

Joint meeting of American Baptists, CBF models newfound cooperation

July 6, 2007

Posted: 7/06/07

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By Robert Dilday & Marv Knox

Associated Baptist Press & Baptist Standard

WASHINGTON (ABP)—Worship infused with music and missions, cooperation and communion, and doses of laughter marked a historic reunion of Baptists in the nation's capital city.

The [American Baptist Churches USA](#) and the [Cooperative Baptist Fellowship](#) held their first national joint worship service—a long-awaited coming together of Baptists whose shared commitment to missions and Baptist principles once was shattered by slavery.

CBF
Executive
Coordinator
Daniel Vestal
speaks
during a
panel
discussion
with
ABCUSA
General
Secretary
Roy Medley
(left) and
Tyrone Pitts,
general
secretary of
the
Progressive
National
Baptist
Convention,
during the
combined
CBF/ABCUSA
worship
service. (CBF
Photo/Rod
Reilly)

“This is an awesome God moment,” ABC General Secretary Roy Medley told the crowd of almost 4,000 participants, divided almost evenly between

representatives of both groups. “It gladdens the heart of God. It makes God happy to see us working together. ... What an awesome moment.”

The service in Washington’s convention center marked the end of the Fellowship’s annual general assembly and the beginning of ABC’s 100th anniversary celebration. Program organizers noted the joint ABC/Fellowship session had been five years in planning. Actually, it was 162 years in the making.

Baptists in the United States first united to support missions in 1814, but they divided acrimoniously in 1845. Baptists in the North, who later reorganized as the American Baptist Churches in 1907, opposed slavery. The Southern Baptist Convention split from them because of their support for slavery. The Fellowship formed out of the SBC in 1991 after more than a decade of conflict with fundamentalists. Although some Fellowship churches still relate to the SBC and some do not, almost all of them trace their roots to the Southern convention.

The strong presence of the Washington-based Progressive National Baptist Convention—one of four historic African-American Baptist groups—underscored the racial nature of the old division. But the Progressive National Baptists’ presence also projected an even larger reunion. The Fellowship, American Baptists and Progressive National Baptists are among the key groups promoting a “celebration” of the [New Baptist Covenant](#), which will be held in Atlanta Jan. 30-Feb. 1, 2008.

The New Baptist Covenant convocation involves about 40 groups that comprise 20 million Baptists in America. It intentionally seeks to bridge the racial divide created by slavery. The rallying point is Baptists’ historic commitment to minister to those Jesus said he came to serve—the poorest and most helpless people.

The June 29 worship service represented the breadth of Fellowship and

American Baptist diversity through music—from traditional hymns and newer praise choruses sung by the audience to a rousing gospel solo belted by Cheri Coleman, folk music by Kate Campbell and a raucous Caribbean beat blasted by the Haitian Alliance Choir.

Participants also keyed on their common focus on missions. Midway through the worship service, they celebrated the appointment of two couples that will serve under joint appointment of the ABC and Fellowship.

Duane and Marcia Binkley are former ABC missionaries among the Karen people group in Thailand. During their new term, they will minister to Karen people both in Thailand and in the United States.

Nancy and Steve James previously served as medical missionaries in Haiti and now are members of a Fellowship church in North Carolina. The Fellowship is helping the ABC send them back to Haiti.

The ABC presented its first Religious Freedom Award to the [Baptist Joint Committee for Religious Liberty](#). The Washington-based Baptist Joint Committee represents 14 Baptist bodies.