

North American Baptists examine series of â€œshiftsâ€

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HONOLULU — Baptists from across Canada and the United States examined seven key “shifts” July 29 that have impacted the North American Baptist Fellowship.

The NABF includes Baptists from the two predominantly English-speaking nations in North America. It held its annual meeting during the 20th Baptist World Congress in Honolulu.

Baptists on the continent would do well to study shifts impacting their ministries and churches, NABF General Secretary George Bullard explained.

The shifts include:

- **A shift in the earth — the January earthquake in Haiti.** Five predominantly African-American Baptist groups — the National Baptist Convention of America; National Baptist Convention, USA; Progressive National Baptist Convention; National Missionary Baptist Convention of America; and Lott Carey Baptist Foreign Mission Convention — have banded together to support relief efforts in Haiti, reported NABF President David Goatley, who also is executive secretary-treasurer of the Lott Carey organization.

The five groups made a \$500,000 Hawaiian dancers performing during the gift to Habitat for Humanity in Baptist World Congress.

Haiti this spring, and they hope to
donate another \$500,000 in
September, Goatley said.

Dean Miller, the NABF's disaster relief coordinator and disaster relief worker with the Baptist General Association of Virginia, said the fellowship is coordinating resources to help the partner conventions meet needs in the wake of the quake. "It's exciting to stand together," he said.

- **Shifts along the Gulf of Mexico — hurricanes Katrina and Rita and the BP oil spill.** The National Baptist Convention of America has responded to all the disasters, noted Sam Tolbert, general secretary of the convention and pastor of Greater Saint Mary Missionary Baptist Church in Lake Charles, La.

"We could not respond adequately alone," Tolbert said, noting his convention also teamed up with the Lott Carey organization.

Important ministries have included mental health counseling to help people in the region cope with the stresses of physical disaster and economic calamity, as well as "community resilience" ministries, such as job-skills training.

- **The shift of missional involvements — response to the changing context of ministry.** In a transitional urban community, First Baptist Church of Decatur, Ga., has switched from giving money for mission work in other places to direct involvement in local ministry, said the church's pastor, Julie Pennington-Russell.

"We've seen ... a robust desire for people to be up to their necks in hands-on ministry," she said, noting the church is striving to move 100 percent of its membership "out of the stands, on the field and into the game."

Operation Insasmuch is an organization that helps churches involve their members in community ministries, noted its founder, David Crocker.

Its model of ministry designed to involve from 50 percent to 75 percent of a

church's members in hands-on ministry, and then to "move them down the funnel to lifestyle ministry," Crocker reported. The organization has worked with 1,600 churches in 17 states, Canada and the United Kingdom.

- **A shift in the Baptist World Alliance.** "We're at a unique time in BWA life," Bullard noted. "The new president [John Upton from Virginia] is from North America. And events in North America — the economy and changes in denominational life — are felt worldwide.

"North America is going to have a huge responsibility in the dialog about how we're going to be resourcing this family called the BWA," Bullard said.

The BWA has experienced staff leadership change and constitutional changes in the past five years, and now is the time to build on those changes, he added. He pointed to the need to include young leaders, develop community and achieve significant diversity within the organization.

- **A shift in denominational leadership.** Canadian Baptist Ministries has experienced a generational shift in leadership, said Gary Nelson, who recently stepped down as the organization's general secretary and was replaced by a young leader, Sam Chase.

"Canada is a time-lapsed camera of what is happening in the United States," Nelson said. "We worship in 42 languages. Our largest churches are multicultural, and we've been struggling with secularism."

However, new leadership has emerged "to help us be the kind of churches we need in Canada," he said.

The BWA's Emerging Leaders Network has recruited and encouraged young leaders from around the world, said the network's coordinator, Chris Liebrum of the Baptist General Convention of Texas.

The network was the brainchild of BWA President David Coffey and has involved about 40 to 50 participants, beginning three years ago. "It's been a deliberate process of cultivating leaders for the next generation," Liebrum said.

- **A shift in the future of North American Baptist organizations.** The North American Baptist Conference, which historically has been composed of Baptists of German heritage, now includes large African-American and Chinese congregations, Executive Director Rob McCleland said.

Also, the Internet has allowed the conference's pastors to locate and relate easily with pastors from other denominations, he said, noting cross-pollination with those groups "has caused our organizational identity to begin to wane."

In recent years, the conference has flattened its organizational structure, shared leadership and convinced regional ministers to own responsibility for the larger organization instead of only the churches in their areas, he said.

Now, the conference is focusing on seeking young leadership for the future, he added.

- **A shift in telling the North American Baptist story.** A thread that ties all of the other shifts together is the challenge of communication, observed David Wilkinson, executive director of Associated Baptist Press.

"Telling the Baptist story, the gospel story, the Jesus story is essential," he said. "But we've got a lot of catching up to do."

Baptists need to "embrace the wonderful tool God has given us in communication, including emerging technology," he said.

As an illustration, he cited New Voice Media, a partnership of news

organizations that collaborate to communicate the Baptist story, both to Baptists and to others. The partners include ABP as well as three state Baptist newspapers — the Baptist Standard of Texas, the Religious Herald of Virginia and Word & Way of Missouri.

The next North American Baptist Fellowship gathering will be held Jan. 10-11, 2011, in Birmingham, Ala., Bullard said.

-Marv Knox is editor of the Texas Baptist Standard.