EUROPEAN BAPTISTS Wade into the Future
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Thank you for showing the love of Christ to the world!
2014 is here and, perhaps, several celebratory events will mark the Baptist calendar this year. The following may be included.

This year we mark the 370th anniversary of the London Confession. Seven Particular (Calvinistic) Baptist churches in London approved this confession of faith in 1644. We also observe the 300th anniversary of the formation of the first Baptist church in the US state of Virginia. Robert Nordin, an Englishman ordained in London and who later settling in the US, started this church at Burley in the state that hosts the BWA international offices.

Just before the start of this year, Myanmar Baptists marked the bicentenary of Baptist work in their country, recalling the contribution of the Judsons and the many other remarkable persons through whose stewardship God has wonderfully blessed the people of that great country. This year marks the bicentenary of the General Convention of the Baptist Denomination in the United States for Foreign Missions (the so-called Triennial Convention) that was formed in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, USA, in the wake of the Judson’s departure from the US. It is also 200 years ago that the noted African American, Lott Carey, sailed with 28 colleagues from Norfolk, Virginia, USA, to Sierra Leone in West Africa.

And there are many other anniversaries that will be observed this New Year!

As we cross over into 2014, I call to mind the opportunity I had last June to join with the people of Pennepack Baptist Church in Philadelphia in their 325th anniversary celebration. It is an experience I will not soon forget.

I had longed to visit with the Baptist Christians at the Pennepack Church, which describes itself not inaccurately as “the Mother Church of the Philadelphia Baptist Association” – a most prestigious title.

Who hasn’t read about Pennepack’s unforgettable pastor, Elias Keach, son of distinguished London Baptist minister, Benjamin Keach, who was one of the conveners of the first English Particular Baptist Assembly in 1689 that affirmed the Second London Confession?

Elias left England for the US and brought with him some of his father’s religious garb. Arriving in New York, this unconverted man posed as a minister of the gospel. Soon, with his known and respected family links and religious regalia, this 19 year-old man associated with the people at the Pennepek Church, as it was then called, where he preached the gospel. One Sunday, Elias brought his sermon to a sudden end. He was distraught and the congregation thought he had suddenly become ill. Elias broke down, confessed that he was an imposter and not a real minister, and announced his decision to become a follower of Jesus Christ. The believers at Pennepack, discovering the truth about their pastor, sent him to Thomas Dungan, Baptist leader in the nearby church in Bucks County, Pennsylvania. Elias Keach was baptized and, after his hastily arranged ordination, the people at Pennepack duly took him back as their pastor.

Can you imagine the memories that flooded the minds of those who gathered that Sunday afternoon in the north Philadelphia area for the Anniversary Service of the Pennepack Baptist Church? The Welsh, Irish and British people, who formed the bulk of Pennepack’s membership in the early years, did for Elias Keach what perhaps few, if any, could expect of any church congregation today!

The church building at Pennepack has been rebuilt and is well preserved, including even its “boxed benches.” The burial place of some past members adorns the surroundings of the building on three sides. But the church now lives in the shadow of its former glory.

Standing in the pulpit in Pennepack, I remembered how Elias Keach, after spending three years at the church, returned to England, leaving behind a people whose demonstration of mercy, forgiveness and love are unforgettable. Elias later served as an effective Baptist minister in his native land and died at the age of thirty-four.

Similar stories may emerge from some of this year’s celebrations. One thing is certain: from recalling accounts of past exploits in faith by followers of Christ, we may learn how much we are indebted to, and can learn from, Christians who blazed the trail in which we walk!
Recently I was reading some stories from the British Baptist Times of 1919-20 about the days before the European Baptist Federation (EBF) when the Baptist World Alliance appointed a Europe Commissioner, a British Baptist, John Henry Rushbrooke.

Just after the First World War, when so much of Europe was devastated, Rushbrooke traveled with an American Baptist leader to visit the Baptists of Europe. They went about 10,000 kilometers by train, before the days of email, mobile phones, airlines and even comfortable rail travels. Rushbrooke wrote very interesting reports on the trains about the Baptists he met in various countries, which were published in the Baptist Times. That led to a conference in London in 1920 where various mission agencies were assigned to help various countries. There was special concern for religious freedom in Romania, whose Baptists were suffering greatly from government. I rejoice that at that council we will welcome a Romanian Baptist as our president, Oti Bunaciu.

What a contrast between the days of Rushbrooke nearly 100 years ago and today! And yet we see the same issues being dealt with: mission, religious freedom, and humanitarian aid.

As I look back on this past year, and indeed the past few years, one theme keeps recurring. How EBF unions and churches are responding to the challenges of engaging their societies with the gospel. The realization that church-based evangelism is not enough; that we need to step out from the safety of the Upper Room, as the disciples did on the Day of Pentecost, in the power of the Holy Spirit; and ask how the gospel speaks to all areas of society, however secular or even hostile to our faith that society might seem.

The challenging words of Jesus to his disciples about being the salt of the earth and light of the world come afresh to us. By these pictures of salt and light, he described the mission of his disciples as one that was deeply engaged and engrained in the world; but yet which kept the uniqueness and distinctiveness of the gospel. The salt must do its work without losing its saltiness. The light must not lose its ability to shine into the darkness.

We must remember that in all those parts of the EBF that were under atheistic communism, the churches had no real opportunities to speak to the issues of society. Their voices were not welcomed in the building of these atheistic states. I thought about this and the huge changes over the last 25 years when I sat together with some Christian parliamentarians in Ukraine to study the Bible together. At one time, this would have been impossible. The Bible passage for the day was Jesus’ question to his disciples, “Who is the greatest?” And how he called out a child to demonstrate how we were to think of greatness in the kingdom of God. There we were, in the Ukrainian parliament building, reflecting on the true nature of power and greatness, and how Christian voices in government can influence society.

My recent visit to Hungary was to be at the official beginning of a unique partnership between Hungarian Baptists and the Hungarian state, whereby Hungarian Baptists will run 45 state schools on behalf of the government. This was not imposed. Staff and parents in each case expressed their positive desire to have the Baptists run their schools and to provide the Religious Education in these institutions.

This model of engagement is taking place in societies that still think of themselves as more or less Christian, such as Ukraine. But in Western and some parts of Central Europe, we are often making our witness in a similar situation to that of the Early Church we read about in the Book of Acts; Christian minorities in a multi-religious society with no pretensions to political power or influence and in a post-Christendom environment. Here we speak from the margins rather than the center. Italian Baptists are in this situation. Recently they had a joyful celebration of 150 years of Baptist life in Italy. They have become known for speaking from the margins, providing a voice for the voiceless on issues of justice and peace and the rights of all groups within society. In the United Kingdom Baptists
We had one of our best mission conferences in 2013 in Austria. We thought about how we should welcome, care for and witness to the many ethnic groups in Europe, including long-established groups such as the Roma, among whom Baptists do some excellent work in countries such as Bulgaria and Romania. Or it might be welcoming the stranger, the refugee and the asylum seeker. While we were at the mission conference in Vienna we saw the remarkable work being done by Walter and Andrea Klimt and Austria Baptists. They are almost creating a Baptist ‘Gemeinde’ (community) in one part of the city, working especially among international students and workers and refugees from many places.

Included also is living alongside those of other faiths, especially Islam. One of our priorities as the EBF must be a serious engagement with Islam; how we live among and witness to our Muslim neighbors. We must speak out and defend Christians who are under threat from radical Islamic groups, but I don’t believe we should be part of the demonizing of Islam “from a distance,” or joining those who give the impression that every Muslim is a potential terrorist.

We must not forget that in some parts of the EBF it is difficult for Baptists to play a role in society. This is especially true in Central Asia. To travel to Uzbekistan last year was to be taken back to the days of the Soviet Union from the moment we landed at the airport to the kind of precautions we had to take not to draw attention to ourselves or to our meetings with local Baptist leaders. The ethnic Uzbek congregations are illegal and have to act as underground churches. We need to remember these brothers and sisters in our prayers and continue to campaign for their religious freedom and human rights.

One of our priorities as the EBF must be a serious engagement with Islam; how we live among and witness to our Muslim neighbors.

We have some excellent models of how to live at peace among Muslims and yet witness to our faith in Christ from parts of the Middle East and some projects in Western Europe. We need serious engagement with these issues in our seminaries, as already happens at the Arab Baptist Theological Seminary in Beirut. The BWA recently established a Commission on Baptist-Muslim relations which is also encouraging us to think through how dialogue and Christian witness must belong together.

These are just some examples of Baptist engaging seriously with their societies and making their voice heard in the marketplace. There are many other examples.

Join with Methodists and Reformed Christians to provide an effective joint platform to speak out on public issues from a Free Church perspective.

In the Middle East, in a multi-faith society like Lebanon with an Islamic majority, a small community of about 2,000 Baptists is having an amazing influence through the Lebanese Society for Education and Social Development, especially in humanitarian relief, care for refugees and in education. The government now looks to the Baptists to provide a lead in special education policy in Lebanon.

Above: Delegates attending the EBF Youth and Children’s Workers conference in Prague, Czech Republic, in January 2013.

Right: From left, EBF Assistant General Secretary Helle Liht, All Africa Baptist Fellowship General Secretary Duro Ayanninola and EBF General Secretary Tony Peck.

Above: An EBF Mission Conference in Vienna, Austria, in June 2013

Left: A 2012 EBF Council meeting in Elstal, Germany
Blythe will be the first IBTS graduate to head of the institution, having earned a Bachelor of Divinity degree there in 1989. He holds master’s degrees from the University of Glasgow in Scotland and Spurgeon’s College in England, and a PhD from the University of Edinburgh. He is interim principal of the Scottish Baptist College, where he has been on the staff for the past eight years, and has pastored several congregations in Scotland.

Blythe’s appointment is part of a major transition being undertaken by the 65 year old institution, originally founded in Ruschlikon, Switzerland, in 1949 before being relocated to Prague, Czech Republic, in 1997. Another relocation is in the works, this time to Amsterdam, Netherlands, in time for the start of the new academic year in 2014.

IBTS will be renamed the International Baptist Theological Study Centre (IBTSC) and will be part of the Theology Faculty of the Free University of Amsterdam (VU). It will, in effect, become an associate seminary with the university, having its own campus and governing structure. It will share a compound at “Baptist House” in Amsterdam with the European Baptist Federation, the Baptist Union of the Netherlands and the Baptist Seminary of the Netherlands.

Since 1998, IBTS has focused on postgraduate students who did their first degree at other European schools. Its relationship with the University of Wales, through which the seminary granted PhD degrees, has been severed. In the new arrangement, students will earn either a PhD from VU or a master’s degree from the University of Manchester in the United Kingdom.

Some 23 students are expected to be transferred into the VU PhD program, while the number of new master’s students is yet to be determined. The PhD is research-based and does not require regular coursework. The programs, both PhD and master’s, are largely nonresidential, meaning that one can stay in one’s home country, on any continent, for much of the time, while doing the required research project.

David McMillan, transition officer who oversees the move from Prague to Amsterdam, said IBTSC will “retain operation as a self-contained institution,” with its own administration. It will be responsible for its own enrollment. “People will be able to apply to us to do PhD studies.” In the VU model, each student has to work directly with a university professor. IBTSC will assist each of its students to identify and establish a relationship with a professor.

The decision to move to Amsterdam was precipitated by financial challenges. According to McMillan, when the relocation was made to Prague, properties were cheap, labor was inexpensive, and currency exchanges were advantageous. “It was not an expensive place to be.” Since the Czech Republic joined the European Union, however, everything has changed. The country, rather than adopting the Euro, maintains its own currency, which is strong, making it prohibitively expensive for persons from other countries with weaker currencies to study there. In addition, inflationary costs in the Czech Republic have been rising faster than many other countries in Europe. Maintaining the property in Prague, which is sizeable, became prohibitively expensive. Matters were not helped that, with the decision in 1998 to focus on graduate students, the number of enrollment shrank as undergraduates were no longer being admitted.

The move to the Netherlands enables the Baptist institution to be part of a major and reputable university while maintaining a level of autonomy, holding out the prospect of becoming financially stable and viable. The study center is expected to have three major sources of funding – an endowment created from the sale of the campus in Prague, donations and tuition fees.
to God, working collegially and are drawing together views from within the whole Baptist family so that we can be faithful to our vision of being a mission movement.

The new general secretary explained that “there are theoretical and practical reasons for the changes” within the BUGB. There is the need, she said, to respond to a country, the United Kingdom, that is itself in transition. Multiculturalism and a multi-faith environment is now more of an issue. “Twenty years ago the key challenge was secularism, people not interested in the faith, churches feeling marginalized, feeling irrelevant.” Now, that has changed, with several faith traditions – Islam, Hinduism and other faiths – gaining a strong presence in the UK. “It is a different kind of playing field.”

Indications are that this trend will continue. “Those things will be felt more keenly,” Green predicted. Churches need to engage...
Prior to Oncken’s mission work, most European Baptists were British. Areas and countries he visited, preached and planted churches included the Balkans, France, Hungary, Prussia, Russia and Switzerland.

That missionary tradition continues in Germany today. The Union of Evangelical Free Churches in Germany (UEFC), founded in 1942 as an affiliation between the German Baptist Union and a coalition of churches of the Brethren movement, is among the chief supporters of EBM International, previously known as European Baptist Mission.

EBM, formed by European Baptists in 1954 to do mission work in Africa, has expanded its role into Latin America and India, and is involved in church planting, theological training, education, health and other endeavors. EBM, with offices in Germany, has had German leadership, including its current head, Christoph Haus, who has sat on several Baptist World Alliance committees. Haus succeeded another German, Hans Guderian, immediate past president of the European Baptist Federation.

UEFC comprises approximately 680 Baptist and 130 Brethren congregations with 82,000 members. It has given generously to the work and ministry of the BWA, including substantial funds for emergency relief such as the January 2010 earthquake in Haiti.

The union is a strong supporter of German-based churches affiliated with the International Baptist Convention (IBC), which represents English-speaking churches in more than 20 countries. Approximately 70 percent of IBC churches in Germany are expected to join the union under the same model as the Brethren churches do. The Brethren churches have no legal status in Germany and operate under the legal status of the Baptists, but each group maintains its own distinctiveness and identity.

Christoph Stiba, recently elected general secretary of the UEFC, succeeding Regina Claas, a BWA vice president, explained that German Baptists are conscious of the help Germany received from other countries after the Second World War. As a result, Germans are willing to give back. “It is in our DNA now to respond and give,” Stiba said. “We heed the Bible,” he elaborated. “It is more blessed to give than to receive.”

German Baptists have had a historical commitment to human rights, and in particular, religious freedom, Stiba stated. This has been the case since at least the time of Julius Wilhelm Köbner, a contemporary of Oncken. Köbner is reported to have declared in 1848, “We claim it [religious freedom] to absolutely the same extent for everybody, no matter if the person is a Christian, a Jew, a Mohammedan or whatever else.”

A major challenge German Baptists face is secularism. “Secularism is the biggest issue in Germany,” Stiba acknowledged. Eastern Germany, perhaps because of its long and relatively recent communist past, is most acutely affected by this phenomenon. This secularism, he said, is twinned with a sense of independence, which “has taken away the sense of the need for salvation.”

Yet he contends that Germans “are open to God and God’s word.” Germans, he said, “have the deepest desire to be known, loved and complete and to have a meaningful life.” To meet the challenge, Stiba said “we need new kinds of churches that can speak to modern people. German churches need to be more open to peoples’ lives. There is a need to “find new ways to tell them about God and the love of God.”
Baptists in Austria have joined with other evangelical and Free Church traditions in the Central European country to form the Free Churches of Austria (FCA).

According to Walter Klimt, general secretary of the Baptist Union of Austria and the first president of the new entity, FCA was born out of both theological reflection and necessity.

Austria has always been “the graveyard of missionaries,” Klimt said. “Austria never saw an awakening since the Reformation. It was the country of counter-reformation.” Anabaptists have been killed. Many Protestants fled the country.

There was little or no church growth. Between 1918 and 1990, Baptists numbered roughly 700 members in 10 churches. Even at these low numbers, Baptists, at one time, had the largest membership among Free churches in Austria. Baptists were known to be in Austria from as early as 1845. The first Baptist church was planted in Vienna, Austria’s capital, in 1869.

Baptists, along with other Free Church traditions, failed to gain official government recognition, a fight that Baptists waged for 100 years. Special laws were passed giving recognition to other Christian traditions such as Catholics, Lutherans and Reformed. In order to gain recognition, church organizations had to have a minimum membership.

The coming together of Baptists, Pentecostals, Mennonites and Evangelicals in 2013 to form FCA helped to meet this minimum membership requirement. This union resulted in more than official government legislation and recognition, which occurred on August 26, 2013. There is greater credibility. “Free churches now have a stronger voice,” Klimt explained. “We now have a prophetic voice that will be heard as we take up social causes such as human trafficking.”

Beginning in 2014, curriculum proposed by the FCA will be taught in schools. The process has started with the preparation of teachers for these subjects.

There is greater public awareness. “We have received a lot of attention from the media,” Klimt said. Press conferences have been held and a number of interviews of church leaders, including with Klimt, conducted. Other church organizations and independent congregations have since expressed interest in joining the FCA, including one with 10,000 members.

The way to forming the union was paved in 2011 and was precipitated by several factors. Free churches experienced numerical growth in more recent years. Thirty years ago, there were roughly 4,500 to 6,000 Free Church Christians in Austria. That has since grown to between 45,000 and 60,000. Baptist membership has also improved and is now approximately 1,600 in 28 churches.

Shared tenets and interests also led to greater cooperation among Free churches. The Forum of Free Churches was formed, with Klimt as chair, “to explore ways of coming together and gain recognition from the state.” It was discovered, the Austrian Baptist leader explained, “that we have so much in common. There were only a few differences.”

There is greater openness in Austrian society. In 1998 the Catholic Church apologized and asked forgiveness for what was done against Anabaptists. The Forum of Free Churches received help from the Catholic, Lutheran and Reformed churches, as well as from the Religious and Cultural Affairs department of Vienna University. In 2012, the government invited Free churches to a meeting to discuss their status in the country.

The forum considered various models and eventually decided that the new body should adopt a model based on Baptist practice and polity. As Klimt explained it, forum members realized that Baptists already have a model that allowed for diverse expressions within a broader unity. There is a union, but there is autonomy within that union. Each congregation may choose, for instance, whether it will have a woman pastor or not, without damage to the wider body. In assemblies held by each of the church bodies, Klimt said there was 99 percent agreement to base FCA on Baptist governance and principles. “People in the churches agreed that this is the right thing to do.”

Each FCA member maintains autonomy. FCA, according to Klimt, “is one church with different unions.” The Baptist Union of Austria will continue to exist, as will the other FCA members.

The FCA is led by a council of nine members, including two Baptists, with Klimt as chair. “The council is the official voice to the government,” said Klimt. Its other duties include overseeing the preparation of religious curriculum for schools; recruiting teachers, who will be paid by the government, to teach these courses; recruiting pastors and other church leaders; and fellowship among Free churches.
The Baptist Union of Wales (BUW) is in the midst of a two-year process to consolidate all Baptist churches and associations within Wales’ borders under its umbrella. Currently, a number of churches and associations are affiliated with the Baptist Union of Great Britain (BUGB) while others are affiliated with the BUW.

Peter Thomas, general secretary of the BUW, said mission lies at the heart of the changes. “We decided from the outset that we would put mission as our priority,” Thomas said, explaining his agenda upon his appointment as BUW general secretary in 2005.

The process included the appointment of a new mission director, “a first for us,” Thomas stated. “That just shows it is so important for us to see our ministry in light of mission. If we don’t have an understanding of mission in our structures, then the churches will just come to the end of their days.

This new mission initiative, which the changes will allow, includes taking the context in which the churches minister seriously. “We are now seeking to reach out to the community. We are now working with our ministers to make sure this is happening. It must happen. Our existence depends on it. That is our driving force.”

Churches and associations, led by the union, are encouraged to incorporate nontraditional models of mission and ministry. In Brecknockshire for instance, where there is no Baptist church, Thomas said “we have a mission-driven team working in that community.” Meetings and gatherings are sometimes held outside church buildings in such locations as community halls and pubs.

Mission is urgent because ministry among Baptists in Wales has been stagnant. Only recently, a Welsh speaking congregation was planted for the first time in 56 years. Thomas indicated that though BUW comprises more than 400 congregations, the membership stands at about 12,500. “In about 100 of these churches we have only 10 in membership and that membership is fairly elderly.” He insisted that “our ministers need to be reintroduced to the ideas of ministry and mission.”

The reorganization needs to overcome a number of challenges. The BUW has a Welsh speaking and an English speaking wing, each with its own president, with Thomas serving both as general secretary. Both wings have had their cultural and theological nuances – the Welsh speaking tend to be more traditional while the English speaking tend to be more evangelical. “We live in this tension,” Thomas explained. “Initially the Welsh Baptist union was a Welsh speaking union. But over the years some churches have lost their language.”

The problem of language in Wales has been an historical one. Welsh activists, Thomas among them, have been jailed for agitating for the preservation and use of their language. “I spent a short term myself in prison for the language issues,” Thomas said, recounting the protests that took place in the 1960s. “The language is of prime importance. It is a part of our identity as a Welsh nation. I am, first of all, a Welshman.” But he is also convinced there is room for cooperation and unity. “It won’t be an easy road, this journey, but I am positive it is a great opportunity for us as Baptists in Wales; to ensure that we can work together in order to extend God’s kingdom.”

A second challenge is incorporating Baptist churches and associations in Wales that are affiliated with the BUGB. The South Wales Baptist Association, for instance, which had churches of mainly a Welsh origin but which is now largely English speaking, is part of the BUGB. “We know there will be people who will oppose this, but there are other ministers who are ready to be a part of this.” To help smooth the transition, “we have had numerous forums and consultations, with ministers in particular.”

Thus far, the BUGB, with whom, according to Thomas, “there is a good relationship,” has been cooperative and helpful. “We work closely in ministry and in mission. There is a mission forum that we are a part of with the BUGB and the Baptist Union of Scotland, the Fellowship of Baptists in Britain and Ireland, which meets twice a year. This has led to positive relationships between the different unions.”

If the incorporation of the BUGB member associations and churches is successful, it will bring in an additional 117 churches into the BUW.

The third challenge has to do with the relationships between the BUW, the associations and the churches. Traditionally, the BUW has been a union of associations, with the associations maintaining a more direct link with churches. “The associations are skeptical and wary of the union,” Thomas explained. “We are often criticized for interfering with the life of the local church.”

The associations, he said, “tend to keep things within their own confines and are unwilling to release that authority to others.”

This calls for some delicate negotiation. “We need to temper what we are doing with grace and understanding. That’s why we are having these roadshows, going around to all the associations.”

The roadshows involve meeting ministers and churches from the different associations. “The response has been good,” Thomas assured.

At the end of the reorganization process, which is expected to be completed in 2014, Thomas is hopeful that Baptists in Wales will have one mission and purpose, proving “that we are one Baptist family in Wales. One mission; one family.”
The story of Erzsebet Vekas of Romania and her late husband brings Acts chapter 10 to mind. In that story, Peter was directly confronted by God about his prejudice against non-Jews and into a realization that Christ died for all humanity.

Once Erzsebet Vekas and her husband, Zoltan, who died in 2010, overcame their prejudices against the Romani people, a fruitful ministry has developed that has led to church planting among what is perhaps the most marginalized group on the European continent.

The Romani or Roma people, commonly referred to as gypsies, are a widely diverse ethnic group living mostly in Europe and the Americas. They are heavily concentrated in countries of Central and Eastern Europe such as Romania, Hungary and Bulgaria, with significant numbers in Western European nations such as Spain, France and Italy. Large numbers also live in the United States and Brazil.

Romani, historically, are heavily persecuted in Europe. Hundreds of thousands were killed in the Holocaust during the Second World War. Discriminatory practices in the 21st century include forced deportations from France and what some human rights groups regard as discriminatory identification laws in Italy.

Vekas said that for several months, “there was big fighting in my husband’s heart,” when a member of his church told him that a Romani man wanted to learn more about God and wanted someone to visit his village to answer the questions of his searching heart. The believing brother who brought the news was insistent. “This brother came two or three times to tell my husband that he should go to this village.”

She had to overcome her own prejudices and fears. “I never loved the gypsies. They are beggars.” When I saw what God worked in my husband’s heart, I began to pray and fast. God changed my heart and mind totally. I understand that before God we are all the same. We are equal.”

The leaders in the church her husband pastored resisted his attempts to reach out...
to the Romani. “The elders were not happy with the trip but he still went,” she said.

This was 1991. The work moved slowly, the first baptism not occurring until 1993. But since then, the original congregation has grown to more than 260 members. “They now have a nice church building,” Vekas said. One other Romani church was planted in 2002 and the original Romani congregation has since given birth to a new mission that is seeking to acquire its own building for a place of worship.

An important ministry is a school started by the Baptists. “We try to teach the mothers and children how to read and write. The children have gone to school regularly.” Several of the Romani have gone on to university. “We have a few young people who have finished university. Their lives and situations have changed totally,” declared Vekas.

Emphasis is placed on educating mothers, who may be quite young. Romani marry in their early to mid-teen years. “It is important to teach the mothers,” Vekas explained. “If the mother’s habits change this will impact the future.”

Erzsebet Vekas is involved in the Baptist women’s movement in Romania and the European Baptist Women’s Union. Her experience has led to a vibrant women’s movement among Romani women in the congregations she and her husband helped to found. Workshops and training sessions are held. Women are taught life skills that would enable them to earn a livelihood. Gifts of seeds have been provided so that they can plant gardens, which are not only a means of earning income, but encourage a healthier lifestyle.

Several large meetings have been held, including most recently in September 2013, when some 300 women gathered for a special women’s conference.

“This is God’s work,” Vekas said. “I have received much blessings and joy. It is not my doing but the Holy Spirit that opened my heart and eyes. They accepted me. The ladies have become so precious in my eyes. I have a big love for them.”

The union now has more than 4,200 members in 112 churches.

The anniversary conference was one of celebration. “The tenor of the conference was that of a spiritual and cultural festival,” a report from out of the meetings stated. “The joyful atmosphere invited personal sharing, commemorating Baptist life past and present, enjoying music and creativity.”

The historical commitment of Baptists in the Western European country to justice issues was celebrated. Starting in the 1960s, Italian Baptists gave public support to the American Civil Rights Movement led by Martin Luther King, Jr. “From early on, Italian Baptists have been greatly influenced by Dr. King and his theology,” the report said. “Italian Baptists found themselves and their beliefs and world views well represented in Dr. King’s teaching.” During the opening ceremony the memory of King played a prominent role, especially in light of the 50th anniversary of King’s famous speech in Washington in September 2013. Italian Baptists lent “voice to the voiceless, opposed those in power when injustices were committed [and] found creative ways of sharing the Gospel of Jesus Christ with people in their own language and culture.”

At the conference, a strong desire was expressed for closer fellowship and networking among Baptist churches in Italy.

Also included was a panel discussion highlighting Baptist life and witness through the BWA and in Europe. During the 150th anniversary conference, the Historical Commission of the Baptist union’s Theological Department staged an exhibition on the history of Baptist life in Italy. After the conference, the exhibit was taken to churches around Italy.

One public event brought into focus Christian responsibility in society. Baptists who hold positions of influence in Italian society explained their involvement in issues such as migration, ecology, politics and the fight against racism, among others.

The special relationship Baptists have with Methodists and Waldensians was also celebrated. All three church bodies have had more than 20 years of cooperation and collaboration, enjoying and extending mutual recognition. Among other initiatives, Baptists, Methodists and Waldensians jointly publish Riforma, a weekly journal.

Most memorable however, were the worship services held each morning of the conference, which concluded with the celebration of Holy Communion and the sending out of the people to follow Christ’s Great Commission to spread the gospel.

Events at the conference were recorded for broadcast on television at a later date. Among those present and participating were BWA Vice President Regina Claas and Tony Peck, BWA regional secretary for Europe and general secretary of the European Baptist Federation.
human trafficking

In August 2013, the entire board of the Union of Baptist Churches in Switzerland organized and participated in a street campaign to create awareness and raise funds from the general public spearheaded by the Brazilian Baptist Church in Zürich. Other participants came from different churches including a student from Elstal Theological Seminary in Germany.

According to a Canadian-American institution dealing with human trafficking, at least 2,000 victims are being channeled to Switzerland every year. Project Resgate assists sexually exploited people by sorting out their situation, arranging for a safe return to their home country and assisting them with starting a new life in a secure location.

Most of these women get lured to Switzerland with the false promise of a job. Once in the country they are forced into prostitution. The trick is to get them so heavily indebted that they cannot repay the debt as their families are poor. They end up being exploited and mistreated. Once forced into prostitution they have a hard time coping emotionally. Often addiction, depression and suicide result and many end up in slave-like situations.

Project Resgate secures emergency accommodations, medical and emotional support, assistance to return to their home country as well as social and professional integration once they return home.

Project Resgate has established 15 drop-in centers in Brazil. In Switzerland Project Resgate maintains a formal partnership with Caritas International. Most of the professional reintegration takes place through micro businesses, home renovations, furnishings, nursing and other training. In 2012, Project Resgate completed the reintegration of 22 ladies. At the current time another 26 ladies are in the reintegration process.

Prepared by the Union of Baptist Churches in Switzerland.

Malkhaz Songulashvili, archbishop and president of the Evangelical Baptist Church of Georgia, was named Honorary Citizen of Tbilisi and presented with the keys of the city by Tbilisi’s mayor in October 2013. Songulashvili, a member of the General Council of the Baptist World Alliance, is the first clergyman to receive this award.

Songulashvili, senior pastor of the Cathedral of Tbilisi in the country’s capital, is an advocate for social justice and religious liberty. He has served as director of the Bethel Humanitarian Association and has led ministries that focus on the poor, sick, orphaned, homeless, and abandoned.

The Baptist leader led Georgian Baptists to participate in nonviolent advocacy during the country’s Rose Revolution in 2003 that helped to bring about democratic reforms in the Caucasus country. Georgia is a former republic of the Soviet Union and regained its independence in 1991 following the breakup of the Soviet Republic.

Songulashvili is the Georgian representative for the United Bible Societies (UBS) and has translated Christian scripture into the modern Georgian language for the UBS. He has written textbooks of Old and New Testament stories approved by the Georgian Ministry of Education.

He has been previously recognized for his work in inter-church and inter-faith relations. Songulashvili was presented with the Lambeth Cross by the Church of England’s Archbishop of Canterbury in 2005. In 2011, he received the Order of Christ the Savior from the head of the Ukrainian Orthodox Church of the Kievan Patriarchate “for strengthening friendly relations between Christian churches and for his support to the Ukrainian Orthodox Church.”

The Evangelical Baptist Union of Georgia historically has an episcopal polity, with Songulashvili as archbishop. Songulashvili has led Georgian Baptists to contextualize their worship, witness and ministries to fit Georgian culture. This includes the incorporation of Georgian musical, visual and dramatic arts in Baptist worship.

Present at the ceremony and a dinner in October were Micheil Saakashvili, president of Georgia, European Union Ambassador Philip Dimitrov and Japanese Ambassador Toshio Kaitani. Baptists from Germany and the United States also attended the events.
Baptist World Alliance General Secretary Neville Callam encouraged European Baptists to adopt the principles of the Covenant on Intra-Baptist Relations that was affirmed by the BWA General Council in July 2013.

Callam, who was speaking at the 2013 meeting of the Council of the European Baptist Federation (EBF) in Bratislava, Slovakia, reminded the delegates of the significant role Europe has played within the life of the worldwide Baptist movement expressed through the BWA. He noted the rich cultural diversity that exists in the Baptist community in Europe and suggested that the EBF might wish to consider ways in which it could further apply the principles in the covenant in its ongoing effort to bring its internal diversity into conversation with its commitment to unity.

Callam presented a summary of the principles highlighted in the covenant and suggested that EBF commitment to institutional theological education through the International Baptist Theological Seminary, is rich with examples of how diversity may help Christians discover a dynamic unity that is strong enough to fend off divisiveness and disunity.

Baptist World Alliance General Secretary Neville Callam declared that he was impressed by the commitment of Estonian Baptists to mission and evangelism.

Callam, who spoke at a Baptist mission conference in the northern European country in October, brought a message “of encouragement in their efforts at mission and evangelism.”

Even though the Baptist union has only 6,000 members in 85 churches, he was appreciative that, in addition to bold mission projects in Estonia, they also had missioners overseas, some of whom shared inspiring stories from the field during the mission conference. Some of these missioners, Callam said, are young people who have heard the call to mission and responded obediently.

Callam also spoke at an evangelistic worship service at the conference which was held in Tartu, Estonia’s second largest city, and declared how pleased he was “to see the intense and intentional focus on evangelistic work by the small union.”

He also preached at two worship services in the capital city of Tallinn and was interviewed by a Christian radio station and a Christian magazine. Discussions were also held with the president and general secretary of the Estonian Council of Churches (ECC) on Baptist and ecumenical affairs in Estonia. ECC president, Andres Põder, is archbishop of the Lutheran Church of Estonia, and Ruudi Leinus, a former general secretary of the Baptist union, is ECC general secretary.

Callam traveled to the parliament where he met with the country’s minister of religious affairs and updated him on Baptist life and work globally. In another meeting with a leader of the country’s parliament, the BWA leader shared with him the historical role played by Baptists in the Baltic state, a former Soviet Republic that regained its independence in 1991 after the breakup of the Soviet Union.

Baptists, the BWA leader urged, should see themselves as “a family without a dominant group marked by a plethora of languages that does not lead to Babel.” In this family, “all cultural groups have an equal voice,” he told the group of Baptist leaders from throughout Europe. There is the need, Callam said, for Baptists to receive one another and to consistently seek each other’s interest to the glory of God.

Reflecting the principles in the Covenant on Intra-Baptist Relations in Baptist life is impossible unless we acknowledge our fallibility and exercise humility. “Following the Intra-Baptist Covenant, Baptist Christians will hold together the cultural diversity that marks the Baptist family within the bonds of a dynamic and compelling unity,” the BWA general secretary said.

The Covenant on Intra-Baptist Relations is available on the BWA website in 22 languages. Baptists are encouraged to translate the covenant into their local language and to share the translation with the BWA office.
Baptist World Alliance General Secretary Neville Callam declared that Baptists need to take a strong stance against racism.

Callam, who delivered the second annual Sam Sharpe Lecture on “The Deconstruction of Race” in the United Kingdom in October, said the notion of race is a social construct not based on scientific reality.

Drawing on studies and statements issued by the United Nations, anthropologists and others, Callam contended that the very idea of race is fiction. “The alleged scientific basis for the notion of biological race has been rejected by most scientists, sociologists and anthropologists, many of whom have helped clarify that race is a socially constructed identity.” Race, he said, “does not correspond to any set of biological features which were once used as a basis for dividing humankind into different racial groupings…it is now generally affirmed that biologically there is only one race – the human race.”

Callam asserted that the socially constructed notion of race has led to many ills, including racism and some forms of slavery. Dividing persons into races, he said, was “a strategy of dominant ethnic groups that wish to assert their superiority over others.” The ideology of race, he claimed, “is a human creation designed both to make inequality between people appear to be inborn and to reinforce the belief that it is part of the taken-for-granted landscape of human life.”

He said the church has a responsibility to oppose racism that still persists, even in the church. Churches that refuse to do so, he declared, are guilty of a major failing. The BWA leader said racism is heretical and those churches that accept the ideology of race make special reference to the Covenant on Intra-Baptist Relations which was adopted by the BWA General Council in its July 2013 meeting in Ocho Rios, Jamaica. The BWA leader emphasized that the document considers how members of the worldwide Baptist movement understand each other, how they communicate with each other, and how they interpret their participation in the BWA. The covenant provides a set of values around which BWA members could find consensus and is meant to address issues concerning relations among participants in the organized life of the Baptist family. The values affirmed may also serve as a guide to those involved in national or regional structures serving Baptist life “translocally.”

The covenant will, hopefully, help protect against any one group or perspective holding a privileged place in the way the BWA conducts its affairs, especially in light of the fact that the BWA first emerged as essentially a North Atlantic alliance at its founding in 1905. The intention is that the international Baptist body, the only one of its kind on a global scale for Baptists, would not be a victim of cultural captivity. “The covenant should contribute to the reduction of tension among believers from various cultures when they gather to discern the mind of Christ on difficult issues of concern to them in the worldwide Baptist movement,” Callam said.

The challenge, Callam told the CS-CWC, was how partners within the worldwide Baptist movement maintain accountability to each other in living out the values enshrined in the covenant, especially in its implementation now that it has been approved.

Callam also commended the Faith and Order paper on Moral Discernment in the Churches as a resource on which the BWA may draw as supplemental support for the BWA covenant. “I do not believe this report is useful only in the process of understanding and adjudicating conflict in ecclesial life around issues of morals,” he said. “It also provides insights that may greatly assist one’s understanding of what is happening when groups meet to deliberate on a wide range of issues of concern within a Christian context.”
Callam Calls for Church Unity

Baptist World Alliance General Secretary Neville Callam said the unity of the church, wherever and whenever it exists, should be celebrated.

Callam, who was speaking during the 10th assembly of the World Council of Churches (WCC) in Busan, South Korea, lauded the work of the Faith and Order Commission of the WCC to aid the church in its quest for visible unity. The commission has published such groundbreaking documents as Baptism Eucharist and Ministry (BEM), which came about through extensive theological engagement in the Christian ecumenical community. Callam canvassed detailed study of the most recent Faith and Order documents, The Church: Towards a Common Vision and Baptism: Towards Mutual Recognition.

Callam also took note of bilateral theological dialogues that have taken place between various Christian traditions. These, he said, have resulted in an “increase in understanding” and have “facilitated responsible rapprochement between Christian communions.”

Despite these and other signs of progress, Callam acknowledged that disunity is a stain on the church’s life and witness. There is “persistence in cherishing our peculiarities” and an unwillingness to see “signs of the one church of our Lord Jesus” in other churches other than one’s own. Callam asserted that the church has failed to “reflect the unity for which our Lord prayed in John 17.”

Such disunity has “compromised our faithfulness in mission;” has led to a failure to confront social and other injustices such as racism, poverty, exploitation and disease; has resulted in self-centeredness that leads to the degradation of creation; and has caused a failure to “respect peoples of other faiths who are all creatures of the one God and inhabitants of a shared planet.”

The appropriate response to Christian disunity, the BWA leader claimed, is “to repent of the sin of our divisions, to petition God’s forgiveness and to pray for the joy of full communion.”

Callam called the assembly’s attention to serious challenges that compromise the mission of the church because of disunity. These include conflicting positions on moral issues, which pose difficulty for the unity of the church. “Churches are actually participating in the entrenchment of divisions in society by offering disparate teaching on issues that profoundly affect people’s lives. The current situation is intolerable.”

The solution, Callam asserted, is for the church “to commit, with greater urgency, to the search for convergence around the sources of authority in the church, and on how to interpret responsibly the sources we regard as authoritative.”

Callam urged the Faith and Order Commission to provide additional resources, in a variety of media formats, to aid persons involved in assisting the church’s quest for unity, especially at the international level.

At least 77 Baptists from 24 countries, including BWA President John Upton, attended the WCC meetings, held October 30 to November 8 in Busan, South Korea’s second largest metropolis after capital city Seoul. The assembly,
Callam Calls for Church Unity continued

CALLAM URGES

Contextualization of the Gospel

Baptist World Alliance General Secretary Neville Callam offered praise to God and encouragement to Baptists in Myanmar during the celebration of the 200th anniversary of Baptist witness in the Southeast Asian country.

Callam, who delivered greetings at the opening service of the Myanmar Bicentenary on December 5, said the series of events were “a celebration of the faithfulness of God who, through changing seasons, has never failed to undergird, empower, equip and enable all who have sought to bear witness in Christ’s name in Myanmar.”

He challenged Myanmar Baptists to serve the Lord joyfully and to bear witness to their faith “with conviction, yet never straying from the path of humility, love and respect for all people.” He said respect should be shown to other Christians and to people of other faiths and that they should stay true to the historical Baptist commitment to religious liberty “as a God-given right.”

Callam declared that remaining true to the gospel in culturally relevant ways, “Myanmarizing the faith,” was paramount. “Continue the work of finding the appropriate forms for communicating the Good News of Jesus in Myanmar,” he said. “Identify and introduce ways of responsibly appropriating the cultural traditions of the people of Myanmar in conveying the Gospel message.” They were to “develop and offer an authentic version of the Gospel that the people of Myanmar can easily understand and with which they can easily identify.”

In his sermon delivered on December 6, the leader of the BWA said “if there is anything that we may learn from the 200 years of Baptist witness in this country, and if there is any principle that we should keep in focus for the years to come, it is this: Those who venture forth on pilgrimage with the God revealed in Jesus Christ are called to focus their lives and direct their energies toward one primary end, namely, the glory of God. This is the mark of true discipleship and this is the end of all Christian striving: the search for the glory of God.”

He challenged the large congregation to “participate in God’s grand design to bring all of creation under the lordship of Jesus Christ.” They were “to practice the love of God and neighbor that is part of God’s great desire for the people whom God has made.” By these two means, Callam said, “the people will make known the very nature and character of God.”

Also on December 6, Callam led a delegation that met with Minister Aung Min, chief government negotiator leading the...
A Kachin Baptist delegation from Myanmar visited the international offices of the Baptist World Alliance in October 2013 to apprise the international umbrella organization of the latest developments in the Southeast Asian country and to seek BWA support.

The Kachin people comprise ethnic groups largely inhabiting the northern Myanmar state of Kachin and neighboring areas of China and India. More than half of the Kachin identify themselves as Christians, most of them Baptists.

Fighting between the Kachin Independence Army (KIA) and the Myanmar Army restarted in June 2011 after a 17-year-old ceasefire, signed in 1994, broke down. The Kachin conflict is part of a broader series of conflicts known as the Burmese Civil War that have occurred since Myanmar, previously known as Burma until 1989, gained independence from the United Kingdom in 1948. Fighting escalated after a military coup in 1962. The Burmese Civil War is described as the world’s longest running civil war that includes other groups in conflict with the government such as the Karen, the Shan and the Rohingya.

Since the restart of armed conflict between the government and the Kachin in 2011, thousands have died, more than 100,000 civilians have been displaced, and there has been widespread use of landmines, child soldiers, systematic rape and torture.

At the heart of the conflict are plans to construct a massive dam in Kachin state that would displace thousands, flood rice paddies – the main economic livelihood for the Kachin – and destroy ancestral homes. The government had refused to reconsider the project despite widespread protests and demonstrations. The Baptist delegation to the BWA alleged that water from the dam, the construction of which is being supported by China, would not supply the Kachin, but was to be pumped into China.

Baptists are caught in the crosshairs of the civil war because roughly two thirds – 400,000 of the 600,000 Kachin in the state – are Baptists. The delegation said authorities in Myanmar regard the Kachin Independence Organization (KIO), the main political organization for the Kachin, as equivalent to the Kachin Baptist Convention (KBC), the main Baptist group in the state. The KBC is part of the larger Myanmar Baptist Convention, a BWA member organization. Christians in general, Baptists in particular, are viewed by the government and military as revolutionaries. “We, the Kachin, have become very lonely now,” the delegation said.

The outbreak of civil war has led to widespread dislocation and displacement. Approximately 60,000 Internally Displaced Persons (IDPs) live in camps near the Chinese border. China refuses to accept Kachin refugees. Another 30,000 are in government controlled areas. At the outset, the Myanmar government refused to allow United Nations personnel to enter the camps, but have since relented. The UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) and the World Food Program now provide relief. However, the delegation alleged that China refuses to allow

(Continued on next page)
supplies to pass through its borders, one of the easier routes to get help to the IDPs.

“Baptists have suffered,” the BWA was told. Much of the care for the IDPs falls on Baptists as many churches serve as IDP centers or camps. Two Kachin Baptist Convention associations lost 20 churches out of a total of 23. In one other association, nine out of 47 churches have been lost. Of the 15 associations, only one has no IDPs.

Several attempts have been made to sign a ceasefire agreement since the outbreak of conflicts in 2011, but all have failed. The

Kachin Baptists told the BWA that the Myanmar government demanded that the KIO, the political group, order its military wing, the KIA, to cease hostilities and to sign a ceasefire. “But the KIO will not do so,” the delegates said. “The government is focusing on the signing of a ceasefire but refuses to address other outstanding issues.”

The government, they claim, is using the international community, mainly China, the United States, the United Kingdom and the UN, to try to force the Kachin into a ceasefire agreement. IDPs, they alleged, have been offered bribes with the equivalent of US$3,500 to each IDP family but these payments were refused. According to the delegation, churches stand with the IDPs in their refusal. The Chinese, the delegation alleged, are offering inducements to the Kachin to give up their ancestral lands.

The Kachin delegation said that in Myanmar ethnicity trumps everything. “Ethnicity comes first, democracy comes second.” Westerners, the delegation suggested, fail to understand this. “For the international community, democracy comes first.” In dealing with Myanmar, countries in the West fail to understand, and thus fail to focus on the core problem of ethnicity in the country, and thus the real issues are not being addressed.

Though Myanmar is ethnically diverse, the Bamar, the largest group with more than two thirds of the population, dominates Myanmar society while other groups such as the Karen, Chin and Kachin are marginalized.

Church leaders, they said, have lost all trust in the government. The KIO is being excluded or marginalized from meaningful discussions on the IDPs and other issues. They accuse the government of continuing the fighting and making deeper inroads inside Kachin state even while demanding that the Kachin lay down their arms.

The Kachin delegation expressed grave concern on the effect the conflict is having on their people. Unemployment is high. Some have crossed illegally into China, with many of the young women and girls becoming commercial sex workers in that country. Health concerns abound. Dengue fever broke out in IDP camps after the rainy season commenced in July.

Medical supplies for IDPs are in short supply. Trauma counseling is needed as well as spiritual sustenance for healing.

“We the church need to stand strong for justice,” the delegation affirmed. “But many KBC leaders are saying this is not the spiritual way.”

They emphasized the importance of being part of an international body. “When we make mention that we belong to the BWA and the WCC (World Council of Churches), this makes us very strong. The government views the various ethnic groups as weak.”

The Kachin delegation in October was the fourth Myanmar group to meet at the BWA offices in 2013 on conditions in that country. These included delegations representing the Chin, the Karen and Shan as well as a group of Myanmar immigrants living in the US.

Through Baptist World Aid, the relief and development arm of the BWA, assistance has been given to the Kachin and the Karen for IDP and refugee relief. The BWA, through its Consultative Status at the UN, took representatives of two of the previous delegations visiting the BWA to the offices of the UNHCR in New York City and presented reports documenting their concerns. Representations were also made to several state missions at the UN, including the Brazilian Mission, the Swedish Mission and the Japanese Mission. Accompanied by personnel from American Baptist Churches USA, visits were also made to the US State Department, where a joint report was presented.

The BWA has repeatedly brought the situation of ethnic minorities in Myanmar, particularly the situation of the Kachin, to the attention of national and intergovernmental authorities and continues to monitor the situation in Myanmar.

The Myanmar Baptist Convention is one of the largest BWA member organizations in Asia with almost one million members in approximately 4,800 churches.

American Baptist Churches USA General Secretary
Roy Medley addresses the gathering during the
200th anniversary celebration in Myanmar
On November 14-16, 2013, McAfee School of Theology of Mercer University partnered with the American Baptist Historical Society, Cooperative Baptist Fellowship, the Baptist History and Heritage Society, Baptist Women in Ministry and the Ministers and Missionaries Benefit Board to produce a three-day event featuring mission experts and practitioners from across Baptist life, entitled, “The Judsons: Celebrating 200 Years of Baptist Missions, Learning from the Past and Looking to the Future.”

Conference speakers provided historical perspective on the contributions of Adoniram Judson, Ann Judson, Sarah Boardman Judson and Emily Chubbuck Judson to Baptist mission work, including education, women’s work and congregational involvement in mission. Workshops, led by mission practitioners, focused on missional engagement within their own congregations.

On November 15, Burmese Baptist congregations led a worship service at First Baptist Church, Tucker, Georgia. The worship service was led by American Baptist Saw Ler Htoo, executive secretary of the Karen Baptist Convention, USA and missionary for American Baptist Home Mission Societies.

Molly Marshall, president of Central Baptist Theological Seminary, Shawnee, Kansas, was keynote speaker for the event, giving the closing address on November 16.

“We planned this event to honor the 200th anniversary of a couple of kids in their 20s who had the courage to follow their beliefs, and had the entrepreneurship to start the mother of all Baptist mission societies in America,” said Loyd Allen, professor of church history at McAfee and one of the event’s conveners. “They had the courage to go to a very different place and stay there, producing fruit that could be passed down to our time.”

Rob Nash, professor of mission and world religions at McAfee University in Georgia in the US, gave the morning presentation on the Judsons’ mission to Myanmar in the 19th century and its relevancy to US Baptists in the 21st century.

“In 1814 delegates from various missionary societies gathered to coordinate their efforts in sending and supporting missionaries. In time, the mechanisms they created would transform the world by carrying the Christian faith into every corner of it,” explained Nash. “In 2014, our challenge is to build on their legacy by supporting, sustaining and nurturing, not simply missionaries now, but rather a much more powerful force, represented in emerging networks of Baptists that, if properly galvanized, can transform the world in even more substantive ways.”


Source: American Baptist churches USA
Baptists in Syria, Egypt and Lebanon are confronting the realities of conflicts and instability in their respective countries.

Beginning in 2011, a Syrian civil war grew out of protests against the government that has got increasingly violent as government and opposition forces clashed. Baptists, like other Syrians, have been severely affected, losing homes, farms, properties and livelihood. Baptist churches in the cities of Aleppo and Homs have been damaged. Approximately 500 Baptist families have been displaced in and outside the country. An estimated 300 Baptists have fled Syria for Lebanon, Europe and the United States.

Syrian Baptist pastor Mazen H said “the war reached every region of my country. Schools have been burned. Churches have been burned. Children are not living their childhood. Many want to escape. Pastors are leaving the country.”

Baptists in the Middle Eastern country, with the support of the Baptist World Alliance and its partners, have been giving assistance to many of the displaced, regardless of whether they are Baptists. Mazen H traverses regularly between Lebanon and Syria to bring supplies to some 1,600 internally displaced (IDP) families. Another 500 families are being assisted with supplies in the city of Homs, a major area of confrontation since the protests and civil war began.

The need is increasing and urgent. Mazen H told the BWA that some 300 families were on the waiting list and approximately 100 families are added to the list for assistance each month. Supplies include food, medication, baby formula and diapers. Medical professionals, both paid and voluntary, provide medical services. Prayer and psychological counseling are offered to deal with the trauma.

While the civil war has taken a heavy toll on the country and its peoples, Mazen H said that, since the conflicts began, more people are attending church in Syria. Christians are “praying, sharing and helping each other to spread the good news, just like the church in Acts. More people are going to church.” He said that one congregation, which previously had only a few members, now regularly has more than 50 persons in worship.

Egypt

Egyptian Baptists have had to deal with the fallout from political instability that has rocked the North African country since the ouster of Hosni Mubarak from power in 2011 in the wake of popular uprising and discontent. The country’s president, Mohammed Morsi, who was elected to succeed Mubarak, became widely unpopular and lasted just about one year in office. He was removed from office by the country’s military, an occurrence that was popular among a wide swath of the population, but condemned by others.

Mounir Malaty, pastor of First Baptist Church of Cairo, drew on the work of late Egyptian professor, writer and parliamentarian, Milad Hanna, to explain the complexity of Egyptian society. Hanna indicated that there are seven layers on which Egypt is built – the pharomic, Greek, Coptic, Islam, Arab, African and Mediterranean. The first four are historical and the last three geographical. “Inside all of us we have all of us, even if we are not more of it,” Malaty said in regard to Egyptians. “Even as a pastor I am affected by the theology of the Muslims because I live among them all the time.”

The Egyptian Baptist pastor said Christians in Egypt were
living in fear as Morsi favored Muslim groups, some of them extremists, which threatened religious liberty of Christians and others. Dozens of churches were burned, including at least two Baptist churches. The church burnings were largely blamed on Morsi’s supporters. There have been physical attacks on Christians, Baptists included. “We thought Mubarak stepping down would be the beginning of real freedom,” Malaty said. But this proved not to be so.

Malaty contends that Christians have started to see “the good in the bad situation.” It is an opportunity, he said, “to restore our theology of seeing the church as the body of Christ.” He asserted that good testimony through loving response by Baptist Christians “has been a good testimony to those outside the church.”

**Lebanon**

Lebanese Baptists, too, have had to deal with threats to peace and safety in the Middle Eastern country. A bomb blast occurred in the capital Beirut on October 19, 2012, killing at least eight persons, including Wissam al-Hassan, the country’s head of intelligence and his assistant. An estimated 110 more were injured. The bombing was believed to be part of the fallout and spillover from the civil war in Syria, which shares a border with Lebanon. Thousands of Syrian refugees have been pouring into Lebanon and other Middle Eastern countries since the Syrian civil war started in 2011.

The attack occurred in Ashrafieh, an area of Beirut that is mostly inhabited by Christian families. It was the first major incident in Lebanon in recent years. The country previously experienced years of turmoil. It went through a protracted civil war between 1975 and 1990, resulting in an estimated 120,000 fatalities, many thousands injured, and tens of thousands displaced.

Nabil Costa, director of the Lebanese Society for Educational and Social Development said Christians in the Middle East are easy targets. Christians, who are the minority in these countries, “are the first to pay the price, even though we have nothing to do with the conflicts between Sunni and Shia Muslims,” Costa declared. “Christians need the right to survive, the right for their children to have an education.”

Yet, Costa insisted that “the majority of Muslims want to live in peace. It is a minority that gives Muslims a bad reputation.” Christians and Muslims have co-existed peaceably in Lebanon for years, Costa said. Lebanon is the most religiously diverse country in the Middle East with a Christian population estimated at almost 40 percent, inclusive of Orthodox and Maronite Catholic. The small Baptist community in Lebanon, according to Costa, has had an outsized influence through education and humanitarian aid.

Costa, a vice president of the BWA, said problems in the Middle East are compounded by a difference in mindset between Muslims on the one hand, and Westerners, including Christians, in Europe and North America, on the other. “Muslims think religion, western Christians think of the Middle East in terms of economy and oil.” He reminded western Christians that “God loves the Middle East and God is at work in the Middle East.”

The geopolitical arrangement of the region complicates matters even more. Costa explained that 85 percent of Middle Eastern and North African Muslims are Sunni while 15 percent are Shia. The US and other western countries, he stated, tend to support the more affluent Sunni majority, led by Saudi Arabia, while Russia and China tend to support the Shia, led by Iran. This has helped to bring about instability, misunderstanding and conflict.

Lebanese Baptists are at the forefront of meeting the needs of Syrian refugees that have poured into the country since the civil war started. The humanitarian aid that is given by the BWA and its partners “is not what helps us to survive. It helps us not to die,“

There is urgent need to address Middle East turmoil. “We need conflict management, if not conflict resolution,” said Costa. The Arab Baptist Theological Seminary in Beirut has held a series of Christian-Muslim dialogues. “We need to co-exist with all our differences,” Costa declared.

**Classes held for displaced Syrian children**
The five Baptist World Alliance member organizations in the Philippines, with total membership of about 430,000 Baptists, reported on the widespread devastation in the wake of Typhoon Haiyan that devastated parts of the Southeast Asian country on November 8.

The typhoon, described as perhaps the most powerful ever recorded, had speed of more than 300 kilometers or up to 195 miles per hour when it made landfall.

More than 5,700 persons were confirmed dead, more than 26,000 injured and almost 1,800 missing after the massive storm cut a swath of destruction across the region.

Among the urgent needs were for food, water, medicine and construction materials for housing.

Ildefonso Alfafara, general secretary of the Baptist Conference of the Philippines, with offices in Mandaue City in the province of Cebu, reported that some 2,000 families, including Baptists, were displaced.

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Japanese Baptists Wary of Nuclear Contamination

Baptists in Japan have grave concerns about pollutants in their communities since the massive earthquake, tsunami and the Fukushima nuclear plant disaster in March 2011.

Director of Baptist World Aid (BWAid) Rothangliani Chhangte who visited Japan in September 2013, met with leaders of the Japan Baptist Convention (JBC) and the Japan Baptist Union (JBU), and toured some of the devastated areas. BWAid is the relief and development arm of the Baptist World Alliance.

She reported that leaders in a Baptist congregation in Koriyama, 40 kilometers or 25 miles west of the Fukushima nuclear plant, “keep a daily log of radiation measurements in the church and surrounding area using a Geiger counter.”

Nuclear contamination is still high. “The public park across the church is too contaminated with radiation for children to play in anymore,” Chhangte reported.

“The church had paid for the top soil to be removed and have the area decontaminated but they no longer allow children to play in the park.”

Concerns are that attention will be diverted from recovery and cleanup efforts to focus on preparations to host the Tokyo Summer Olympics in 2020. Tokyo was announced as the host city in early September 2013. “They were afraid their government will now focus on building facilities for the Olympics and beautifying Tokyo instead of focusing on rebuilding the areas that have been devastated by the tsunami,” Chhangte said.

Related to this concern are allegations that the government is deliberately misinforming and misleading the Japanese public and international community as to the levels of nuclear contamination.

“Those from the Fukushima area were hurt by the prime minister’s comments about the nuclear plant there, as he brushed off the seriousness of the problem and showed...
have lost their homes. Approximately 80 percent of homes in the province were badly damaged or destroyed. Several Baptist churches were also destroyed.

Judson Herbilla, general secretary of the Convention of Philippine Baptist Churches, with its base in Iloilo, a highly urbanized city in Panay Island, said communication was difficult as phone lines were down and travel by road, ferry or air to the affected areas were not possible. He estimated that there were 2,000 families in immediate need of help. Herbilla said many churches were affected by the typhoon.

Pastoral R.V. Gernal, executive secretary of the Convention of Visayas and Mindanao of Southern Baptist Churches, with offices in Davao City in Mindanao, the second largest and southernmost island in the Philippines, said communication channels and systems were down and many of those affected live in hard to reach areas. Baptists were helping to minister to those who were affected, including those in hospital.

Jeremias Muring, president of the General Baptist Churches of the Philippines, also headquartered in Davao City, said the city of Tacloban in Mindanao was one of the hardest hit areas. While aid was reaching those in the city, Muring said those living in the outlying areas and other cities were not getting any assistance. Communication was still difficult and the Internet was slow. Volunteers were being trained to provide assistance. At least one Baptist church in Tacloban was destroyed.

Gerlie Baltero of the Luzon Convention of Southern Baptist Churches reported widespread devastation in the affected areas. He said hard hit provinces and cities included Leyte, Iloilo, Cebu, Oriental and Occidental Mindoro, Davao Oriental, Tacloban, Surigao del Norte and Palawan.

Carroll Baltimore, president of the Progressive National Baptist Convention in the United States, was in in the Philippines at the time when Typhoon Haiyan landed. “The destruction of the super typhoon has exceeded all predictions and expectations,” Baltimore wrote. “In the province of Capiz, 90 percent of the population [were affected] and buildings were destroyed. At least 15 of its area cities are wiped off the map and nothing exists.”

The Philippines have experienced a series of natural disasters in recent months. A 7.2 magnitude earthquake occurred on October 15 in Bohol, an island province located in Mindanao. Since September, a total of seven typhoons have affected the Asian archipelago, with three, including Haiyan, in November alone. “I could see that repeated earthquakes and typhoons had taken its toll on the people,” Baltimore said. He reported that many lived “in tents and had to evacuate at least four times in the past month due to repeated disasters.”

Both the JBC and JBU report that pastors and relief workers are experiencing burnout. “Volunteers also become tired and burnt-out,” Chhangte reported. “I am deeply concerned about those pastors and volunteers experiencing burn-out,” Chhangte said. “A system needs to be built-in to support their spiritual and physical needs so that they may continue to be effective in their ministry.”

The BWAid director visited projects that BW Aid supports, including a microenterprise project for 12 women who lost homes in the tsunami in Shizugawa fishing village. The women make braided leather bracelets, key chains, and lanyards for cell phones. The products are marketed to stores and businesses. Up to September 2013, four million yen in sales (US$400,000) have been generated since the project started two years earlier.
The Baptist World Alliance sent initial sums of US$10,000 for emergency relief to victims of Cyclone Phailin in India.

Described as a “Very Severe Cyclonic Storm,” Phailin, which attained the equivalent strength of a category five hurricane, slammed into eastern India on October 12, causing more than 20 deaths, widespread wind damage and astronomical loss through flooding. An estimated 12 million people were affected in Odisha state alone. The state of Andhra Pradesh was also severely affected, although early evacuation and warning were credited for limiting loss of life.

Hundreds of Baptists lost their homes. Swarupananda Patra of the Orissa Baptist Evangelical Crusade indicated that 175 houses of Baptist families in the districts of Gopalpur and Ganjam in Odisha were destroyed by the hurricane. Another 568 were washed away or otherwise destroyed by the floods that followed. “The state of Odisha in India has been hit severely,” Patra said.

Baptist churches were either washed away or submerged by the heavy flooding. “Baptist churches are under water and accessibility is almost nonexistent,” Patra stated. “The needs are huge, considering the magnitude of this natural disaster. We need your help and support to provide relief material for about 800 families in Balasore district and 350 families in Gopalpur, who belong to Baptist churches.”

Immediate needs include mosquito nets, medicine, water, food and blankets.
Nicolas Aimé Gbazia, president of the Association of Baptist Churches of Central African Republic told the BWA that there have been “great tribulations against the church of Christ in general and Baptists in particular.” Gbazia asserted that “churches and the interests of the church are the target of the new masters” of the nation.

In response, the Baptist World Alliance sent US$20,000 for relief that assisted 1,800 persons with tents, food and hygiene supplies. “We have helped some families cultivate small gardens. They will soon eat vegetables that will be harvested in these small gardens,” a report sent to the BWA on the assistance read.

The offensive against the government and civilian population began in December 2012 when Seleka forces, a loose coalition of four rebel groups, began a violent trek from the northeast region of CAR, seizing the towns of N’Délé, Sam Ouandja, Ouadda, Bria, Bambari, Sibut, Ndassima, Alindao Kouango, Kaga-Bandoro, Mbres and Batangafo. On March 24 Seleka rebels took the capital city of Bangui by force. President Bozize fled the country and Michel Djotodia, the rebel commander, declared himself president, suspended the constitution, and dissolved the national assembly.

A United States Department of State report said nearly 400,000 people were internally displaced and approximately 68,000 new refugees were forced into the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC), the Republic of the Congo, Cameroon, and Chad. The total number of CAR refugees in neighboring countries is now more than 220,000. The report said hospitals, schools, and warehouses were looted and entire villages destroyed. Displaced persons have little to no access to clean water, schools, or health services. Food security is a growing concern as many farmers missed the planting season due to the violence.

Gbazia said more than 3,000 people have been killed, churches, including Baptist places of worship, have been burned, church social outreach projects have been destroyed and women, including the wives of pastors, have been sexually assaulted in front of their families. “Whole villages were looted and burned. It’s chaos,” Gabazia declared. He expressed special concern for those who have fled into the jungle as they are exposed to diseases and wild animals.

“If nothing is done urgently we will inevitably evolve towards a civil war (Christians against Muslims) and no one can predict the result. This may be genocide because all the signs are visible,” Gbazai warned.

Reports suggest that many Seleka fighters were from other countries, including Chad and Sudan, and preyed on the civilian population outside of the capital Bangui. Seleka’s targeted violence has created inter-religious tensions in a country where Christian and Muslim populations lived in relatively peaceful co-existence.

The US State Department report said Seleka’s actions “have given rise to primarily Christian self-defense groups that have sought to kill both Seleka fighters and CAR Muslims, creating a dangerous dynamic of inter-religious hatred and tension that risks spiraling out of control.”

There are four BWA member organizations in CAR with a total membership of more than 180,000 in more than 770 churches.
Leaders of the Baptist World Alliance and Baptist leaders in South Africa paid tribute to anti-Apartheid hero, Nobel Peace Prize Winner and former President of South Africa Nelson Mandela, who died on December 5, 2013. He was 95 years old.

BWA President John Upton said “Nelson Mandela stood out as a giant among us in his humble way because he modeled understanding when retaliation was expected.” Mandela “demonstrated peace when many wanted war. He extended a hand to his former enemies when disdain would have been easier.”

A REMARKABLE EMANCIPATOR

BWA General Secretary Neville Callam indicated that “with the passing of this great man, the world has lost a remarkable emancipator. Mandela blazed a trail of respect for human dignity and human rights.”

Chris Dikana, general secretary of the Baptist Convention of South Africa declared that “Nelson Rolihlahla Mandela was truly an icon and a symbol of reconciliation.” He said “the church of God has benefited immensely from his struggle for freedom. Had it not been for his leadership and Christian beliefs that influenced him in that process, this nation could have been easily plunged into deep conflict and possible civil war.”

Ronnie Reddy, general secretary of the Baptist Association of South Africa, said Mandela “made the world a better place for all South Africans. He taught us to hold on to our biggest dreams and to stand firm in defense of our principles. He renewed our faith in the power of good men and women to triumph over evil. He showed us, in the way he lived his life, that the human spirit can rise above seemingly impossible odds to offer forgiveness instead of enacting revenge; to embrace peace rather than violence. He reminded us that if we stand together, united in action, we can achieve anything.”

Angelo Scheepers, general secretary of the Baptist Union of Southern Africa asserted that “throughout his life Mr. Mandela strove for justice for everyone in South Africa. His willingness to forgive those who had wronged him almost certainly saved South Africa from a bloodbath of catastrophic proportions. Our beloved Madiba consistently pursued the goals of fairness, reconciliation and unity. Mr. Mandela was a leader of principle. He was also a man of deep humanity, humility and compassion. Everybody loved and respected him – and we shall all deeply miss him.”

Everton Jackson, executive secretary/treasurer of the Caribbean Baptist Fellowship pointed out that “the parallels between both regions – Caribbean and Africa – are well known in terms of our common experience of exploitation, oppression, racial prejudice and victimization. Therefore, Caribbean people identified with Mandela in his struggle and protest against the dehumanizing exploits of oppressive principalities and powers.”

Baptists Respond to American Tornado Outbreak

Baptists responded to the devastating series of tornados that affected the Midwest region of the United States on November 17.

The tornado outbreak was the deadliest and most violent on record during the month of November in the US state of Illinois. The event resulted in many tornadoes across the states of Illinois, Missouri, Michigan, Indiana, Kentucky, Ohio and Tennessee. There were at least eight fatalities.
Erling Oddestad, a prominent Swedish businessman and former president of the Baptist Union of Sweden, died on August 18. He was 93 years old.

Oddestad, born in Norway and who moved to Sweden while a young child, operated several businesses, including Duribolaget, which he developed to become the market leader in the flooring industry in Sweden, the Royal Hotel in Gothenburg, the city’s oldest hotel, and Light Stool, in Karlstad.

He was president of the Baptist Union of Sweden from 1967-1978 and was previously president of the Swedish Baptist Union Youth League from 1955-1960.

Oddestad served on the Baptist World Alliance General Council and Personnel Committee, and was a member of the Local Arrangements Committee that helped to plan the Baptist World Congress in Stockholm in 1975, where he delivered the congress sermon. He was part of the first BWA delegation that visited China in the early 1980s after the end of the Cultural Revolution in that country.

“My mother remembers that after WW II when Erling was a young man, he came as a ‘Time-for-God’ Volunteer to Berlin, Germany, to help distribute aid coming from Sweden to the destitute,” said Regina Claas, daughter of former BWA General Secretary Gerhard Claas, who was German. “He was a very modest and humble man, always willing to help. As a successful business man he shared his wealth freely to the glory of God. A true example of discipleship as a lay leader!” said Claas, a BWA vice president and former general secretary of the Union of Evangelical Free Churches (Baptists) in Germany.

Oddestad leaves wife, Alva, son, Mark, and daughters Anna and Karin.

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About 127 tornadoes were reported with 65 confirmed. Some of the twisters attained F4 levels with winds of up to 190 miles or 310 kilometers per hour. Worst damage was in Washington, Illinois, were an F4 twister killed at least six people.

Baptist Press (BP) reported that the tornado disrupted worship service at First Baptist Church in Washington. “We stepped outside, and you could see the updraft pulling into the storm,” said Josh Monda, pastor of First Baptist. “We saw the tornado form and began moving through the neighborhood where we knew several of our members live.” Worshippers took refuge in the church’s basement.

After the tornado passed, worshipers helped to rescue victims. “We went out and started to help people. We pulled a couple of people from the wreckage of their homes and prayed with them. Some of our members tried to make it home but could not. It was a tough situation,” Monda said.

A church member was hospitalized with injuries from the storm. Four homes of members were destroyed and other residences were damaged as the tornado passed approximately one-quarter mile from the church. The church building received no damage.

BP indicated that Roland Manor Baptist Church, also in Washington, served as an incident command center for Illinois Baptist disaster relief. Thirty five volunteers served in Washington and other nearby communities, clearing debris and putting tarps on roofs. Another crew worked in Peoria to cook 1,600 meals a day for the volunteers and other storm responders and victims.

Southern Baptist Disaster Relief units were deployed in Illinois, Indiana and Missouri. The North American Mission Board dispatched supplies including bottled water and roofing tarp to the area.

Upton said all persons should “hear the call of his life for peace, unity, and dignity and commit ourselves to those very values.” The BWA president said this would be a different world “if those commitments were common practices in human relationships.”

Callam said “we cannot afford to forget the unbounded passion for freedom, the relentless striving for justice and the unshakeable commitment to peaceful human coexistence that Mandela exhibited.”

Mandela was South Africa’s first black president after he spent 27 years in prison of a life sentence for his struggles against apartheid. He was released in 1990 after growing international pressure and numerous demonstrations inside South Africa, many of which were brutally put down by the oppressive apartheid government that ruled the country for decades.

After he was elected president in 1994, Mandela championed forgiveness and reconciliation in the country that is believed to have averted civil war in the nation that could have spilled over into other countries of Southern Africa.

Approximately 90 representatives of foreign states traveled to South Africa to attend memorial events in December 2013, one of the largest gatherings of world leaders outside of a United Nations meeting.

MODELED UNDERSTANDING RETALIATION WAS EXPECTED
This account of the issues involved in the European Baptist foray into institutional theological education contains vital information. Journey with the writer to Rüshlikon and share cherished memories of exciting days. Consider the challenges involved in intentional community-building among diverse people, and follow the contours of the successful effort to define what true partnership involves.

Karl Heinz Walter, Encounters: People and Encounters that Impressed and Shaped Me, 1933-2008, WDL Verlag, 2013

Karl Heinz Walter, former BWA regional secretary for Europe and past general secretary of the European Baptist Federation, writes about the impression made on him by Philip Potter, Richard Nixon, Pope John Paul II and others. Denton Lotz writes the Preface to this 95-page book which first appeared in German in 2011.

Cawley Bolt, Reluctant or Radical Revolutionaries?: Evangelical Missionaries and Afro-Jamaican Character, 1834-1870, Regnum Books International, September 2013

Benjamin Ola. Akande, Miracles, Mysteries, Death and Dying and Other Supernatural Events, CreateSpace Independent Publishing, August 2013

The International Baptist Convention (IBC) began in 1958 from a vision to reach primarily American military members and their families who lived in other countries, but has grown far beyond that. Today IBC churches are in more than 25 countries, reaching people from more than 120 nationalities through English-speaking churches in Europe, the Middle East, Africa, and Latin America.

More than one-third of IBC churches comprise mainly American military personnel, while others are made up mostly of international members who live outside their home countries. The word “international” is in the name of more than half the churches.

The churches are rich in diversity and strive for unity in Christ that is rooted in Christian love. Since English is the most widely used language in the Western world, English-language churches have a great opportunity to reach people from many nations with the good news of Jesus Christ. Every year people from around the world respond when they hear the good news of Jesus Christ presented by faithful IBC church members.

The IBC office is in Frankfurt, Germany, but the headquarters are in Madrid, Moscow, Dar es Salaam, Dubai, Düsseldorf, Heidelberg, Hannover and Hamburg, Hoensbroek, Buenos Aires, Berlin, Bitburg and Brasilia, Kaiserslautern, Cologne and Cape Town — basically wherever IBC churches are located.

Believing that working together can accomplish more than can be done separately, IBC churches cooperate in proclaiming the gospel of Jesus Christ, planting new churches, strengthening member churches, enhancing fellowship among member churches, supporting other Baptist groups and promoting worldwide Christian mission.

IBC member churches receive many benefits from working together as a family of churches. These include training of teachers and leaders; resources for searching, supporting, and relocating pastors and other staff; counsel and support in times of crisis and transition; partnerships with volunteer teams in construction projects; specialized seminars and outreach events; and financial assistance through grants and loans for building, remodeling and crises. IBC churches also engage in regular prayer with partners around the world through CareNet, IBC’s weekly prayer network. There is also publicity for churches to people looking for English-language congregations; as well as opportunities for refreshment, ministry, and training through various conferences.
All-Ukrainian Union of Associations of Evangelical Christian-Baptists held a mission forum in September to honor the 1025th Anniversary of the Baptism of Rus. More than 3,000 attended the forum and hundreds came forward to offer their lives to mission. It stirred something deep within my soul to observe young people committing themselves to move to many parts of the world that will be dangerous for them to live as Christians. Yet, in full awareness of the danger, they made the commitment. They will also have to find ways to sustain their livelihood as they serve since they will go without much financial support. Their response was profoundly moving to me.

Also at the meeting were many pastors and Baptist leaders from countries where churches are currently being burned and believers are arrested, beaten, and sometimes killed. One shared with us that in his country more than 90 churches had been burned that month. When asked how they coped with such persecution he responded by saying, “When a blind person bumps into you, are you offended or do you get angry? Of course you don’t, you understand, they are blind. You don’t get angry or respond with like treatment. You know they are blind and the only way that will help them see is if you respond in love.”

I heard stories of how the Baptists in Ukraine survived during the communist era, how they spoke truth even at great risk to themselves. President Vyacheslav Nesteruk invited the European Baptist Federation leadership and me to his home for a huge meal where we spent an evening enjoying fellowship and hearing stories of days when the church was not free and how God provided so many miracles during that time. It will be an evening I will treasure for the rest of my life.

In all these experience there was a common theme. I noticed it first at the big event of the mission forum. The success of that huge event was due to the daily emphasis of local churches teaching total commitment to Christ, regardless of the sacrifice. You could hear that expressed in all the testimonies. For those from persecuted countries they found a level of spiritual maturity through their daily spiritual disciplines. When periods of persecution come upon them they are prepared to respond in love and not in the ways of the world. I was reminded over and over again of the value of tending to the little things.

Jesus was attuned to small things. He had a child’s studious love of the little. Jesus saw a dead sparrow on the ground, pointed to it, and said, “God cares about that!” Jesus saw two pennies in an offering plate and said they are stupendously important. He took time with little children. He said we should ponder wildflowers and birds. He spoke of yeast, salt, and a single coin. He spoke a lot about seeds. Look at these little things he kept saying. Jesus was telling us those little things are shouting to us about God and about the world and about you and me.

Actually, this is good news, isn’t it? It is life like that holiness is made of. It’s life like that God’s greatness is hidden. It is good news for me at least because, I don’t know about you, but the Nobel Prize Committee never calls me and the President of the United States does not seek my advice and there is not one celebrity magazine that seems to know or care that I exist.

My life is made up of meetings, conversations, phone calls, emails (lots of emails), negotiating little conflicts, washing dishes, mowing grass, putting words together as I try, running into people that are both acquaintances and strangers. I would guess your life is made up of many of the same things.

I realized anew in Kiev that little daily choices make astonishing differences. That is true because day after day, year after year, those small choices accumulate, they gather weight and they start making us who we are. Sometimes they start showing up in how our faces look. Does evil rise in us all at once or by one little mean choice at a time? Or, how many generous words, generous deeds and generous prayers do we offer until one day we become a generous soul? Faithful in little means faithful in much. What a good thing to be reminded of.

John V. Upton Jr.

from the President
JOHN UPTON

The Little Things

JANUARY/MARCH 2014 31
interested in international mission ever since I got more involved with the church. I was intimately involved with local mission in Jamaica while working with the Jamaica Baptist Union Youth Department. However, my first experience of international mission brought me to Eastover, Virginia, in the United States, in 2005. Ever since, I have had an unending appetite for international mission.

So far, I managed only to do mission in Grenada (in partnership with the Virginia Baptist Mission Board), as well as in Panama (in partnership with the Caribbean Baptist Youth) while being chairman of the Jamaica Baptist Union Youth Department. After my tenure as chairman, I applied for two different positions. First, to be an intern with the World Council of Churches (WCC). If successful, I would have traveled to Geneva, Switzerland, to the WCC head office. I worked with the WCC as a steward at their assembly in Brazil back in 2006, so I thought I would apply. Also because one of my passions is ecumenism. I also applied to be an English teacher in Japan where the Christian population is only one percent.

Rural Japan

I got the English teacher job in Japan and didn’t hear from the WCC, so I decided to go to Japan, possibly the most “unreached” country on earth. I was placed in a very rural part of Japan, not knowing the language or much about their customs outside of what I read. I was devastated for the first few months. But I eventually found some Christians to do Bible study with and a church where I could worship. In that community of Niimi, Okayama, there was only one church. Membership? About nine. A family church of sorts. Every year some international students would come through and leave. The membership has been at a constant 9-12 for more than 10 years. Evangelistic outreach is very subtle. Being a Christian in Japan will almost certainly ostracize you from the others, unless you are a foreigner. Being a foreigner in Japan, you are already ostracized. But many are interested in seeing a foreigner as many Japanese in these parts only see foreigners on TV.

The sermons at the church were in Japanese only. Someone had to translate for me weekly. This was kind of tiring.

The son in law of the pastor asked me to preach at his church in Okayama city. I accepted the challenge and a translator was there to help me deliver the message. I preached to a congregation of seven. It was a touching experience. My topic was “Living a life of purpose for God.”

Urban Japan

This was the only time I preached in rural Japan. After living there for three years, I decided to relocate closer to Tokyo. I started to search for churches to attend in the area. My friend introduced me to an English speaking congregation called Kanazawa Christ Church. The pastor is Malaysian and his wife is Japanese. Each week he would preach in English, while his wife translated into Japanese. I visited there for one year. This was while I was completing an online Masters in Christian Education. The pastor was instrumental in helping me complete it. My course was especially challenging since I am coming from a computer science background and knew very little about theology.

Baptists in Japan

While teaching in Yokohama, I found out that someone who assisted me with translation was actually a Baptist pastor. She invited me to her church which was close to one of the schools I taught at. Unfortunately, they speak only Japanese at her church. The pastor introduced me to an American missionary, Roberta Stephens, who has been living in Japan since the 1970s. She told me more about Baptists in Japan. There are several Baptist groups in Japan including the Japan Baptist Union, which Roberta was working with, the Gospel Baptist Association, the Japan Baptist Association and the Japan Baptist Convention.

I was then finally introduced to an English speaking Baptist church which was not too far from where I lived, The Yokohama International Baptist Church. Since attending this church, a pastor and friend of mine in Jamaica, Learoy Campbell, made some links and got me more involved with Baptist missionaries in Japan. I preached once to some street people in Tokyo. There is a street Baptist church kept at a famous park in Tokyo. They meet weekly at the park where 80-100 street people attend. I heard from my missionary friend that there are several of these street side Baptist churches in Tokyo, one with as many as 500 persons visiting weekly.

So even though the gospel preached by Baptists is spreading slowly in Japan, it is still going on. God is doing a wonderful work here in this distant land. Please pray for Japan.

To God be the glory, great things he has done and is doing. 

By Dave Collymore

I have become all things to all people so that by all possible means I might save some. I do all this for the sake of the gospel, that I may share in its blessings.

— Paul
1 Corinthians 9:22-23