

CBF general assembly includes focus on racial justice

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BIRMINGHAM, Ala.—The 2019 Cooperative Baptist Fellowship general assembly included a day focused on racial justice, including a worship service featuring testimonies from pastors deeply engaged in the work toward racial justice and reconciliation.

“The work of reconciliation is challenging to preach, and even more challenging to practice,” said Erica Whitaker, senior pastor of Buechel Park Baptist Church, which partners with Von Spiegel Missionary Baptist Church in Louisville, Ky.

For Buechel Park, the work of racial reconciliation and justice required rethinking and relearning basic biblical stories of salvation and working against the knee-jerk reaction to “fix” things in their partner church.

“We have a long way to go but we’ve come so far,” Whitaker explained. “We have done the hard work of getting out of the land of comfort zones, crossing the sea of the stale, everyday ministry, and entering the wilderness where God shapes and forms a community who is always willing to risk failure for the sake of salvation.”

Tables of fellowship

Scott Dickison, pastor of First Baptist Church of Christ in Macon, Ga., described the fear of a church member prior to a pilgrimage to Montgomery, Ala., with members of partner congregation The First Baptist Church in Macon.

“My hope—and my fear—is that I’ll feel responsible,” the church member told Dickison.



Scott Dickison, pastor of First Baptist Church of Christ in Macon, Ga., talked about a pilgrimage to Montgomery, Ala., with members of partner congregation The First Baptist Church in Macon. (CBF Photo)

This—and many other hopes and fears—are shared around tables of fellowship among these partner congregations, Dickison said. The hard work of reconciliation started with Easter egg hunts, youth trips and potluck suppers—worshipping around tables and breaking bread together as all share hopes and fears, he noted. The pilgrimage to Montgomery brought these partners out from around the table, where they were confronted with their hopes and fears head on, he noted.

“My hope is that this shared experience will lead us into the next phase of our covenant together, in which we at the First Baptist Church of Christ will need to dig deeper into this painful history in order to confront our

painful present,” Dickison said.

CBF joins Angela Project summit

A diverse group of Cooperative Baptists gathered at the historic 16th Street Baptist Church in Birmingham for the third summit of The Angela Project and a commemoration of the 400-year anniversary of black enslavement.

The Angela Project was launched as part of a multi-denomination Baptist coalition led by Simmons College of Kentucky and including the National Baptist Convention of America International, Inc., The Progressive National Baptist Convention and the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship.

CBF Executive Coordinator Paul Baxley reflected on the sermon of Martin Luther King Jr. at the funeral for the three victims of the 1963 bombing at 16th Street Baptist Church.

“Standing in this place, I can’t help but think of the words that Dr. King spoke at the funeral of three of the young women who died in the bombing of this church,” Baxley said. “Almost 60 years have passed since Dr. King spoke those words, and we as Cooperative Baptists are joined to the work of The Angela Project because honesty compels us to recognize that the dark of the storm has not yet passed.

“I wonder as we gather in this space today and as we listen to each other—I wonder how the risen Jesus and the Holy Spirit want to stir our consciousness.”

The blood of the four young girls who lost their lives in the bombing of the church serve as a “redemptive force,” Baxley said, and call Christians to acknowledge that we live in a time where “photo ops and pulpit swaps are not enough.”

“How is the risen Jesus asking his church—black, white—to partner

together to bring a new day?” Baxley asked. “There is still much to be done for Dr. King’s prayer in this place to be fulfilled. Today, we come to listen, to be challenged, to be remade.”

Churches seek to Empower West Louisville



Joe Phelps, co-chair of Empower West Louisville and retired pastor of Highland Baptist Church in Louisville, Ky., called on white Baptists to see what they have not seen. (CBF Photo)

Joe Phelps, co-chair of Empower West Louisville and retired pastor of Highland Baptist Church in Louisville, Ky., challenged summit attendees by calling white Baptists to see what they have not seen.

“The reality is that in the last three or four years I have realized that my objectivity on being white, Baptist and male has been distorted. I have been blind,” Phelps confessed.

Four years ago, Phelps joined Kevin Cosby, senior pastor of St. Stephen

Church in Louisville and president of Simmons College of Kentucky, in creating Empower West Louisville, which was convened to bring together white and black citizens to empower the community in West Louisville.

“I won’t say that we are woke,” he said. “We aren’t woke, but we’re waking up. We’re seeing things we never saw. We’re curious about things we weren’t before. And we’re mad about some things. And I’m embarrassed.”

Phelps challenged white Baptists to engage in examining their history, to open their eyes to the profound effects of white privilege and think about ways to engage in reconciliation through repair, not just repentance.

“I challenge you all to think about how your church could make a repair of any wrong that’s been done,” Phelps said.



Kevin Cosby, senior pastor of St. Stephen Church and president of Simmons College of Kentucky, Louisville, Ky., calls Christians to biblical justice. (CBF Photo)

Cosby talked about concepts of justice in the Bible and how these should be applied, challenging white Christians to lead in justice and repair work for people who have been damaged by the legacy of slavery, Jim Crow,

sharecropping, convict leasing and other racial injustices.

“Saying you’re sorry is not repair,” Cosby said. “Black people are suffering because of this legacy.”

Through weekly conversations and deep engagement together, as well as coordinated discussions around challenging books, Empower West has become a powerful force for justice and for good in Louisville, he reported.

Angela Project attendees also heard greetings from Arthur Price, senior pastor of 16th Street Baptist Church, Brenda Girton-Mitchell on behalf of the president of Progressive National Baptist Convention and Jeremy Powell, representing the North American Baptist Fellowship and Baptist World Alliance. They also heard presentations from Joshua Poe, urban developer and city planner from Louisville, Ky., and Cheri Mills, author of 40 Days of Prayer for the Liberation of American Descendants of Slavery.

Two individuals and three ministries were presented with the Emmanuel McCall Racial Justice Trailblazer Award.

Individual award recipients were Francis Ford, executive director of Sowing Seeds of Hope in Perry County, Ala., and Sean Roberds, pastor of First Baptist Church in Herndon, Va.

Ministry organization recipients were CBF Arkansas for its advocacy on behalf of justice, equity and unity; and Friends of Justice, an organization committed to reforming the criminal justice system through empowering local communities and working to hold public officials accountable for equal justice, along with Empower West in Louisville, Ky.