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MCLEAN, Va. (ABP) - Through 100 years that have seen some of the most dramatic changes in history, worldwide Baptists have emerged with a spirit of unity, according Denton Lotz, general secretary for Baptist World Alliance.

In an open letter ushering in BWA's centennial celebration, Lotz said that in 1905, when BWA was founded in London, "there was excitement that this was going to be 'the Christian Century.'" But two world wars "doomed the so-called Christian West to extinction" in Europe, according to Lotz.

Disunity in the world has also expressed itself in disunity within the church, said Lotz, but the Baptist World Alliance, an international fellowship of Baptist organizations, is a notable exception.

"We rejoice at the great unity among Baptists worldwide as expressed in the Baptist World Alliance," he said. "In spite of the recent Southern Baptist exodus, we rejoice at the tremendous support for the BWA from its 211 member bodies in every part of the globe."

Baptist World Alliance will hold its centenary world congress July 27-31 in Birmingham, England. It will be the group's first worldwide meeting without the Southern Baptist Convention, which withdrew its membership and funding in October in a dispute over BWA's control and direction.

The past century saw a dramatic shift of Christianity southward, Lotz wrote. In 1905, more than 85 percent of Christians in the world were in Europe and North America. In 2005, 60 percent of Christians are in Asia, Africa and Latin America, Lotz said.

"While in 1905 Spurgeon's Tabernacle was the largest Baptist church, with thousands of white, English worshippers, today the largest Baptist church in Britain is a Ghanaian/Nigerian Baptist church composed of African immigrants," he said. "The former missionary-receiving countries have now become missionary-sending countries."

Leadership of BWA also reflects that trend, he said.

The last century witnessed significant cultural changes, Lotz said, such as the end of colonialism in the 1960s, the end of segregation in the United States in 1965, the fall of communism in 1989, the end of apartheid in South Africa in 1991, the global war on terror beginning in 2001, and dramatic breakthroughs in technology.

"All these changes meant the church had to develop new strategies for mission, with new opportunities in Eastern Europe and Africa and hindrances in the Middle East," he continued.

"The past 100 years saw great Baptist spiritual and political leaders: Martin Luther King Jr., Billy Graham and Jimmy Carter," said Lotz finally. "These men represent three significant aspects of the gospel message for which most Baptists have stood for many years—social justice, evangelism and human rights.

“Who will be the new leaders in the next century of Baptist life? Let us pray that God will send men and women to the Baptist World Alliance with a prophetic and biblical word for bringing renewal, kingdom growth and advance for Christ and his kingdom.”

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