

BWA committee nominates first non-white general secretary

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By Robert Marus

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FALLS CHURCH, Va. (ABP)—Neville Callam will make history for Baptists around the world if elected general secretary of the Baptist World Alliance.

If elected in July, the 55-year-old Jamaican pastor will be the first non-white chief executive of the group, which represents about 110 million Baptists in national and regional bodies across the planet. He would also be the first general secretary in the group's 101-year history to hail from somewhere other than the United States or Europe.

Neville Callam

Callam, who would succeed Denton Lotz, the organization's retiring general secretary, was announced as the nominee March 7 during a meeting of the BWA Executive Committee at the group's Falls Church, Va., headquarters. The panel responded by giving the nominee a standing ovation and symbolically affirming the candidate.

John Sundquist, chairman of the search committee that recommended Callam, called him “a seminal theological thinker,” “an articulate statesman” and an ingenious “Renaissance man.”

Callam, in response, said he would offer only one sentence: “All I have to say is, if this is how the Lord is leading us, I am willing to follow.”

The position will not become formal until the organization’s larger governing body, the BWA General Council, votes on Callam’s nomination during its July meeting in Accra, Ghana—a location Sundquist views as significant.

“We will, in the providence of God, install Neville Callam into the office of general secretary when we are in Ghana,” he said. “Neville’s grandparents were shipped in slave ships from Ghana to Jamaica. And now he becomes, in Ghana, the leader of the Baptist World Alliance.”

Pastor of Tarrant Baptist Church in Kingston, Jamaica, Callam has been heavily involved in BWA life more than 20 years. He has served on BWA governing bodies and on several other committees and work groups for the organization. He currently belongs to BWA’s Implementation Task Force, which is charged with restructuring the organization for the future.

Callam has served two terms as president of the Jamaica Baptist Union and has, at other times, held every other office for that denomination, including acting general secretary. He also worked on the boards of several public and religious media organizations in Jamaica.

He also serves as a member of the World Council of Churches’ Faith and Order Commission. It is a theological discussion forum whose membership is not limited to denominations that cooperate with the ecumenical council. Southern Baptist Convention leader Timothy George is the only other Baptist who serves on the commission.

A Harvard Divinity School and University of the West Indies graduate, Callam is a specialist in Christian ethics. He and his wife, Dulcie, have two grown children.

Burchell Taylor, president of the Caribbean Baptist Fellowship and a member of the Executive Committee, said Baptists in the West Indies are excited about Callam's nomination and what it will signify for the global Baptist movement.

"We regard his elevation to this post as a great historic statement by this Baptist world family, and we do think that it will have consequences for the good as the unfolding future comes upon us," he said.

The man Callam is slated to replace said the election of a non-white candidate who does not come from a First World nation signifies the radical changes global Christianity has undergone since the alliance's founding.

"The fact is, the Christian faith has moved to the Southern Hemisphere. Neville represents that tradition of African Christianity that is winning the world" for Christ, said Lotz. "And maybe we in the West need to be re-missionized and re-evangelized by the (global) South."

At the March meeting, BWA leaders also heard a financial report and expressed concern about strained relations with some Baptist unions in former Soviet-bloc countries.

Ellen Teague, BWA's director of finance and administration, noted that the organization ended 2006 with nearly \$500,000 more in net assets than it had at the end of 2005. She said BWA's income from individual and church donations has increased dramatically in recent years. In 2003, for example, the group received approximately \$315,000 directly from local churches. By 2006, the figure was more than \$761,000.

The European Baptist Federation, comprised of BWA member unions from

Europe, the Middle East and the former Soviet republics, reported that two Baptist denominations in small Central Asian republics had left BWA in the past year. Leaders of the Baptist unions in Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan cited concerns similar to the Southern Baptists' in deciding to leave the worldwide fellowship. The Southern Baptist Convention withdrew from the BWA, accusing the group of embracing liberalism and anti-Americanism.

In addition, Baptists in Romania are in the midst of a struggle over leadership that could decide the future of their relationship with BWA, said Tony Peck, European Baptist Federation Secretary.

An upcoming election for the Romanian Baptist Union's presidency pits an anti-BWA candidate against Otniel Bunaciu, vice president of the Union's seminary that supports continued BWA involvement.

"We need to pray for him (Bunaciu) and the Romanian Union for the future," Peck said. "We really do need to pray for the situation. We don't want a division and the split there; we want them to find a way forward in our Baptist world family."

The committee also honored Lotz, whose retirement was announced a year ago. North American Baptists honored him with a banquet prior to the Executive Committee meeting; similar celebrations are set for Europe and the General Council meeting in Ghana.

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