

# **CBF gains BWA membership despite SBC opposition\_72803**

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RIO DE JANEIRO, Brazil (ABP)-The Cooperative Baptist Fellowship was elected to full membership in the Baptist World Alliance July 11 despite strong opposition from Southern Baptist Convention representatives.

The 75-28 vote by the BWA General Council came two years after the CBF's initial application for membership. The vote also followed a decision last month by SBC messengers to reduce BWA funding by more than 30 percent.

The flap over CBF's membership escalated last year when SBC leaders voiced concerns about how the BWA membership committee handled CBF's application. Rather than declining CBF's application a year ago, committee members publicly outlined the steps necessary for CBF to qualify for membership in the global Baptist fellowship.

Membership committee Chairman Ian Hawley told participants at the BWA General Council meeting this summer in Rio de Janeiro that CBF leaders had fulfilled the requirements for membership by declaring last fall that

"they have separated themselves from the structures and organization of the SBC." Additionally, CBF leaders submitted 20 "indicators" the fellowship is a separate Baptist body, including the organization's own mission statement, funding channels and missions structure.

Hawley, director of international missions for Australian Baptists, expressed regret that the membership process contributed to heightened tensions. "We certainly did not have any intention of hurting or embarrassing the SBC," he emphasized.

Noting that committee members "agonized and prayed for guidance over this decision," Hawley added, "The membership committee is of the opinion that the necessary degree of separation from the SBC by the CBF has been met."

He said the committee determined that recommending CBF as a BWA member body was "the only fair and right decision that could be made."

Prior to the secret-ballot vote, SBC representatives sought to defer the vote until next year. They suggested that the CBF might be better qualified for associate membership, a new category to be considered next year that would include local churches as well as other Baptist groups such as state, regional or associational entities.

The primary issue is whether CBF is "eligible under our present rules of membership," responded Tony Peck, a representative from the Baptist Union of Great Britain. "If so, we ought to vote on it now."

General Council members declined to consider the motion to defer before voting by a margin of nearly 3-to-1 to accept the CBF as BWA's newest member body.

CBF Coordinator Daniel Vestal described the vote as "a kind of validation by other Baptist bodies worldwide of our value, worth and place in the

Baptist family. Baptist World Alliance is an important ministry, and I'm excited about being a part of it."

Charles Wade, executive director of the Baptist General Convention of Texas, noted, "The world Baptist family considered carefully the recommendation of their membership committee."

Accepting CBF despite the controversy surrounding its application demonstrates that "Baptists around the world clearly will relate to all the Baptist family," Wade added. "They do not want to play favorites."

Denton Lotz, BWA general secretary, said he believes the membership process was fair and appropriate.

"We are Baptists," he emphasized. "We believe in democracy. We believe in the will of the people. ... We would just plead that we all love one another."

Four other groups—the Community of Baptist Churches of Eastern Congo, the Association of Baptist Churches in the Central African Republic, the Baptist Church of Bosnia-Herzegovina and the Fraternity of Baptist Churches in Cuba—were approved for membership without debate earlier in the session.

The five additions expand BWA's global membership to 211 member bodies representing more than 46 million baptized believers worldwide.