

New Baptist Covenant pitches reconciliation at CBF

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ATLANTA—The New Baptist Covenant has tapped powerful allies to help push the movement from what one of its leaders described as its “dream phase” into bold action.

Powerful supporters of the movement backed its “covenants of action” initiative during the [Cooperative Baptist Fellowship](#) general assembly in Atlanta.



South African theologian Allan Boesak CBF Executive Coordinator Suzii Paynter urged nearly 600 gathered at the New Baptist Covenant luncheon to embrace the initiative, in which churches from separate Baptist denominations forge alliances of service and ministry in their communities.

“There’s only one way to make a road and that is to walk it,” Paynter said.

“I challenge our CBF churches to consider ‘covenants of action.’”

Former President Jimmy Carter, who founded the movement in 2008 hoping to heal divisions between Baptists, joined yet more prominent leaders in a video describing the effort.

Costly discipleship

Keynote speaker Allan Boesak, a theologian, Reformed Church pastor and colleague of Nelson Mandela in South Africa’s anti-apartheid movement, issued a call to “costly discipleship.”

While never mentioning the pan-Baptist pacts in his address, he preached about the difficulties, dangers and necessities of forgiveness and reconciliation—all of which the covenants seek for participating churches and their communities.

Boesak, the Desmond Tutu Chair of Peace, Global Justice and Reconciliation Studies at Butler University and Christian Theological Seminary in Indianapolis, reminded his audience they do not follow the Jesus whose name was invoked to bring slaves to America or to rationalize apartheid. They follow the one presented by the gospels as a challenger of authority.

Good news to the oppressed

Jesus is a Savior who never allowed his followers to get comfortable in their ministries, who preached the good news to the oppressed and outcast, he insisted.

He is “the Jesus that will not let us rest and the Jesus who demands costly discipleship,” he said.

Christ lived what he preached and the church today must do the same. And one of the principles Jesus lived was reconciliation, Boesak said,

That's an easy word to say but one difficult to live into, he said. Christians should not speak of reconciliation without being prepared to confront the opposition that always rises against it.

But Christians are required to accept that challenge, Boesak said.

A biblical demand

"Reconciliation is not a bookkeeping term, it is a biblical demand."

It's also constantly uncomfortable as shifts occur in the balance of power and equality in existing and new relationships, Boesak said.

Much of that discomfort arises from the forgiveness required in reconciliation movements. Forgiveness is not a buzzword but a process that leads to personal and social transformation, he insisted.

The process helped avoid violence after the defeat of apartheid in South Africa as some former oppressors sought and received forgiveness, he said.

While some great inequalities remain and reconciliation is incomplete, "retribution, bloodshed and revenge" were prevented, he said.

"Forgiveness is never sentimental" but "life-giving and soul-affirming," Boesak said.

As in South Africa, Christians should expect strong challenges to genuine efforts of reconciliation and forgiveness. But Boesak urged Fellowship Baptists to embrace those difficulties.

"If you go on this road there will be some hard moments. Don't run away from it," he said. "Don't run away from evil."

Embarking on that journey, he added, will be transformative for all involved.

“The Holy Spirit will change your life, and then the church will change and then the world will change.”

Recognize differences

New Baptist Covenant National Coordinator Hannah McMahan followed Boesak’s address with a plea for Baptists to overcome the differences that divide them. She urged Baptists to recognize differences as strengths that “allow us to more fully know God.”

But action also is needed so the Baptist family can become a “transformational agent in this world,” she said. “It is time to take action, now.”

The covenants represent transformation for NBC, too, moving it into a “new chapter” from inspiration to action, McMahan said. Modeled on Jesus’ ministry described in Luke 4, they will do the same for churches who participate in the process, she said.