

African influence felt at Baptist World Congress

July 23, 2015

DURBAN, South Africa—The [Baptist World Congress](#) in Durban, South Africa, marked one key first and a significant second—the first world congress held in Africa and the second led by an African president since the [Baptist World Alliance's](#) founding in 1905.

Paul Msiza, pastor of Peniel-Salem Baptist Church in Pretoria, South Africa, presided for the first time at the BWA's General Council meeting just prior to the five-day Baptist World Congress.



Paul Msiza, pastor of Peniel-Salem Baptist Church in Pretoria, South Africa, and new BWA president, welcomes participants to the Baptist World Congress meeting. (BWA Photo)The congress, held every five years in cities around the world, was expected to draw about 2,500 participants from many of the BWA's 200-plus member unions and conventions.

The 53-year-old Msiza was elected last summer at the General Council's

meeting in Izmir, Turkey. He succeeds John Upton, executive director of the [Baptist General Association of Virginia](#), who was elected to the five-year term as president in 2010.

“I stand here today with all humility and being humbled before the Lord to serve,” Msiza told council members gathered in Durban’s International Conference Center. “God has put a special calling on us to serve our international fellowship. From a human viewpoint, we have anxiety and questions. But if we rely on those, there is nothing we can do. All we can do is trust in the presence of the Lord as we move forward, as we begin a new journey together.”

Msiza, who will work closely with BWA General Secretary Neville Callam, is the second African to be elected president. The first was Liberian William Tolbert, who held the office from 1971 to 1980.



The Sharon Children’s Choir & Hosanna Children’s Orchestra from South Korea performed at the Baptist World Congress in Durban, South Africa. (Central Baptist Theological Seminary Photo)A former bivocational pastor and school teacher, Msiza has been principal of a Baptist college in South

Africa, general secretary of the Baptist Convention of South Africa, president of the All Africa Baptist Fellowship—one of six BWA regional groups—and a BWA vice president.

Upton noted over his five-year tenure, the BWA had “faced challenges together as a family” in a world that “is very different from what it was” in 2010.

“One thing that has been most helpful to me recently is to remember that leadership is not an identity,” Upton told the council, many of whose members are rotating off. “We’ve each been entrusted with leadership roles, but the seduction is to take on leadership as an identity. It’s never an identity. It’s always a function. My identity is that I’m a child of God. I live that out all the time, and occasionally I lead. For some of us now, we’ll take on a new function—a supportive role.”

BWA unions and conventions comprise nearly 50 million Baptists around the world, representing wide cultural and social differences—a diversity the group’s general secretary said must be acknowledged.



About 2,500 participants from many of the Baptist World Alliance’s 200-plus member unions and conventions gathered in Durbin’s International Convention

Centre. (Central Baptist Theological Seminary Photo)“I come from a certain place, we have a certain way of doing things, and sometimes it is easy not to recognize our formation in the specificity of our own cultures which influence the way we act, the way we live,” Callam said.

“We deceive ourselves that the traditions we practice are traditions founded in the word of God. Truly listening to one another and seeking to hear the voice of God in each other, we can put aside our own fears and our weaknesses. The glorious opportunity is that we can influence one another.”

Callam urged the council—and the churches they represent—to study the “Covenant on Intra-Baptist Relationships,” adopted two years ago as an expression of “our ideals as we seek to serve together in the fellowship of the BWA in its organized life.”

The covenant notes the BWA’s diversity “includes various cultures, languages, customs, histories, racial identities, ways of expressing theological conviction, and personal and communal encounters with Christ in different cultural contexts. By God’s grace, the BWA reflects, in a visible way, the rich diversity of the one body of Christ.”



Worship, preaching and cultural presentations from around the world marked the 21st Baptist

World Congress in Durbin, South Africa. But, it acknowledges, “the BWA commitment to open dialogue and honest communication in the midst of our profound diversity also presents the BWA with perhaps the greatest challenge to the unity we are called to maintain.”

“We acknowledge that Baptists are known to have a wide range of opinions and perspectives on many issues, including what constitutes ‘truth,’” the covenant asserts. “Yet, we love and accept one another. When we believe an opinion or perspective is seriously flawed, we challenge each other as beloved family members rather than as strangers and enemies. Even the correction of perceived errors must be done in love.”

During its meeting, the council agreed to admit an additional union—the Evangelical Baptist Churches of Zimbabwe, a network of congregations primarily near Zimbabwe’s border with Zambia.

The council also:

- Approved a set of guidelines for adopting resolutions at annual council meetings, including criteria for determining what constitutes relevant topics and appropriate language, and a process to follow.
- Received notice of a proposed motion to give the council’s executive committee authority to employ staff members other than the general secretary. That change in the bylaws will be considered at the council meeting next summer in Vancouver, British Columbia.
- Unveiled a budget for 2016 of \$2,253,390, just slightly below the current \$2,258,100 budget. Next year’s financial plan anticipates \$670,000 in contributions from member bodies, the same amount as the current budget. In 2014, those contributions totaled \$441,676, but leaders said they were confident member bodies would “step up and contribute.”