

# Christians called to tear down walls, not build them, South Texas pastor says

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## ‘Incarnation’ is key for Baptists engaging policy, speakers stress

**By Robert Marus**

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ATLANTA (ABP)—Christians should become involved in transforming public policy, a diverse group of Baptists heard Jan. 31, because Christ first set the example by transforming the world and bidding Christians to follow.

“God believed in incarnation so much that he hasn’t given up on it yet,” said Suzii Paynter, director of the Baptist General Convention of Texas Christian Life Commission. “It didn’t end with Jesus. It continues.”

Suzii Paynter (Photo by Joel McLendon)
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Paynter and two other Baptists engaged in social advocacy spoke in Atlanta on the subject of faith and public policy at one of a host of breakout

sessions during the Celebration of a New Baptist Covenant meeting Jan. 31.

Paynter, New Jersey pastor Buster Soaries and Canadian Baptist activist Lois Mitchell told listeners that understanding the proper relationship between the church and public policy can be complex, but that policy engagement is a natural outgrowth of Christian discipleship and ministry.

“We are not called to reform secular society or secular culture; rather, through Christ ... we have the assurance” of self-reformation, said Mitchell, who works for Canadian Baptist Ministries’ Sharing Way program. “Transformation is not our agenda but the consequence of our obedience.”


<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• <a href="#">See latest photos</a> and the latest <a href="#">video clips</a> from the New Baptist Covenant Meeting.  <a href="#">(And go here to see our complete coverage of the event).</a></li></ul>

Mitchell said that Christ’s followers are called to aid the downtrodden, which lends itself to influencing public policy.

However, she warned, “When we try to change the world using the ways of the world, we will always fail.”

Soaries noted that temptation. The pastor of First Baptist Church of Lincoln Gardens in Somerset, N.J., served from 1999 to 2003 as secretary of state under former New Jersey governor Christine Whitman.

Of the reactions after the news was announced, “On the one hand was the group of people who thought I would use my office to make the entire state of New Jersey Baptist,” he said, while the other half “thought I had abandoned by faith by taking office.”

But his experience engaging in public policy grew out of his church’s ministries, he noted. “Prophetic witness emerges from priestly endeavor,” Soaries said. “Our impact on public policy should be an outgrowth of our concern for people.”

For instance, his church became involved in financial counseling after he discovered that many of its own members were drowning in consumer debt.

“We discovered at First Baptist that one of the greatest threats to the economic stability of our church family ... was the use and abuse of credit cards,” Soaries said. The church developed a ministry devoted to debt counseling and teaching budgeting and other good financial habits for households.

“In the process of doing that work, we discovered that the policies of our state allowed car salesmen, for instance, to charge up to 35 percent interest,” he said “Our involvement with policies in New Jersey that would regulate the amount of interest that lenders would charge ... was a natural outgrowth.”

Paynter noted that her congregation —First Baptist Church in Austin—is beginning to see similar concern grow out of ministry. For 37 years, she noted, groups from the church have been taking humanitarian mission trips to poverty-stricken colonias along the Texas/Mexico border.

“Should we go to that same neighborhood for 30 years and never ask, ‘Why don’t they have running water?’” she said.

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