

# BWA leaders focus on diversity, justice, development

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HONOLULU (ABP) — The Baptist World Alliance's first global congress since its 2005 centennial and last year's 400th anniversary of the beginning of the Baptist movement revealed an ever-more-diverse global fellowship poised to tackle injustice and poverty in some of the planet's most neglected regions, BWA leaders said.

Baptist World Alliance General Secretary Neville Callam (foreground) and BWA president John Upton speak during a press conference at the 20th Baptist World Congress meeting in Honolulu. (BWA photo)

The more than 4,000 delegates from about 105 nations who gathered in Honolulu July 28-Aug. 1 for the 20th Baptist World Congress exhibited a rich diversity — a sharp contrast to the group of mainly white male Americans, Canadians and Britons who organized the BWA in 1905 in London.

Virginia Baptist leader John Upton's election to a five-year term as president reflects in part the continuing strength and commitment of North American and Western European Baptists to the global organization. But the every-five-year Congress also featured the first non-white tapped to fill the BWA's top executive position — Jamaican Neville Callam, who was elected general secretary in 2007. Callam is also the first person to hold the position who hails from neither the United States nor Western Europe.

“Some of us who have been speaking for so long need to be quiet and do some listening,” Upton said at a press conference following his election to the volunteer presidential post. “I’m speaking as a North American now. The challenge is to listen more than we speak.... If we listen to each other, we’ll have wiser words to say to each other.”

Callam voiced a hope that the BWA — whose 220 member unions represent almost 40 million baptized believers — will “become a space where all Baptists across the world may meet and hold hands ... as children of God.”



New Baptist World Alliance president John Upton speaks during the 20th Baptist World Congress meeting in Honolulu. (BWA photo)

With the celebration of the BWA’s centennial at the 2005 Congress in Birmingham, England, behind them, many BWA leaders said they sensed this year’s congress represented the beginning of a new era for — and perhaps a maturing of — the global fellowship.

How BWA’s future will look, leaders of the group said, will be shaped by three trends in its ministry.

### **Increasing cultural and ethnic diversity**

While BWA leaders universally affirm the organization’s lively

heterogeneity, some expect a degree of tension as Baptists from the developing world take on more leadership roles in proportion to their growing numbers.

About half of the keynote speakers at the recent congress were from India, South Africa, Argentina and Jamaica. The BWA's nine senior employed staff members — though headquartered in the United States — include two Jamaicans, two Brazilians and a Liberian. And the next Baptist World Congress, in 2015, will be held in Durban, South Africa — the first congress on the African continent and only the fifth held outside North America or Western Europe.

"The BWA is moving into an era of even deeper diversity and inclusiveness of member bodies around the world," Upton said.

Increasingly that inclusiveness extends to Baptists in countries whose governments historically have regarded religion with suspicion. Among the three new organizations [granted BWA membership at the congress](#) was the Baptist Churches of Vietnam, a union of 509 congregations with about 30,000 members which was recognized by Vietnamese officials only in 2008.



Baptists from around the globe form prayer circles during the 20th Baptist World Congress meeting in Honolulu. (BWA photo)

Callam emphasized that such diversity will strengthen the BWA witness in the 21st century.

“We understand that one aspect of our [Baptist] tradition is the emphasis on the confidence we have in the Holy Spirit to enlighten, to equip, to enable and to empower us to appreciate the diversity we have in Jesus Christ,” he said.

But, he added, it creates challenges: “Anyone who makes that affirmation knows that one is running the risk of opening the door for multiplicity and diversity of interpretation. We must ask if some of the diversity that flows from our faith is divisive or enriching.”

### **A more holistic approach to mission**

Church planting and evangelism remain key parts of the BWA’s agenda. But BWA leaders increasingly rank relief and development as an essential component of Christian witness.

[Baptist World Aid](#), the organization’s relief arm, is arguably the BWA’s most familiar face as it has responded rapidly to assist victims of natural disasters such as last January’s earthquake in Haiti and the 2004 Indian Ocean tsunami. It also has moved beyond disaster relief, working in Lebanon during the 2006 war between Israel and Hezbollah and providing food to starving North Koreans.

“I think Baptists today are more holistic, not only in our thinking but in our actions, and I see that the world over,” said [BWAid Director Paul Montacute](#). “The BWA’s member bodies and their congregations have increasingly embraced Jesus’ call to meet the needs of the world’s poor, oppressed and marginalized people without compromising in any way our commitment to evangelism and discipleship.”



Baptist World Aid Director  
Paul Montacute. (BWA  
photo)

Bela Szilagyi, director of Hungarian Baptist Aid, said relief-and-development work has opened doors to Christian witness that might otherwise have remained closed.

“Before the fall of the Berlin Wall the BWA and many Baptist bodies from the West did a lot in Eastern Europe, and theirs was a good approach,” he said. “They encouraged the Baptist churches and helped them stay strong in their fight against oppressive regimes.

“But after the wall fell, what I think has happened is that the BWA is providing not only fellowship and not only general mission work — which are very much needed — but it has begun relief and development that really is part of a holistic mission work.... I am very happy for that and really see it taking us a long way.”

Szilagyi said increased visibility for Hungarian Baptist Aid’s relief activities has definitely improved the image of Baptists in recent years in Hungary — a nation where the overwhelming Catholic majority has historically viewed

Baptists as a sect.

Kabi Gangmei, director of Asia Pacific Baptist Aid, another BWAid affiliate, called relief-and-development assistance a “leavening” that broadens BWA influence.

“Some years ago, Baptists in Asia weren’t interested in funding that kind of work. But since the [2004] tsunami, leaders at the convention level have awakened to the need,” he said. He noted that Sri Lankan and Indonesian Baptist groups have started relief ministries,” he said. “Teaching and preaching and church planting and disaster relief need to go hand in hand,” he said.

### **An increasing focus on social justice**

The BWA has been an advocate for religious liberty since its founding in 1905. But increasingly, a passion for protecting other human rights and alleviating social and economic ills has animated its members, reflected in the hiring last March of Brazilian Raimundo Barreto as the organization’s first director of freedom and justice.

When speaking for justice, Upton said, the BWA needs to speak in a common voice.

“It doesn’t matter if that voice is always eloquent, but we have to speak the truth that we know to speak. God’s Word will speak through us on issues of poverty, of equality, of human trafficking. We have to get involved in these issues and we have to speak boldly to them and we need a common voice around the world. And we need to speak not only in the larger arena but also in the local arena as well.”

BWAid’s Montacute, standing in the exhibit hall at the congress, surveyed the array of displays and said, “Twenty years ago this room would have been dominated by vendors selling their wares. Now, look at the number of

organizations that are committed to responding to global needs — from hunger and homelessness to HIV/AIDS to human trafficking to disaster relief.”



Korean Baptist women dance at the  
20th Baptist World Congress meeting.  
(BWA photo)

At the Honolulu gathering, Bible study leaders [stressed the social-justice implications of Scripture](#) as they [focused on Luke 4](#), in which Jesus described his mission to proclaim good news to the poor and freedom for the captives, bring sight to the blind and release the oppressed.

In a message adopted at the close of the Congress, participants pledged to “develop greater familiarity with the teachings of Christ, cultivate a rich prayer life, bear witness to the gospel of salvation through Jesus Christ and provide examples of godly living reflecting the values taught by the Lord of the church.

At the same time, they promised to “remove the scourge of poverty and hunger; support efforts to provide universal education; work for environmental sustainability; promote gender equality; improve child health and maternal health; combat HIV/AIDS, malaria and other diseases; and develop global partnerships.”

*-Robert Dilday is managing editor of the Virginia Baptist Religious Herald. Texas Baptist Standard Editor Marv Knox, ABP Executive Director David Wilkinson and freelance writer Wendy Ryan contributed to this story.*