

BWA president offers global perspective on the church

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Baptist World Alliance President David Coffey recently spoke at several Texas Baptist churches, institutions and events as a part of his visit to the United States. Terri Jo Ryan, religion reporter for the *Waco Tribune-Herald*, interviewed him.

Q: What are some of the differences you've observed between Texas Baptist life and that in Great Britain?

A: I think the biggest difference is your Sunday school system. You have what is probably a core element of Baptist life in Texas—that is, the commitment to Sunday school. We don't have that. We've tried that, but it hasn't worked. I think there are lots more similarities, such as a commitment to local and global missions and your commitment to the fact that the world doesn't stop at the Texas border, that there is life beyond there.

Baptist
World
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President
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Coffey

I think musically, you've got a much stronger tradition. ... There has been a worship renaissance, not just in Baptist life in Britain but in many evangelical circles, which has re-established the Reformation principle of putting worship back as the property of the congregation, not a group of professionals.

There is a gain and a loss in that. The gain has been evident. It has made worship more a corporate experience. If you worship in the average Baptist church in Britain, the sense is that everybody is participating.

The loss is the loss of the traditional choir. And historians, I think, would be amazed to see the demise, even in my lifetime, of the church choir. Very, very few churches now have church choirs. They have music groups—there's been a huge shift in that direction.

Q: So, there is a movement toward contemporary Christian music, then, on your side of the world?

A: Oh, huge. When I travel around the world, one of the disappointments I have, if I have a disappointment, it's that you can be in South Africa, you could be in Hong Kong, you could even be in places in South Korea and Great Britain, and there's almost a global hymnody. You long sometimes for that indigenous culture. But it'll pass. Music has trends and phases, and it may have lasted the last 10 to 20 years, but there's quite an influence in the United Kingdom now from places like Taize (France, an ecumenical monastery) and ... the Celtic influences, a sort of blended worship. The

majority of our Baptist churches are less traditional and more informal.

Q: How vital is the role of churches there? We are always hearing that Christianity seems irrelevant in the postmodern age, specifically in secularized Europe.

A: Institutional Christianity is in decline. You can't deny that because the statistics are there. ... But I think there are people, commentators and important sociologists like Grace Davie (director of the Centre for European Studies at the University of Exeter, U.K.) who have surveyed in Europe who would say that the continuing presence of religious symbol is going to be very important. ... We have every 10 years a major census in the United Kingdom. In the last census (2001), it was revealed that 75 percent of the population when asked their chosen religion put down Christian. In this non-church-going age, only 10 percent of the population across Europe, a mean average, is going to services each week. All institutional Christianity has suffered.

But Christianity as a movement ... especially in the United Kingdom, makes me spiritually optimistic. ... I believe that every human being is made in the image of God, and the heart is restless until it rests in God. There is always that soul quest—the spiritual quest. The difference nowadays is that people don't necessarily turn to Christianity or the church to fulfill that quest when there are all these other avenues Some things about the church change—the structures, the outward form. But the core, the good news of Jesus Christ, doesn't change though the centuries.

Q: What is the role of the Baptist World Alliance in fostering Christian unity? What should that role be?

A: One of the core values of the Baptist World Alliance since its inception has been that it stands for unity—unity among the various shades and differences of opinion among Baptists. It takes its place within the world

communion of the Christian churches.

One of our great former presidents, Alexander Maclaren, at the very founding meeting of the BWA, was bold enough to get all the delegates there to quote the Apostles' Creed, and we repeated it in Birmingham last year in England for our Centenary Congress.

He wanted to demonstrate that Baptists were part of the one universal church of Jesus Christ. Now, how we express that, in terms of our outward commitment, will vary. I do believe there is one true church, and Baptists are a part of it. But there will be some who say, "I cannot express that in friendship."

I am one of the presidents of Churches Together of England (an ecumenical body), and I don't deny that there are some very deep differences—sometimes to a breaking point—between Christian denominations. But I have to believe there is one true church of Jesus Christ, there is one true spiritual church of Jesus Christ, and Baptists are a part of it. ... In a world that is so broken with division, I think I would affirm the principle of Jesus in that he prayed that his church would be one, so that the world would believe. The world finds it difficult to believe when it sees a disunited church.

Q: What kind of a witness is this to the world at large when there are major fault lines in Baptist life?

A: We know from Christian history as well as Scripture itself that there are times when Christians disagree so deeply that there is a parting of the ways. Barely is the young early church, as recorded in the Acts of the Apostles, hardly out of that first century before there are deep divisions showing up.

What I find difficult to cope with is what I call unnecessary division. There is what I call core doctrine, surrounding the central events of the life of

Jesus, the unity of the Godhead—and it's when people start to sort of subdivide which is what I find sad and unnecessary. It damages the integrity of the mission, no two ways about that. ... There is an intimate relationship between the unity of the church and the witness of the church to a watching world. Now, we can have deep differences with those who are of other faith traditions, but if Baptists are not able to unite around a core of values that they believe, then I always find that a deep sadness.

Q: Can you speak about the Southern Baptist Convention's withdrawal from the BWA more than a year ago? Any hopes of a reconciliation between it and the BWA?

A: We were saddened by the withdrawal of the Southern Baptist Convention. There was no rejoicing on the day that happened. We were sad because it was one of those moments, probably the most serious moment in terms of unity that we had faced in 100 years of our history; it happened on the eve of our centenary, it happened under the leadership of one of the most dynamic and gospel-loving presidents, Dr. Billy Kim, and I know he carried it as a heavy burden in his own heart that this had happened.

Speaking about the hopes of reconciliation, I was one of the 10 representatives of the Baptist World Alliance that met with the Southern Baptist Convention in Nashville just before the split took place. We met in April (2004) when the decision to resign came in June. In the statement that was signed that day, although it became obvious on the horizon that there were no possible grounds for reconciliation, we did agree there would be regular meetings, there would be opportunities for SBC and BWA people to meet. I now count it as my responsibility at some point in the coming months to contact Morris Chapman (president of the SBC Executive Committee), whom I know well, and say, "Is it time that we had the first meeting since the withdrawal?"

Q: As a European and a Christian, can you speak to the concerns

many have about the rise of a militant brand of Islam on the continent and Great Britain? What role can the BWA play in seeking peaceful relations between Christendom and moderate Islam?

A: What it has exposed is that the people who perpetrate such acts, these terrible atrocities, are a minority within the Muslim community. And we have had to work hard in the United Kingdom for peaceful relations.

I was a signatory with the Jewish, the Muslim, the Catholic and the Anglican leaders, of a statement (issued three days after the London bombings last July), where together we called such atrocities evil and barbaric. And we called for peace and calm and good community relations.

We've just founded, within the past month, the council for Christians and Muslims. We have a council for Christians and Jews. At the initiative of the archbishop of Canterbury, that came into being this year. The idea is to bring together a dialogue of Christian and Muslim scholars who will be able to speak together about these things. ... I think Christians should be working so that Huntington's Thesis (the clash of civilizations will dominate global politics, and the fault-lines between civilizations will be the battle lines of the future) doesn't come true in our lifetime. It's possible among people of good will.

When I've been in these Muslim-Jewish-Christian dialogues, their concerns are our concerns—their concerns for family values, their concerns for peaceful communities, their concern for law and order, and there are many, many people of good will.

Baptist life began in Europe in the 17th century, and some of the great things that were written in those early days about religious liberty were not just for religious liberty for Baptists but for all. We wanted everyone to have the freedom to exercise the soul competency the way they wanted to.

Q: What challenges do you see the world Baptist movement facing in

the near future, and the rest of the 21st century?

A: As a Baptist Christian, I believe one of the goals of our world alliance is to share the faith that we have in Jesus Christ. We have to share it sensitively and appropriately, but every human being has a right to hear the good news of Jesus Christ in words or a form they can understand. We need to realize there are still millions of people who do not have access to words of Scripture. So there is a huge commitment to distributing the Bible so that people have the opportunity to read for themselves.

Baptists in many parts of the world have been at the forefront of the Make Poverty History movement. ... We'll be rolling out this summer a coordinated program on HIV/AIDS, to stand beside people who are sufferers.

We've already had some major international conferences on human trafficking. Drug trafficking is less of a problem than human trafficking. The trafficking of human beings at a time when, in Britain, we are approaching the bicentennial of the abolition of the slave trade, is a sad irony. This year the film of the life on William Wilberforce, *Amazing Grace*, will be released. I'm hoping there is going to be a new awareness of how setting the slave free is still a very key element of our commitment.

Religious liberty is high on the agenda. Whether it be North Korea, Turkmenistan, Eritrea or Burma, there are many, many oppressive regimes.

We were founding members of the U.N. as a (nongovernmental organization), and I'd like to see us strengthening our role there so we can have face-to-face conversations with the governments there. We have a human rights visit to Vietnam this May, and Texas Baptists are coming with me, so we will be meeting with government officials there.

Q: Any final thoughts?

A: If there were such a thing as back to basics, my own commitment as a Christian of 45 to 50 years is to be a serious follower—a serious disciple of Jesus Christ. That is my life's commitment. I became a Christian when I was 17 or 18, and I promised to serve Jesus until the end, and where I saw his footprints I wanted to follow myself.

So for all the complexity my life is leading me into, one day I won't have any titles like president. I will be, if God spares me, an old man, and the only title left to me will be disciple of Jesus. So therefore, that's my priority. I've been working on the title I will carry for the longest time. I recommend that to any Christian—always be a disciple, a learner. I am always seeking to learn what he wants me to be.

News of religion, faith, missions, Bible study and Christian ministry among Texas Baptist churches, in the BGCT, the Southern Baptist Convention (SBC) and around the world.