

BWA commission urges Baptists to continue conversation with Muslims

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KUALA LUMPUR, Malaysia — Baptists must continue to engage with Muslims around the world in hopes of promoting “peaceful living together,” a [Baptist World Alliance](#) commission concluded July 6.

Developing a process by which Christians and Muslims can address and resolve issues of conflict is essential, said members of the BWA’s commission on Baptist-Muslim relations, meeting in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia, in conjunction with the global organization’s Annual Gathering July 4-9.

“The aim of the commission is to encourage further conversations to promote peaceful living together,” said Nabil Costa of Beirut, Lebanon, who chairs the panel. “This is not a matter of choice anymore. While we will not compromise our faith, we need to understand and live with each other. As Baptists, we are against any act that disrespects or humiliates any religious group. This is our position.”

Costa is executive director of the [Lebanese Society for Educational and Social Development](#), an umbrella organization for several educational ministries, including the Arab Baptist Theological Seminary and the Beirut Baptist School.

Conversations already are taking place among scholars and religious leaders of both faiths, commission members reported. A recent gathering at [Andover Newton Theological School](#) in Newton Centre, Mass., drew about 60 Muslim and Baptist religious scholars. The event began with Muslim

prayers at a mosque on a Friday evening and concluded with Christian worship at a church on a Sunday morning. The focus was on what Baptist and Muslim scriptures, traditions and practices say about “loving neighbors.”

Participants will meet again in early 2012, once more at Andover Newton, to explore the theme “Love of God.” Eventually they plan to include pastoral leaders and young people, not just scholars. In order to succeed, they believe, dialogue must reach the grassroots level of laypeople.

David Kerrigan, general director of the United Kingdom’s [BMS World Mission](#), told commission members that a significant challenge to the conversations is that both Christianity and Islam are “missionary religions.” BMS World Mission is a Didcot, England-based mission organization with Baptist ties working in about 35 countries.

Two streams of thought influence Baptist/Muslim dialogues, said Kerrigan — one attempts understanding and cooperation, the other focuses on missionary commitment.

“What does it mean to have authentic Christian witness?” he asked. “How can you sit down with [Muslims] in dialogue and at the same time stay true to your missionary commitments? At the same time, we remember that Muslims are, themselves, a missionary people. There will always be this tension.”

Rather than allowing tension to inhibit conversation, however, Kerrigan suggested that both groups acknowledge they would like to convert the other, but give the other freedom not to do so.

“We must talk about ‘How do we live in peace?’ and ‘How do we resolve conflicts?’ ” he declared.

Tony Peck, general secretary of the [European Baptist Federation](#), noted

that “next year is the 400th anniversary of a very important book written by Thomas Helwys to King James. In it he contends that religious freedom, including for those who are called the ‘Turks,’ must follow the dictates of their own beliefs. He was not writing out of a sense of human rights in those days, but saying that no human authority should inhibit the religious freedoms of individuals.”

In *A Short Declaration of the Mystery of Iniquity*, Helwys, who in the 17th century helped organize the first Baptist church in England, wrote: “For men’s religion to God is betwixt God and themselves; the King shall not answer for it, neither may the King be judge between God and man. Let them be heretics, Turks, Jews, or whatsoever, it appertains not to the earthly power to punish them in the least measure.”

That Baptists have always contended for this freedom should inform both Baptists and Muslims and provide an openness for discussion, said Peck.

Peck also referred to [“A Common Word Between Us and You,”](#) a document developed in 2007 by about 140 Muslim scholars and clerics defining common ground between Islam and Christianity. A number of Christian groups have responded, said Peck, and in the case of Baptists, the positive response has surprised Muslims, some of whom identify the denomination with extremist thinking that advocates publicly burning the Quran.

Baptists should be able to relate to the independence of Muslim congregations, given their own commitment to church autonomy, said commission members. Mosques’ independence is generally not understood by Baptists, who assume all Muslim congregations and leaders are responsible to governing authorities.

But this independence illustrates the difficulty of dealing with Islam collectively, said Nicholas Wood, a professor of religion and culture at [Regent’s Park College](#), a Baptist institution affiliated with Oxford

University.

“The structure of Islam limits the capacity to deal with it collectively,” said Wood, who also is director of the [Oxford Centre for Christianity and Culture](#). “They are even more independent than Baptists. They don’t even have an equivalent of the BWA.”

Wood said governments’ increasingly aggressive secularism aims to “undercut the influence of these religious groups that cannot get along with one another.” In the face of such opinion, he said, “It will be good not only for the religious groups, but for society in general” if the world’s faith communities learn to settle their differences.

“Over the last 10 years governments have gotten much more interested in religion,” said Wood. “Governments have a role to play, but they also have their own agendas. We need to acknowledge that the future lies with the younger generation for whom living in a multi-faith context is not unusual.”

Jim White is editor of the Religious Herald.