

Unity the focus of New Baptist Covenant gathering, organizers insist

February 2, 2008

Posted: 1/30/08

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By Ken Camp

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ATLANTA—If a spirit of unity prevails at the Celebration of a New Baptist Covenant, organizers of the historic interracial meeting said they will consider the gathering a success.

And participants in the event will remain focused on the biblical mandate to show compassion and care for the needy, not become distracted by partisan politics “if we can prevent it,” former President Jimmy Carter added.

Jimmy Carter

Event co-chairs Carter and Mercer University President Bill Underwood joined other members of the meeting’s steering committee in responding to reporters’ questions prior to the opening session at Atlanta’s Georgia World Congress Center.

Carter noted he and his wife, Rosalynn, had observed in their international travels how divisions within Christianity have been one of the faith's greatest hindrances. And, he added, Baptists are perhaps known more than any other Christian group for their own internal divisions.

Perhaps the New Baptist Covenant—an informal alliance of more than 30 racially, geographically and theologically diverse Baptist groups throughout North America claiming more than 20 million members—can set an example for the church at large, Carter noted.

“If we can do it, maybe other Christians can do it as well,” he said.

A year of planning

The Atlanta meeting grew out of a year of planning and was scheduled to follow a joint meeting of the four largest historically African-American Baptist groups in the United States.

Representatives from the National Baptist Convention, USA; the National Baptist Convention of America; the Progressive National Baptist Convention and the National Missionary Baptist Convention of America had scheduled a joint mid-winter meeting for Atlanta, and the New Baptist Covenant celebration piggybacked on that meeting.

Many of the other Baptist groups joining in the celebration are predominantly comprised of Anglo or Hispanic members. The celebration's most obvious diversity became evident as multicultural crowds filled the hallways of the meeting venue.



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Underwood quoted Martin Luther King’s famous dream that “one day on the red hills of Georgia the sons of former slaves and the sons of former slave-owners will be able to sit down together at a table of brotherhood.”

“It is fitting that today, on these red hills of Georgia, Baptists have come together and taken a step forward in the long journey to achieve Dr. King’s dream,” Underwood said.

SBC leaders absent

While the three-day celebration’s program includes representatives from a wide range of Baptist groups in North America, leaders of the Southern Baptist Convention—the nation’s largest Baptist denomination—were noticeably absent.

The SBC withdrew from the Baptist World Alliance and its regional affiliate, the North American Baptist Fellowship, several years ago. Most participating bodies in the New Baptist Covenant event belong to fellowship, and organizers planned their efforts around its membership.

Some SBC leaders—including current convention president Frank Page—have criticized the covenant celebration. But Carter noted he has developed “a wonderful relationship” with Page, a pastor in South Carolina. Carter said he plans to report to Page about the Atlanta event in the near future with a hope that Southern Baptists will want to cooperate on the

initiatives that emerge from the event.

Carter expressed his desire that the New Baptist Covenant meeting would maintain an “all-inclusive” posture and “non-critical” tone—and that it steer clear of partisan politics.

Some critics had charged the event—which not only features Carter but also former President Bill Clinton and Vice President Al Gore—was designed to give Democrats an edge with Baptists in an election year.

Two Republicans withdrew

Of the three prominent Republicans who initially agreed to participate in the event—presidential hopeful and former Arkansas governor Mike Huckabee, South Carolina Sen. Lindsey Graham and Iowa Sen. Charles Grassley—two ended up withdrawing.

Huckabee pulled out in May, after Carter was quoted as calling President Bush’s administration “the worst in history” in terms of the way it has affected America’s image around the world.

Graham withdrew shortly before the event, citing his duties in stumping for his Senate colleague John McCain’s presidential bid. Organizers said his speaking slot would be filled by another prominent Republican, former Texas senator Phil Gramm.

Carter said he was “not frustrated” by the organizers’ inability to attract more high-profile Republicans as program personalities. He expressed confidence that, if journalists polled celebration participants about their party affiliations, they probably would find them about equally divided between Democrats and Republicans.

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