individuals, churches and organizations to help promote the Baptist World Congress by making posts and links on churches’ and organizations’ websites, placements on churches’ bulletin boards and in printed bulletins, and share on personal and organizations’ social media platforms and websites. Downloadable brochures, posters and video are available on the website.

SOCIAL MEDIA
On social media, we encourage Baptists, churches and organizations to follow us on Twitter @TheBWA and join the BWA Facebook group. Persons are encouraged to post prayer requests, pictures and memories of past congresses, as well as re-share (re-Tweet) information posted by the BWA using the hashtag #BaptistCongress 15.

Short of becoming a missionary and serving overseas among Baptists in another country, I cannot imagine a better way to engage with the global Baptist family than to attend the upcoming congress in Durban. At the BWA congress you will meet Baptist leaders from all over the world. You will hear choirs and learn songs of worship from other lands, and discover the rich variety of how Baptists worship in different languages and styles. You will come home with a solid recognition that you are a part of a global reality, and that our Baptist family is widely dispersed and alive and well among the peoples of the earth. Maybe like me you will feel that the worldwide Baptist family is your own family of faith. The meeting will change the way you hear a news broadcast or read a news release, since behind the headlines you will see the images of brothers and sisters who live there and whose lives are impacted by what you are learning. You will find that the daily news will call you to prayer for fellow Baptists and their countrymen all over the earth.

— Bob Garrett, Piper Chair of Missions/director, Master of Arts in Global Leadership/Global Missions Center, Dallas Baptist University
Participants, scenes and activities at Baptist World Congresses through the years

**IMPORTANT DATES**

- Closing Date for EARLY BIRD Registration: November 30, 2014
- Closing Date for ONLINE Registration: July 10, 2015
- Executive Committee/General Council: July 21-22, 2015
- ONSITE Registration Opens: July 22, 2015
- 21st Baptist World Congress: July 22-26, 2015
When I was growing up in the Virginia suburbs of Washington, DC, in the 1950s and 1960s, I lived in a very uniform world. There was virtually no racial, ethnic or religious diversity in my elementary school, except for one Jewish family. Everybody I played with, learned with and worshipped with looked similar to me.

During those same years, our national press demonized some nations of the world as “Reds.” We lived in constant fear of the Soviets, and their even scarier neighbors the “Red Chinese.” The events of the Cuban Missile Crisis only exacerbated those fears. I remember the regular bomb drills we had at school, where a special alarm would go off and we would all file into the hallways and crouch along the walls with our heads buried in our arms. Did anybody actually think that would protect us from a nuclear bomb? Yet we practiced it, month after month.

In other words, I grew up in a context in which the “other” was unseen, untouched and very scary.

At the same time, my father was very involved with the Baptist World Alliance. He had made his commitment to ministry at the World Congress in Atlanta, Georgia, in 1939. One of his favorite parts about being located in the Washington area was the proximity of the BWA offices and his ability to be actively involved in its work. When a generous donor made it possible for him to attend the World Congress in Rio de Janeiro in 1960, we all waved him off with excitement and amazement at the places he would be seeing with his own eyes.

During those same years, my father was delighted to occasionally serve as a host for guests visiting the BWA. It was not unusual for me to give up my room and sleep on the floor of my sisters’ room while a person from another country or another part of this country slept in my bed. And that’s where my mind and my heart began to grow and stretch. Sometimes the guests Russian Baptists were involved in the Baptist World Alliance from its early days. Delegates from Russia to the 1911 Congress in Philadelphia, USA, are pictured below.
were white Americans, but they talked funny. Sometimes they were Americans of another racial or ethnic background. Sometimes they were from another continent. Once I even had actual Baptists from the Soviet Union sleeping in my bed! The variety was wide, and most guests were from places I had only read about. But I learned one very important lesson: each and every one of them was a human being who loved and worshipped the same God that I loved and worshipped. None were ogres; none were scary; none were out to hurt me. They were all just people, like me. As we talked around the breakfast table and shared photos of their families at home, each stopped being “other” and became a brother or sister in Christ.

My world has become much more brightly colored than it was all those years ago. I am delighted that my children grew up in a much richer environment than I did, with friends of many different backgrounds. Yet I’m not sure that I would have been able to enjoy the diversity of my current life nearly as much if I had not had the blessing of exposure to these fellow believers through the Baptist World Alliance.

— Beth Fogg, Communication Consultant for Mission Resource Development, American Baptist Churches USA
As an 18 year old evangelist I visited my first BWA Congress in Copenhagen, Denmark, in 1947, right after the end of World War II. I was so inspired by the worldwide fellowship that I brought a big group of Swedes to the Congress in London in 1955. Since then I have brought a group of Swedes, and often other Scandinavians, to every congress until the Centennial Congress in Birmingham, England, in 2005. I have had two main purposes for bringing groups of ordinary people to the congresses.

Firstly, they need to realize that not only Baptist national leaders should be involved in the worldwide fellowship. Secondly, we took the opportunity to visit other countries and/or places on the way to and from the congresses. Thus they became aware of the situation Baptist believers live in all over the world. The most extensive tours were Buenos Aires in 1995, when we also visited Brazil on the way to the congress, and Melbourne in 2000, when we visited Japan on the way to and China on the way back from the congress.

During many years I have also served on the Youth Committee (1960-65), the Commission on Evangelism and Mission (1960-65, 70-75), as chairman of the Conference of International Mission Secretaries 1973-1989 and as a participant.
I was born in Copenhagen 1937. I was 10 years old when we had the World Congress in Copenhagen in 1947. It was a very special congress that I remember very well, especially because my mother invited people from the congress to our home nearly every evening. These were people from all over the world but the biggest impression was the first black people I had ever seen. Among them was a singer who sang and played the piano we had in our home. My wife and I attended the youth conference in Berne, Switzerland, in 1968 (we were not that young however). We met Vic Jackopsen, now an international evangelist from England, who became a friend of ours. We attended the congress in Stockholm, Sweden, and more recently we attended the congress in Birmingham, England. We intend to be in Durban next year. Those experiences of a world family are amazing and wonderful and a big opportunity to open your eyes to other cultures. It strengthens your faith to see in very different cultures the Spirit of Christ.

— Svend Erik Jorgensen, Madrid, Spain

I have also attended the congresses and annual council meetings of the European Baptist Federation and served in various positions within the EBF throughout the years. As a close friend of the Baptist World Alliance I always follow the BWA with prayers and warm thoughts.

— Sven Ohm, Sweden, has held several positions in the BWA, including chair of the Conference of International Mission Secretaries from 1973-1989

MISSION PROJECTS

Mission opportunities are available before and after the congress in South Africa and other countries in Southern Africa. The BWA does not organize or arrange mission projects. Arrangements are made between partners. However, the BWA may facilitate such partnerships through the provision of contact information. The BWA also lists mission projects that groups plan independently. Mission project information may be sent to, or received, by writing to communications@bwanet.org. The BWA encourages groups participating in mission projects to share that information with the BWA as well.

PERFORMING & CREATIVE ARTS

Choirs, soloists, instrumentalists, ensembles, dance groups, drama groups and artists are encouraged to apply to participate in Performing Arts events at the congress. Creative arts expressions will reflect varied worship styles and cultural experiences from around the world. Congress Application forms are available online at www.bwanet.org/congress.
BWA NEGOTIATES DISCOUNTED AIRFARE FOR 2015 CONGRESS

Participants attending the 21st Baptist World Congress in Durban, South Africa, in 2015, can benefit from discounted airfares from South African Airways (SAA), the official airline for the congress.

The congress will be held from July 22-26, 2015, at the International Convention Center Durban.

A Baptist World Congress authorization code will be issued to participants by the Baptist World Alliance upon registration for the global event, after which the code may be used to book a discounted airfare directly with SAA. Registration for the congress is preferably done on the BWA website, www.bwanet.org/congress.

Discounted fares will become available as of August 2014. Travel must take place between July 8 and August 10, 2015. The discount ranges between 5 percent and 18 percent, subject to flight availability.

The discount is available on international, regional and domestic travels. Fare discounts will be determined by the origin of travel, flight schedule, and whether persons travel business or economy class. Code share flights are excluded.

Both the BWA and SAA encourage travelers to the congress to take advantage of the discounted airfares.

Further details are available on the BWA website.
My first congress was in Seoul, Korea, in 1990. My biggest shock was when I realized I had many spiritual siblings! I then wondered what heaven would be like if Baptists are such a diverse group! Dr. Charles Adams, then president of the Progressive Baptists, preached one of the most unforgettable sermons, “Together in Christ we LOVE!” My second congress in Birmingham in the UK in 2005 was overwhelming. In Hawaii in 2010, the preaching and workshops were phenomenal. I experienced the Spirit when a stranger at the lobby prophesied what I was leaving the congress with – the power of God. Indeed as I returned to the US mainland two women at two churches anointed me with oil affirming the prophecy, which manifested at home in South Africa. It is worth every penny to come to the congress!

— Diba Madolo, South Africa

Attending a BWA congress reminds me of God’s handiwork across the continents, displaying how He molds hearts and mobilizes souls for His Kingdom. I get to rendezvous with old friends of the family and joyously meet new brothers and sisters for the first time. Those BWA heavenly connections grow even more during the ensuing months as we communicate from pole to pole and unify our hearts in prayer.

— Donald Sewell, director, Faith in Action Initiatives, USA

Below: The baptism of 10,000 persons in Seoul, Korea, in 1990
We took books to Buenos Aires in 1995 as gifts for those with few. By my turn on the stall only two or three German books remained. Was I wasting my time? An Argentinian pastor appeared there one day because "the Lord has sent me to get help." His church wanted to work for those with developmental disabilities but did not know how. I help lead such work in Britain and in my briefcase were several of our books. He seized these with delight. We both knew God sent us there that afternoon.

— Faith Bowers, United Kingdom

In Argentina in 1995 I was a novice at world gatherings. I was bewildered and uneasy but the warm, friendly welcome made me comfortable. I saw women, confident and free at the forefront. Free to be who they were, created in the image of God. My self concept changed, self-esteem rose! Sharing this with my sisters was imperative.

— Indranie Premawardhana, Sri Lanka

My first congress was the Centenary World Congress in Birmingham, England, in 2005 and the second in Hawaii in 2010. I sang in an International music concert on July 26, 2005, in Birmingham and in Hawaii. It was a great privilege for me to participate in these two world congress programs.

— M. S. Sarwatkar, Mumbai, India
Standing in a plenary session of the 19th Baptist World Congress in Birmingham, England, listening in awe to familiar hymns being lustily sung, simultaneously, in a multiplicity of languages, I asked God to allow me to be instrumental in developing a diverse community – if not a congregation. BWA congresses emphasize – as few other events can – the possibilities of the human spirit and the power of the Christian church when, through their beautiful plethora of peoples, cultures, languages and origins, they fuse together in one Lord, one faith, and one baptism! This makes ministry much more purposeful, though certainly not easier, in these United States.

— Michael Friday, Trinidad and Tobago and USA

Through their beautiful plethora of peoples, cultures, languages and origins, they fuse together in one Lord, one faith, and one baptism!

TOUR OPPORTUNITIES AT BAPTIST WORLD CONGRESS

Participants at the 21st Baptist World Congress in South Africa will have the opportunity to participate in a number of tours during and after the week of meetings, the first in Africa.

The congress will be held July 22-26, 2015.

There will be a choice between two half-day tours on July 25, either a Durban City tour or the Ushaka Marine World Tour. These two tours will be restricted to a maximum 2,000 persons.

Several one-day tours are available. A Walk to Freedom Tour includes a visit to Robben Island where Nelson Mandela was imprisoned and a tour of Langa Township, the oldest apartheid housing scheme in the Cape, and other townships. Visitors will be provided hands-on experience of life in a township.

Participants can also visit the seat of the kingdom of Shaka, the legendary king of the Zulus, to experience traditional Zulu sites, culture and customs. Persons may witness the creation of and purchase traditional Zulu craft.

There is a safari tour to the Big Five game park, regarded as the oldest game reserve in Africa, to observe some of the 84 species of game, including the white rhino.

There is also a tour to battlefields between Zulu soldiers and British fighters, including the infamous Isandlwana and Rorke Drift battlefields.

Other tour options include a three-day fully guided “soft adventure journey,” the Buffalo Rock Tented Safari to the Kruger National Park. A five-day “fully guided flexible and combinable journey” to Salt Rock, St. Lucia, Swaziland and Hazyview, which incorporates trips to the beach, game reserve safaris, and experience of the Swazi culture. Another tour includes a trip to the country of Lesotho and the Royal Natal National Park.

For additional tour information, visit the Baptist World Alliance website: \[http://www.bwanet.org/congress/conference-tours\]
The BWA Congress has continually afforded me an opportunity to meet Christians of various nations and cultures, to make new friends, to engage in thoughtful theological/biblical conversations and to find answers from unexpected resources. That is how it has been for the last 38 years. The 2015 Congress may be my last, but it has been a glorious pilgrimage.

— Emmanuel McCall, Atlanta, Georgia, USA

... a glorious pilgrimage!

The Honolulu Hawaii Congress in 2010 broadened my scope in drawing up a conference program. The Cameroon Baptist Convention Women’s Union, at its 54th year of existence, held its first national conference in March 2011. The Honolulu program was my blueprint. More than 2,000 women participated. Ninety percent of the participants requested we have the conference yearly. We settled on having it once every four years. Imagine 2,000 women from all over Cameroon implementing what they saw and learned. God bless Baptist World Alliance.

— Elizabeth Samandi, Cameroon

Before an English-language Bible study at the Baptist World Congress in Hawaii in 2010, I said to my wife, Linda, “I hope we can meet someone from Cameroon.” Our church had recently helped a Baptist church in Bamunkumbit, Cameroon, with funds for a new building, and we were supporting its former pastor in his studies at the Cameroon Baptist Theological Seminary. The Bible study leader asked where participants were from. A lady sitting in the row behind us said, “Cameroon.” I whispered over my shoulder, “We’d like to talk with you after the session.” Thus was the beginning of our friendship with Mrs. Elizabeth Samandi, president of the Women’s Union of the Cameroon Baptist Convention. Sister Elizabeth has since visited and spoken in our church on several occasions. Currently our church is partnering with the CBC Women’s Union and Health Department to provide cancer screenings for women in underserved areas of Cameroon. Praise God for bringing us together at the Baptist World Congress!

— Bruce Salmon, Pastor, Bowie, Maryland, USA
Baptist World Alliance General Secretary Neville Callam has proposed that the Baptist World Congress and the Baptist Youth World Conference be merged. Both are planned by the BWA and are held at five-year intervals, normally two years apart from each other.

Callam made the proposal amid concerns of declining attendance at the two global events. “Over the years, attendance at these international events has been less than encouraging,” he told the BWA Executive Committee. “The relatively small attendance has severely strained BWA financial resources and has had the effect of diverting attention of BWA staff from other pressing aspects of the BWA mission.”

Callam provided statistics to back up his concern. The congress had more than 20,000 participants at the 1980 meetings in Canada. In 2010 in Hawaii, attendance was 4,400.

The youth conference had an attendance of approximately 7,000 in Scotland in 1988 and 8,000 in the United States in 1998. In 2013, just about 2,700 youth attended the event in Singapore.

“I believe that sound stewardship needs to be exercised in our approach to conceiving and planning future international conferences beyond 2015,” the BWA leader said. Plans are already at an advanced stage for the 21st Baptist World Congress in Durban, South Africa, in July 2015.

“It is important to note that what I am asking us to consider is the transformation of both the congress and the youth conference through their integration into one vast opportunity for interaction among Baptists,” he told the Executive Committee. “This transformation does not affect only the youth conference, but also the congress. The driving force behind this appeal is the firm desire to preserve the opportunities these two quinquennial events afford.”

Callam believes that “thoughtful planning should preserve the opportunity for the youth to share fellowship with each other and to experience worship in ways that reflect the admissible values they hold.” Similarly, “careful planning should also offer to adults and children the opportunity for meaningful encounter with each other and with the youth population of our churches.”

Callam envisages that the 2020 global meetings “could be a great gathering in which children, youth, young people and adults in the church community across the worldwide Baptist family have the opportunity to experience a first great gathering in which the best features of both the youth conference and the congress are brought together in an appropriate way.”

Such an “international gathering will provide BWA with an opportunity to respond to the challenge to preserve some of our best mission consciousness-raising opportunities, to facilitate extensive networking among Baptists worldwide, and to offer worship and fellowship opportunities using a flexible, effective, and sustainable vehicle,” Callam declared.

Callam indicated that any future planning of global conferences and meetings should take into account technological developments, especially in international communications. “As is well known, ways of understanding what it means to be together have changed,” he told the group of Baptist leaders from around the world. “Although not all aspects of the change are welcome, we need to bear this development in mind when we are planning international meetings.”

The Executive Committee approved the establishment of a General Secretary’s Special Commission to consider the possible design for such an international meeting.
Baptist World Alliance General Secretary Neville Callam commended Nigerian Baptists on the role they have played in the worldwide Baptist community at an event to mark the 100th anniversary of the Nigerian Baptist Convention (NBC).

Callam Lauds NIGERIAN BAPTISTS on Centenary

More than 30,000 people gathered at the Hebron Baptist Center in Ibadan for the week of celebration from April 26 to May 1.

NBC is the largest BWA member body in Africa, with approximately 3.5 million members in about 10,000 churches.

Baptist witness started in Yorubaland in 1850 through the work of Thomas Jefferson Bowen, a missionary from the United States. Baptist churches formed the Yoruba Baptist Association in 1914 and renamed it the Nigerian Baptist Convention in 1919.

Callam commended the work of Nigerian Baptists in mission, notably in other countries in West Africa such as Ghana and Sierra Leone. “You gave impetus to the work, provided critical support, and facilitated independent national organizations enjoying leadership from among their members,” Callam told the gathering of Baptists on April 30.

Nigerians have been among the leaders of the BWA, holding key positions in the international umbrella organization. These included BWA vice presidents James Tanimola Ayorinde (1955-1960 and 1970-75), Atinuke Bamijoko (1985-90) Osadolor Imasogie (1995-2000) and Yemi Ladokun (2005-2010).

Callam said Nigerians played a leading role in the formation of the All Africa Baptist Fellowship (AABF) in 1982. Nigerian Samuel Titilola Oladele Akande was the first general secretary/treasurer of the AABF as well as BWA regional secretary for Africa, serving from 1982-1992. Isaac Durosinsjesu Ayanrinola has been AABF general secretary and BWA regional secretary for Africa since 2012.

Nigerians have inspired Baptists worldwide as keynote speakers at the Baptist World Congress, the largest international gathering of Baptists that is held every five years. Nigerian congress speakers included Ayorinde in 1950 in Cleveland, Ohio, in the United States and in 1955 in London, England; S. A. Lawoyin in 1960 in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil; Akande in 1980 in Toronto, Canada; Atinuke Bamijoko in 1990 in Seoul, South Korea; and Solomon Ademola Ishola in Birmingham, England, in 2005.

“Today, 100 years after the association was formed, we have good reason to pause to offer praise and thanks to our God and Savior through whose sovereign grace Nigeria Baptists have been empowered for witness over these many years,” Callam declared.

During the meetings, NBC commissioned two missioners to South Africa and more than 75 new ministers who recently completed training in Bible schools or theological seminaries.

African countries that host missioners from NBC sent representatives to the centenary meetings, including South Sudan, Ivory Coast, Mozambique, Burkina Faso, Benin, Togo, Sierra Leone, Mali, Chad, and Tanzania and the United Kingdom.

Leaders and representatives of Baptist groups in Ghana, Liberia, Nigerians in the American and British Diaspora and the World Council of Churches were also present at the celebration. NBC Chairman, Uche Enyioha, presided at the anniversary events that were organized and led by Samson Ayokunle, president.

Greetings were given on behalf of Nigeria President Goodluck Jonathan and by Governor ABIOLA AJIMOSI of Oyo state and traditional Nigerian leaders.
Seven Baptist groups in Ethiopia met for the first time and organized an umbrella organization, the Fellowship of Baptists of Ethiopia.

The meeting on May 5, which was facilitated by the Baptist World Alliance and the All Africa Baptist Fellowship, formed a committee to help determine the types and levels of cooperation between the seven bodies, which will cooperate in the newly established fellowship.

“This was to be the very first time that leaders of these groups were gathering for discussion and it was wonderful to have the opportunity to facilitate the event,” said BWA General Secretary Neville Callam, who was present at the meeting in Addis Ababa, the country’s capital. “There was an exchange of information which involved each group telling the story of its beginnings and characterizing its current ministry.”

Callam said “participants expressed joy and relief for the opportunity they had to meet each other in loving fellowship and sharing.”

The seven groups are the Ethiopian Baptist Evangelical Church, the Ethiopian Addis Kidan (New Covenant) Baptist Church, the Ethiopian Berhane Christos (Light of Christ) Baptist Church, the Ethiopian Berhane Wangel (Light of the Gospel) Baptist Church, the Ethiopian Bible Baptist Church, the Ethiopian Bole Bible Baptist Church and the Immanuel Baptist Church Fellowship.

The Ethiopian Baptist Evangelical Church and the Ethiopian Addis Kidan (New Covenant) Baptist Church are member organizations of the BWA.

The seven represent a total membership of approximately 180,000 believers with the Ethiopian Berhane Christos (Light of Christ) Baptist Church reporting 100,000.

They trace their origins to mission work done by Converge Worldwide, formerly known as Baptist General Conference, the Southern Baptist Convention and Baptist Bible Fellowship International.

Duro Ayanrinola, BWA regional secretary for Africa and general secretary of the All Africa Baptist Fellowship, who helped to arrange the meeting, expressed joy in the fulfillment of the promise of his previous meeting with some of the Baptists in Ethiopia.

Also attending the meeting was the leader of the East Africa Baptist Mission, a mission agency started by some Baptists in Ethiopia that offers training in mission to persons in, Ethiopia, South Sudan, Kenya and Uganda.

Baptist work has been affected by political and social realities in the Horn of Africa country. Emperor Haile Selassie adopted policies that favored good relationships between Ethiopia and the United States, which provided encouragement for mission work.

After Selassie was overthrown and killed in 1974, the communist government of Mengistu Haile Mariam expelled missionaries from Ethiopia, but the great famine in 1984 and 1985 forced the government to allow foreigners back into the country, enabling mission workers to return.

The overthrow of the Mengistu government in 1991 by the Revolutionary Democratic Front, a coalition of four parties, has led to dynamic economic growth in some sectors of the economy, with Ethiopia having one of the fastest growing economies in the world, and the easing or removal of religious restrictions.

Ethiopia has deep Christian roots going back to the early church in New Testament times. The apostle Matthew is said to have died there. It is one of the first countries to adopt Christianity as an official religion.

Protestants, including Baptists, have experienced rapid numerical growth over the past several decades.
The Centennial Celebration of the Annual Session of the Liberia Baptist Missionary and Educational Convention (LBMEC) was held over several weeks in the month of March.

Baptist work began in Liberia at the founding of the colony in the 1820s by freed enslaved persons from the United States. Though LBMEC was formed in 1880, several years would lapse between meetings due to various reasons.

The 2014 celebrations included “pilgrimages” to the Good Hope Baptist Church in Marshall City where, in 1880, the first session of the LBMEC was held and to First Baptist Church Edina in Grand Bassa County, where the LBMEC was conceptualized.

Emmett Dunn, director of the Baptist World Alliance Youth Department, was one of six persons conferred with an honorary Doctor of Divinity degree by the Liberia Baptist Theological Seminary (LBTS) on March 31.

“The Board of Trustees with the Administration of the Liberia Baptist Theological Seminary recognizes Emmett Lafayette Dunn’s distinguished labor in His Service, the commitment to humanitarian advances and excellent leadership to the church, the community, the nation, and the world,” the citation reads.

Dunn, a Liberian and alumnus of LBTS, showed “excellence and promise” from early. This promise has been fulfilled in his studies, life and work as he “has increased in wisdom and stature and in favor of God and humanity.”

Despite his involvement on the global stage, the BWA director “has not allowed his global identity to detract from his local commitments to the Body of Christ” in Liberia. Dunn was chair of the Board of Advisors of the Ricks Institute School in Liberia from 2006-2012 and serves on its Board of Trustees. Ricks,
Also in March, Richard Wilson, a professor at Mercer University in the state of Georgia in the United States, who was seconded to serve in Liberia, was installed as the sixth president of LBTS.

Baptists have, historically, been among the most influential religious groups in the West African country.

Lott Carey, one of the first black American missionaries as well as the first Baptist missionary to Africa from the US, was instrumental in the founding of the Colony of Liberia. The colony officially became the Republic of Liberia in 1847.

Joseph Cheeseman, a founder of the LBMEC and who served as its president for 16 years, was president of Liberia from 1892 until his death in 1896.

William Tolbert, president of Liberia from 1971 until his assassination in 1980, was president of the Baptist World Alliance from 1965-1970, the first African to hold that position. He was previously elected LBMEC president in 1958.

Other Baptists have held senior government and elected positions in the country.

Founded in the 1880s, LBTS is a Baptist school from kindergarten to grade 12, with a coeducational residential campus. He also served as a member of the Board of Trustees of LBTS from 2009-2012.

Dunn was born in Monrovia, Liberia’s capital. After earning a Bachelor of Theology degree from LBTS, he was ordained to the Christian ministry in 1987 at Providence Baptist Church, his home church, and was appointed education director and assistant minister.

He received a World Council of Churches scholarship and studied at the Virginia Theological Seminary and the Howard University School of Divinity, in the United States. He has done additional studies in sustainable community development at Colorado State University.

Dunn became director of the BWA Youth Department in 1994 and, as of 2006, helps to coordinate planning for the Baptist World Congress, conferences and meetings.

Others conferred with the honorary Doctor of Divinity degree by LBTS were Liberians Anthony Jonah and Mydea White, as well as Americans John Mark Carpenter, second president of LBTS, philanthropist Earl Stafford and advocate for Liberia, Esther Worthington.
Turkey has a deep Christian heritage that goes back to the Early Church, but Christians are now a minority. It is estimated that there are approximately 120,000 Christians in Turkey, out of a population of more than 76 million. Only a few thousand Protestants are in the transcontinental country, which straddles both Western Asia and Southeastern Europe. Sunni Islam is the majority religion.

Many of the travels by the Apostle Paul recorded in the book of Acts were in Turkey. The epistles to the Galatians, Ephesians and Colossians were addressed to churches located in modern day Turkey. The book of Revelation was addressed to seven churches in what is now western Turkey. The first seven Christian Ecumenical Councils took place in the territory that is now Turkey.

The founding of the Alliance of Baptist Churches in Turkey occurs just months before the Baptist World Alliance begins its Annual Gathering in Izmir in early July. Izmir is biblical Smyrna mentioned in the book of Revelation. The Annual Gathering includes a tour of the ruins of Ephesus, an important biblical city of the Early Church.

The BWA Annual Gathering brings together denominational leaders, pastors, theologians, seminary presidents, professors and interested Baptists from around the world for worship, fellowship, study and decision meetings.

**— Newly Formed —**

**Alliance of TURKISH Baptists**

Four Baptist congregations have formed the Alliance of Baptist Churches in Turkey.

The goals of the group are to encourage member churches, explain the teachings of Baptists to member churches and to others, develop Baptist leaders, pray for the churches’ needs, highlight these needs to other churches, and strengthen believers by organizing seminars, camps and conferences.

Ertan Çevik, pastor of Izmir Baptist Church, was elected president and Orhan Pıçaklar, pastor of Samsun Agape Church, was named general secretary. Each will serve an initial term of five years.

**— UNITED STATES —**

**The Need for Solidarity, Hospitality and Fidelity in the Church**

Baptist World Alliance General Secretary Neville Callam urged a Baptist congregation in Atlanta, Georgia, in the United States, to commit to cultivating three virtues that are evident in healthy churches.

The BWA leader spoke on the occasion of the 152nd anniversary of Friendship Baptist Church, the oldest African American Baptist Church in Atlanta. Organized in the days of the American Civil War and unable to purchase property, Friendship Baptist started meeting in a discarded boxcar that they received from a church in Chattanooga, Tennessee. The church grew rapidly and, over the years, it started nine Baptist churches in different locations in Atlanta.

What is now called Atlanta University was first housed at Friendship Church. The church also provided accommodation for Morehouse College when, in 1879, it moved from Augusta to Atlanta. In 1881, Spelman Collage had its beginnings in the basement of the church. Interim pastor is Emanuel McCall, a former BWA vice president and a current BWA ambassador.

There is the need, Callam said, for churches to practice a solidarity that goes beyond ethnic boundaries, social status and gender differences. He noted that, in the early church, Jewish and Gentile believers belonged together in the one Christian family because they were united in Christ whom they claimed as their Lord. Within the church, he said, “every believer in Christ finds a sense of belonging.”

There is need, Callam said, for churches to embrace a hospitality that is based on friendship. Callam asserted that in the first 500 years in Christian history, it was common practice for Christians to welcome strangers and neighbors whom they encountered. These early Christians shared their lives with the needy and “they did this without concern for advantage or ambition.” In their manifestation of the spirit of true hospitality, “they encountered the risen Christ in the needy stranger.”

Callam also commended the need for a fidelity that expresses itself in authentic Christian living. True fidelity “does not put selfish interest first” nor does it “count the cost involved when one is determined to follow the teachings of the Lord of the church.” He emphasized that fidelity “does not scorn serious effort” but instead “opens its arms to joyfully embrace obedience to the demands of love modeled by Christ Jesus.”

Callam encouraged believers that, as “citizens of the kingdom of heaven,” to let solidarity, hospitality and fidelity “join hands” and “kiss each other,” as they continue the search for a new home. The church recently voted to accept an offer from the city of Atlanta to purchase its property in order to build a new stadium, and is making plans for relocation.
Baptists in Latin America launched a 100-day Continental Campaign of Prayer during the annual congress of the Union of Baptists in Latin America (UBLA) in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil, from April 22-26.

The prayer campaign was launched during a worship service under the theme “Jesus: Transformation and Life.” A 120-voice Cristolandia (Christland) Choir comprising men and women rescued from the streets known as Crackolandia (Crack Land) made a deep impression on the worshippers.

A prayer campaign resource guidebook with 100 meditations was launched during the worship service. It includes six texts written by Baptist World Alliance Director of Mission, Evangelism and Theological Reflection Fausto Vasconcelos and one by BWA Director of Freedom and Justice Raimundo Barreto. It is available in Spanish and Portuguese, in print and electronic formats.

(Continued on next page)
During the 100 days of prayer, Baptists from across Latin America were encouraged to engage in joint efforts such as evangelism, discipleship, the planting of new churches and social action.

During their meetings and workshops, congress participants focused on urban ministries and the engagement of Latin American realities including urban violence, drugs, poverty and inequality. Studies were conducted on themes such as unmet demands for peace and justice, a new paradigm for a transformed city, and the development of influential ministries from the city and for the city.

The status of youth and children and the state of theological education were also matters of concern addressed by the approximately 100 delegates from 14 countries.

A peace conference, organized by UBLA with support from the BWA, the first among Latin American Baptists, preceded the congress. The peace conference explored the challenges of having a prophetic voice, nonviolent resistance, environmental conflicts and eco-justice, human dignity and gender in light of liberating pedagogies, racism, and urban churches and social exclusion. Conference representatives heard testimonies of Baptist work for peace in countries such as El Salvador, Colombia and Brazil.

The conference produced the Baptist Declaration of Rio de Janeiro, 2014, and formed the Latin American Baptist Peace Community (Fellowship).

The declaration affirms, among other things, that the way forward to solve national and international conflicts is nonviolence through dialogue and negotiations. The declaration demands from governments, churches and other civil society organizations, greater and more sustained efforts to establish processes to eradicate urban and other forms of violence in Latin America.

The document encouraged Latin American Christians, Baptists especially, to renew their commitment to “continue to preach, teach, and practice the gospel of the Kingdom of God,” glorifying God in their work for the liberation of the poor and victims of violence, so that persons may live in peace.

The Peace Community will make plans for the next Latin American Baptist Peace Conference.
SERBIAN BAPTISTS Appeal for Help after Deadly Flooding

Baptists in Serbia appealed to the worldwide Baptist family for assistance after deadly floods affected large parts of Southeast Europe.

The Baptist World Alliance sent an initial sum of US$8,000 in relief assistance.

Heavy rainfall between May 14 and 17 caused heavy flooding and landslides, killing at least 62 people in several countries with hundreds of thousands left homeless. Serbia and Bosnia and Herzegovina suffered the greatest damage with Croatia, Romania and Slovakia also affected.

“Many are suffering,” wrote Ondrej Franka and Dane Vidovic, president and general secretary, respectively, of the Union of Baptist Churches in Serbia. Franka and Vidovic told the Baptist World Alliance that rivers flooded “many cities, towns and villages.”

Baptists have not been spared. “Believers from the town of Obrenovac have been evacuated and came to the Baptist church in Belgrade where they will live until their houses are made livable again,” Franka and Vidovic said. The houses of a pastor and church planter were flooded out.

The Serbian Baptist leaders appealed for financial assistance and for food, water, hygienic packs, diapers, blankets, beds and linens. “This is a great opportunity to help Serbia and show the people and especially authorities that God cares.”

Baptists Respond to Tornadoes and Flooding in the US

Baptists responded to the spate of natural disasters that caused the loss of life and property in parts of the United States in late April.

On April 25, numerous severe thunderstorms developed across central and eastern North Carolina into southern Virginia, damaging or destroying 100 homes, killing one person and injuring 16 others.

From April 27-29, numerous tornadoes ripped across parts of Mississippi, Alabama, Iowa, Nebraska, Missouri, Kansas, Oklahoma, Arkansas and Florida.

More than 160 tornadoes were reported over a four day period and more than 60 confirmed by authorities.

A large tornado struck Mayflower and Vilonia in Arkansas on April 27 causing severe damage, killing 15 people. Another death was confirmed with a tornado that moved through Quapaw, Oklahoma, and Baxter Springs, Kansas. At least nine people were killed when a tornado struck Louisville, Mississippi.

Severe flooding has also been associated with the storm system, with areas of Florida, Arkansas, Missouri, Maryland and other states badly affected. At least 35 people have died from the tornadoes and floods.

Groups such as the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship, Virginia Baptists, North Carolina Baptist Men and Texas Baptist Men have responded or are preparing to do so. Others awaited assessment from first responders and disaster relief coordinators to determine their response.

The Baptist World Alliance, through Baptist World Aid, monitored the level of damage and response to the various disasters.
Prayer Appeal for UKRAINE

The Euro-Asiatic Federation of Evangelical Christian-Baptists, a sub-regional group of Baptists, appealed for prayer for Ukraine during its 55th congress in Almaty, Kazakhstan, on May 11.

The congress noted that “Ukraine represents one of the early centers of the Evangelical-Christian Baptist movement in prerevolutionary Russia” and that the country comprises “the largest number of churches as well as individual believers” in the sub-region.

Participants in the conflict in Ukraine were urged “to avoid actions that fuel discord and strife,” to “turn away from any manifestations of hostility, hatred, bitterness, or bloodshed” and to “resist the temptation to escalate tensions and instead to pull back from the darkening abyss.”

“We recognize that prayer is the most important weapon in our spiritual struggle,” the delegates declared. In praying for Ukraine, its leaders and citizens, the Baptist gathering offered “to make every effort to assist the Ukrainian people in restoring peace and in living in a way that is pleasing to God.”

Baptist believers in the region were encouraged to join together in a day of prayer and fasting over the situation in Ukraine.

Members in the Euro-Asiatic Federation are drawn mainly from countries that were part of the Soviet Union and which gained independence after that country collapsed in 1991. Representatives at the meeting in Kazakhstan came from Russia, Ukraine, Belarus, Moldova, Armenia, Georgia, Azerbaijan, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Uzbekistan, Tajikistan and Turkmenistan.

UKRAINIAN & RUSSIAN Baptists Seek Common Ground

Baptist leaders in Ukraine and Russia met in April to “present a visible sign of support for the possibility of a peaceful dialogue between our churches and nations.”

The meeting took place in the wake of the collapse of the previous government in Ukraine in February in the face of widespread protests and tensions between Ukraine and Russia that threatened the possibility of war.

Vyacheslav Nesteruk, president of the All-Ukrainian Union of Associations of Evangelical Christians-Baptists (AUUAECB) and Alexey Smirnov, president of the Russian Union of Evangelical Christians-Baptists, met at the Kiev offices of the AUUAECB on April 8.

A communique from that meeting condemned “all acts of violence and brutality against persons as well as the resolution of political problems by military means.” The leaders appealed “to all who are responsible for the future of our countries to hold firmly to the principles of freedom of conscience and confession as well as the non-interference of the state and political forces in the internal life of religious organizations.”

Baptist and other Christians in both Ukraine and Russia were encouraged “to pray for a peaceful resolution of the political confrontation between our two countries” and “to contribute to the process of forgiveness and agreement between our peoples.”

Ukrainians and Russians, Christians in particular, were “to make every effort to avoid any provocations, to retain in their hearts love for the neighbor [and] to respect his human dignity and religious beliefs.”

The leaders expressed sorrow at the loss of life that resulted from the conflicts and pledged “our sincere willingness to pray and support deeds of fraternal dialogue and the promotion of peace in the Russian and Ukrainian societies.”

Despite what happens, Nesteruk, the Ukrainian Baptist president, and Smirnov, his Russian counterpart, said “We are ready, regardless of our circumstances, to cooperate further in proclaiming the Gospel in our own countries and throughout the world.”

Below: Russian Baptist Union President Alexey Smirnov (left) and Ukraine counterpart Vyacheslav Nesteruk, at a meeting in Kiev on April 8
Baptists joined other Christians in Nigeria on May 15 to pray for the end of terrorist activities in the West African country.

Samson Olasupo Ayokunle, president and CEO of the Nigerian Baptist Convention (NBC) and vice president of the Christian Association of Nigeria (CAN), said CAN “declared a national day of prayer and fasting to stem the tide of the terrorist activities in general and the return of the Chibok girls in particular.”

The “Chibok girls” refer to approximately 276 female students who were kidnapped from a school in the town of Chibok in Borno State between April 14 and 15. The kidnappings were claimed by Boko Haram, an Islamic Jihadist and terrorist organization based in northeast Nigeria.

Thousands of people have been killed in attacks perpetrated by Boko Haram. Since 2010, the group has targeted schools, killing hundreds of students. Boko Haram’s attacks intensified in 2014 and have been blamed for approximately 4,000 deaths since the beginning of the year.

Ayokunle said Baptists “observed the prayer and fasting with other Christians at the National Christian Center in Abuja,” Nigeria’s capital city, while the approximately 10,000 affiliated churches of NBC were expected to engage in prayer as well.

(Continued on next page)
The Baptist World Alliance has been re-elected to another term on the board of CoNGO, the Conference of NGOs in Consultative Status with the UN. This occurred during the 25th General Assembly of CoNGO in New York, from April 1-4.

The BWA was renewed as one of 20 members of the CoNGO Board for the 2014-2017 period. It will serve on two standing committees of the board and continue to be actively involved in the work of the NGO Substantive Committees at the UN.

Membership with the NGO Committee on the Status of Women, one of the most vibrant and active NGO committees at the UN, was also formalized by the BWA. The BWA will once again participate in the 65th DPI/NGO Conference, which focuses on the follow-up to the Millennium Development Goals in 2015 and beyond.

Femi Okunlola, *The Source: Connect with the Trinity*. Lagos, Cross of Christ Communications, 2014

Okunlola, also systematic theologian and broadcaster, analyzes the importance to effective Christian communication of rootedness in the Trinity and the cultivation of a culture of listening. Okunlola is one of the rising female theologians in Nigeria.
Glen Stassen, the 2013 recipient of the Baptist World Alliance Denton and Janice Lotz Human Rights award, died on April 26. He was 78 years old.

Stassen, the Lewis B. Smedes Professor of Christian Ethics at Fuller Theological Seminary in California in the United States, was presented with the award in Ocho Rios, Jamaica, in July 2013, for his longtime role as a peace activist.

He was lauded as the foremost proponent of the globally recognized just peacemaking theory in matters of war and conflict and was hailed as “arguably the leading Baptist peace theorist-activist of the twentieth century” whose “influence is felt well beyond the confines of the Baptist family.”

He was described as a fearless advocate who, for more than 50 years, engaged religious communities, civil society and governments in human rights, justice and peacemaking issues and who engaged in nonviolent campaigns for peace and human rights in countries such as the former East Germany, Kazakhstan and South Korea, and regions such as Central America, Eastern Europe and Southern Africa.

Declared as a tireless campaigner who participated in anti-nuclear campaigns across the world and negotiated the disarming and removal of short and middle range nuclear weapons from Europe, he led organizations such as the Strategy Committee of the Nuclear Weapons Freeze Campaign and the Arms Race and the International Conflict Committee of the Louisville Area Council on Peacemaking.

Stassen led and held membership in a wide ranging number of academic, peacemaking, and denominational institutions and organizations, including on various BWA commissions over a number of decades. At the time of his death, he was a member of the BWA Commission on Peace.

He wrote or co-authored several books on the just peace making theory and award winning publications such as Kingdom Ethics: Following Jesus in Contemporary Context

Stassen leaves wife, Dot, and sons Bill, Michael and David.


Imasogie, retired theological educator and head of the famed Nigerian Baptist Theological Seminary in Ogbomosho, addresses controversial issues through the lens of “Christian philosophy.”

Emiola Nihilola, Theology under the Mango Tree: A Handbook of African Christian Theology, Lagos, Fine Print & Manufacturing Ltd., 2013

Nihilola, a systematic theologian and editor of the Ogbomosho Journal of Theology deals with “topics in African Christian Theology.”
Harold Paul, president and former general secretary of the Baptist Association of South Africa (BASA), died on March 27. He was 49 years old.

Paul was a member of the Baptist World Alliance General Council, the Congress Committee and the Local Arrangements Committee (LAC) for the 21st Baptist World Congress.

The LAC comprises Baptists in South Africa and assists in preparation for the congress to be held in the city of Durban in July 2015.

Paul, an entrepreneur, founded two businesses, Simunye Event Marketing and Eagles Wings Promotions. He received degrees and diplomas from the University of Durban Westville, the College of Theological Education and Faith Bible College.

BWA General Secretary Neville Callam said, “in his service to the LAC, Harold brought his characteristic enthusiasm, vigor, thoughtfulness and decisiveness.” He declared that the South African Baptist leader “gave himself to seeking solutions, identifying ways to get things done and making an effort to resolve whatever needed the consensus of the discussants.”

“Harold was passionate about the coming BWA 2015 Congress,” said BASA General Secretary Ronnie Reddy. “Harold loved the Lord and Savior Jesus Christ and had a passion for serving the Baptist Association.”

He leaves children Theophilus and Cliantha.

Funeral services were held on March 29.

Richard Ice, president emeritus of American Baptist Homes of the West (ABHOW) and a longtime supporter of the Baptist World Alliance, died on March 15 in Alameda, California, in the United States. He was 83 years old.

He pastored in Seattle, Washington state, for four years before serving with American Baptist Churches, USA, in several positions, including as vice president. He was president and CEO of ABHOW for 23 years until his retirement in 1995.

Ice was a former member of the BWA Commission on Freedom and Justice, the Commission on Religious Freedom and the Promotion and Development Committee.

He chaired the board of trustees at Linfield College from 1994-2004 and that of the American Baptist Seminary of the West from 1987-1995. He held membership on the boards of the Graduate Theological Union, the Baptist Joint Committee for Religious Liberty and the Ministers and Missionaries Benefit Board.

Ice earned degrees and diplomas from Centralia College, Linfield College, Berkeley Baptist Divinity School, and Harvard’s Advanced Management Program. He was conferred with honorary doctoral degrees by Linfield College and the American Baptist Seminary of the West.

In 2011, he received the Religious Freedom Award from the American Baptist Home Mission Societies and the Dawson Religious Liberty Award.

A memorial service was held on April 5 at Lakeshore Avenue Baptist Church in Oakland, California.

Predeceased by his wife, Lucille, in 1992, he is survived by daughters Lorinda, Julianne and Diana.
I am keeping a record of the most interesting ways worship services have been interrupted. I remember the day a bird flew down from a window in the sanctuary right into the fan and feathers flew down onto the communion table as I stood there about to break the bread. The bird, by the way, survived. In Taiwan I was speaking and a curious listener drove into the sanctuary on his motorcycle and left it running while he listened to the message.

A common interruption in worship all around the world is the cell phone. On some days, it has become a form of choir as the phones ring in chorus. One Sunday I gave in and sang “Ain’t Nothing but a Hound Dog” as that tune rang out from someone’s phone. Others joined me in the chorus. Recently a woman fell into the aisle in the middle of the message. I ran down to check on her to see if she needed medical help. Turns out she was, in her words, “slain in the Lord.” I wasn’t accustomed to that happening during my preaching. My favorite interruption was when a big yellow dog came trotting down the center aisle toward me as I gave the invitation. I’m pleased to report that others followed his lead.

Anyone who leads in worship is acquainted with interrupted worship. Even Jesus was acquainted with interruptions. It happened the first time, according to scripture, he preached in a service. His listeners were impressed. They said his words had a striking authority about them. It happened right in the middle of his sermon. Somebody went berserk, shrieking at Jesus, “What do you want with us? Have you come to destroy us?”

I was curious as to how Jesus handled that interruption. All Jesus said was “Stop it.” And the man convulsed, got up, and all was well. I’m sure that ended the worship service. It would be difficult to imagine Jesus saying “Now, where was I?” after that. Or, the Rabbi jumping up saying, “Now, let’s all sing hymn number . . . .” No, the people just filed out, reflecting on what just happened, “What’s this, a new teaching with authority? He commands even the demons.”

We don’t talk about the authority of Jesus much anymore. I suppose the reason is because the word authority is unpopular for many persons. It seems we would rather question authority or resist authority. Yet, in the presence of Jesus we stand in the presence of deep and authentic authority, profound moral and spiritual authority, the authority of absolute love.

Have we forgotten the basic authority that lies in the word of Jesus? Do we take Jesus in stride? Do we just give him a hearing within the larger conversation of our lives? He gets a voice but there just happens to be many other voices, too. Jesus says, “Love your enemies.” We think those are good words but then we listen to see if anyone else has another word to say. He says, “Repent and believe.” Well, that is good news, but let’s discuss that. He says, “Follow me.” Yes, but should we have a discussion to talk about why bad things happen to good people?

We live in a cultural jamboree where we mingle our way through the easy exchanges of ideas. That is good. But when it comes down to the living of our lives, the disposition of our hearts and the commitment of our wills, it becomes just dialogue and discussion.

There are points at which all our discussing and considering has to end. There are certain subjects where Jesus’ word is enough. When Jesus says the word “forgiven,” that should be enough. Who are we to keep beating ourselves and holding on to our shame? Jesus says, “Forgive each other.” How is it we, his followers, are still so smug and unforgiving? He says, “Believe, believe the good news.” Why don’t we give it a chance? He says, “Feed the hungry, love the enemy, welcome the stranger, seek the lost, don’t stop praying, make disciples for me.” Why isn’t that enough?

Interruptions in our worship services are like the ones in our lives. We need a word to settle them. We need a word of authority. Here is good news; the “Word” was made flesh. The Word still speaks to change the world. Let us be commanded by him and obedient to the one whose word is the authority of absolute love and transformation.
Invited!

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