

# Baptist World Alliance responds to Muslim letter

January 5, 2009

FALLS CHURCH, Va. (ABP) — The Baptist World Alliance has issued its formal response to a 2007 letter, written to Christians by 138 Muslim leaders, describing love for God and love for neighbor as common ground between the two faiths.

BWA leaders [agreed](#) that the double love for God and neighbor "lies at the heart of the message of Jesus Christ as recorded in the Gospels" but clarified that Baptists do not understand those commands as "the sum total of our two faiths."

The letter cited one example, the Trinity, as "troubling" for Muslims but "absolutely essential for us in confessing the oneness of God."

"We are well aware that Muslims believe the Christian idea of the Trinity contradicts the affirmation that God has no other being in association with him," the Baptist leaders said, but Christians do not understand "the distinct reality" of God in three persons to mean that any other being is beside God.

"Rather, the church is attempting to express the truth that there are mysterious, unknowable depths to the personal nature of God," the letter said. "It is also aiming to be faithful to the truth of God which has been disclosed in the event of Jesus Christ in history."

## **Not an attempt to convince**

The Baptist leaders said the letter is not the place for "a fuller exposition of the Christian doctrine of the Trinity" or an attempt to try to convince

Muslims of its truth.

"We write in order to make clear that we ourselves cannot think of God as love except in terms of an eternal communion or fellowship whose unity is dynamic and relational," the letter said. "While we rejoice to confess with you that there is one God, it is not possible for us to speak of the one God without also speaking of Trinity."

In November 2007 a number of Christian leaders published a statement in the *New York Times* responding to [A Common Word Between Us and You](#) by Muslim scholars and clerics.

Signed by evangelicals including Leith Anderson and Richard Cizik of the National Association of Evangelicals, Timothy George of Samford University's Beeson Divinity School, David Gushee of Mercer University, Bill Hybels of Willow Creek Church, Richard Mouw of Fuller Theological Seminary and Rick Warren of Saddleback Church, the [Loving God and Neighbor Together](#) response expressed strong agreement with the Muslim letter.

After conservative evangelicals including [John Piper](#), [Al Mohler](#) and Focus on the Family's *CitizenLink* newsletter criticized the Christian letter for not explicitly affirming the deity of Christ, [some](#) of the original signers had their names removed.

During a discussion of a Baptist response to the Islamic letter last summer, according to a [report](#) on the website EthicsDaily.com, some Baptists expressed concern about theological language in the original letter from Islamic leaders. Meanwhile, some Baptists from areas of the world where Christians and Muslims clash questioned the need for dialogue.

After that meeting, BWA leaders drafted a formal response signed by BWA president David Coffey, General Secretary Neville Callam, Paul Fiddes of the Commission on Doctrine and Inter-Church Cooperation and Regina

Claas of the Commission on Freedom and Justice.

### **Thanks for "generous initiative"**

The BWA letter thanked the Muslim leaders for their "generous initiative" and "irenic and constructive spirit" in the 2007 letter. The leaders proposed that future discussions take place not in a central commission of the BWA but rather in regional unions and conventions engaged in joint conversations and projects for aid and development.

They also called for education of both religious teachers and members of local congregations and mosques to "change attitudes and prejudices" that undermine values of respect and honor of others despite differing religious beliefs.

"Just one way this may happen is for religious teachers in both faiths to be careful about the rhetoric they use, which may have unintended effects on followers who are less aware of theological nuances, and which may even lead to violence," the leaders said. "To be concrete, we have one suggestion for Baptist Christians, that they avoid words to describe evangelism (or telling the gospel story) which appear threatening to others, such as 'evangelistic crusades.' Nor is it necessary to be critical of another faith in order to commend what we believe to be true in ours; the story of Jesus has power to persuade in its own right."

"It is easy to slip into a violent rhetoric which arouses unpleasant memories of conflicts in the past," the letter said. "We do not venture to suggest examples of unhelpful rhetoric to you, our Muslim friends, but hope that you might be able to identify some for yourselves. Let our rhetoric be that of love, as you have already shown."

*-Bob Allen is senior writer for Associated Baptist Press.*

