

# **CBF virtual assembly focuses on pandemic and racial injustice**

June 26, 2020

During a Cooperative Baptist Fellowship general assembly in which participants assembled online, issues related to a global pandemic and racial injustice took center stage.

“This is the most unusual general assembly in the history of the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship,” Executive Coordinator Paul Baxley said from the mostly empty sanctuary of Johns Creek Baptist Church in Alpharetta, Ga., in remarks carried through digital platforms.

COVID-19 forced CBF to shift from its scheduled in-person gathering to its first virtual general assembly, just as churches throughout the country changed their schedules and worship patterns due to the public health crisis, he noted.

Likewise, the death of George Floyd while in police custody sparked protests throughout the United States and prompted a national conversation about a long history of racial injustice.

“A lot is in doubt,” Baxley said, while “some things are eerily the same as they have been for years.”

## **Call to bold faithfulness**

In his address to the online general assembly, Baxley called on CBF to demonstrate the kind of “bold faithfulness” early Christians demonstrated both in word and deed.

Preaching from 2 Corinthians 5 and Acts 4, he insisted the “ministry of

reconciliation” to which all Christians are called requires an intimate relationship with Christ and filling of the Holy Spirit.

The religious authorities who marveled both at the healing miracle Peter and John performed and their bold proclamation of the gospel came to the inescapable conclusion “they had been with Jesus,” Baxley observed.

“The foundation of bold faithfulness—of a faith that stands out and doesn’t blend in—is a deep companionship with Jesus,” he said. “A bold faithfulness does not begin in an independent decision to be socially active. It begins at the heart of a relationship with Jesus that is growing more and more alive so that more and more of Christ’s ways are evident in our lives.”

## **‘We cannot remain silent’**

Today, Christians must confront not only the challenges presented by a public health crisis, but also the “glaring pandemic of racial injustice that has afflicted this land” for four centuries, he asserted.

“I believe the Holy Spirit is calling us to speak clearly about some things that have to change,” Baxley said. “This moment is requiring us to repent for sins of white supremacy, to repent for the abuses of white privilege. ... This moment is requiring us to speak clearly against any kind of injustice, any form of police brutality that is based on race. We cannot remain silent.”

White Christians should join Black Christians in helping historically Black colleges and African American-owned businesses thrive, as well as seeking ways to set right entrenched injustice, he insisted.

“As we contemplate how God is calling us to speak and how God is calling us to act, we must always remember that extending racial justice and racial healing is not a political agenda,” Baxley said. “Instead, the commitment to racial justice and racial healing comes from the heart of the life of God.”

# **‘Time to work for racial justice is now**

Incoming CBF Moderator Carol McEntyre described the important “kingdom work of creating beloved community for all.”



Carol McEntyre, incoming CBF moderator, described Fellowship efforts create “beloved community for all.” (Screen Capture)

The discovery process leading to development of CBF’s Toward Bold Faithfulness strategic plan revealed a deep desire for diversity and concern for racial reconciliation among Fellowship Baptists, said McEntyre, senior pastor of First Baptist Church in Columbia, Mo. Those findings predated the events of recent weeks, she noted.

“I wonder if the Holy Spirit has been preparing us to respond to this pivotal moment in our country’s history,” she said, calling on CBF to “seize this moment filled with possibility and hope.”

“The time to work for racial justice is now,” she said.

## **‘Ambassadors for Christ’**

In his keynote address to the virtual general assembly, Emmanuel McCall—a Baptist pioneer in racial reconciliation—reminded Fellowship

Baptists the priesthood of believers not only means Christians have the privilege of unhindered access to God through Christ, but also have the responsibility to serve as “ambassadors for Christ.”



Emmanuel McCall, a Baptist pioneer in racial reconciliation, delivered the keynote address to the CBF virtual assembly. (CBF Photo)

“We are all God’s representatives. We are God’s ambassadors,” said McCall, who served with the Southern Baptist Convention’s Home Mission Board and was instrumental in CBF’s formation. Ambassadors are appointed to represent someone in a higher position and are accountable to the one who appointed them, said McCall, pastor emeritus of First Baptist Church in East Point, Ga.

Effective ambassadors regularly consult the one in power whom they represent so they “know the mind” of the person authority, he said. An ambassador who becomes sidetracked from his mission no longer is fit to serve as a representative for the one who holds power, he noted.

Furthermore, any credit for achievement belongs to the one whom the ambassador represents, not to the representative, he said.

“God will use any of us willing to let God use us,” he said.

Even in challenging times, God calls his servants to remain faithful to their calling, McCall said, reciting the lyrics to an old Spiritual: “Walk together children. Don’t you get weary.”

## **Death before resurrection**

In the assembly’s closing worship service, Mary Alice Birdwhistell, until recently pastor of Calvary Baptist Church in Waco, described the death of a dear friend and church member who died last Christmas Eve.



In a time of global pandemic and racial injustice, Mary Alice Birdwhistell challenged CBF to ask what needs to die in order for God to bring about resurrection. (Screen Capture)

“Nothing prepares you for the hard and holy work of burying someone you love,” said Birdwhistell, now pastor of Highland Baptist Church in Louisville, Ky.

She spoke about the role of Joseph of Arimathea in burying the body of Jesus—an admittedly odd topic for an assembly focused on “bold faithfulness.”

“But much of the work you and I do can seem kind of odd,” she said, particularly given ways churches have adapted creatively during the COVID-19 pandemic. “There is bold and beautiful work happening all around us.”

In “difficult days” of racial injustice and global pandemic, Birdwhistell challenged Fellowship Baptists to ask what policies and practices “need to die in order for God to resurrect something new.”

## **Taking care of business**

During the business session, Patricia Wilson, a professor at Baylor Law School and a deacon at Seventh & James Baptist Church in Waco, was chosen as CBF moderator-elect.



Patricia Wilson, CBF  
moderator-elect

Wilson has held leadership posts in CBF more than a decade, including service on its coordinating council, governing board and nominating committee. She also served CBF Texas as moderator and board member.

Others elected to key positions included Jewel London, pastoral assistant at Brookhollow Baptist Church in Houston, as a member of the governing board; and Katie Sciba, home health director at Citizens Medical Center in Victoria, and Jorge Zayasbazan, pastor of Temple Baptist Church in San Antonio, to the board of the CBF Foundation.

Virtual assembly participants also approved a governing board recommendation to extend the current budget up to an additional three months in light of uncertainty related largely to COVID-19 and its impact on contributions. The governing board will develop a new budget in October based on the priorities of CBF's Toward Bold Faithfulness strategic plan.