

# Transcongregational mindset may be BWA's gift to Baptists

July 27, 2015

DURBAN, South Africa (BNG)—The [Baptist World Alliance](#) may provide Baptists' best opportunity to embrace a "transcongregational" mindset that balances historic adherence to congregational autonomy while avoiding the isolation of local-church independence.

That's the assessment of outgoing BWA President John Upton, who completes a five-year term as the top elected official of the global fellowship representing about 43 million baptized believers.



John Upton (left) and Russian Baptist leader Vitaly Vlasenko caught up in Durban's International Convention Center. (BNG Photo by Nathan White) "My fear is that we Baptists are so prone to thinking of being in an isolated place we lose sight of what that (connection) means and how to leverage it," said Upton, executive director of the [Baptist General Association of Virginia](#). "We understand congregational. We don't understand transcongregational. The BWA is the place to learn that."

Upton reflected on his past five years as president during an interview days before his term ended at the close of the Baptist World Congress meeting in Durban, South Africa. South African pastor Paul Msiza succeeds him as BWA president.

There's a hunger for wider congregational relationships among Baptists, Upton said. But it is sometimes stymied by the faith tradition's strong theological commitment to autonomous local congregations.

### **'Identity as a collective'**

Although he also advocates an autonomous understanding of the nature of the church, "because we are so congregationally based, we don't have a comprehension of what it means to have an identity as a collective, much less leverage it."

"That's why so many young people go on (international) mission trips," he said. "When I fly this time of year, the planes are packed with people going on mission trips. They experience something in an international context that they can take home with them. And it's obviously found in an international context, because otherwise they wouldn't be on the trip."

Referencing Jesus' Great Commission, he said: "You can see 'Jerusalem' a lot better when you've been to 'the uttermost part of the earth.' You see your neighbors differently. You have new sets of eyes."

A sense of connectedness is likely to increase during his successor's tenure, Upton noted. As a South African, Msiza is shaped by that country's concept of Ubuntu, often defined as a belief in a "universal bond of sharing, which connects humanity."

### **'I am because you are'**

"You can't have a leader like Paul step in from a culture of Ubuntu and not

have a stronger sense of unity,” Upton said. “There’s a sense of ‘I am because you are.’ It’s reconciling, hopeful, collaborative at its core. Five years of that kind of leadership will have an impact. It already has impacted our understanding of autonomy. I’m only free to the extent that you’re free.”

An emerging set of Baptist leaders around the globe will lend support to that connectedness, Upton said.

“I’ve traveled to their countries and seen these people in their leadership roles, and I’m amazed at the caliber of leadership on every continent,” he said. “There’s a generation of very innovative and sacrificial young leaders who are surfacing.”

Those leaders share a sense of a church “not isolated from the world but strongly connected to the world,” Upton said. They seek “unity of the church not for its own end but unity of the church for the world’s transformation.”

There’s no top-down mindset among those new leaders, he said.

“They thrive in a collaborative and distributed environment. ... Their whole idea is a walk together, a sense of journeying together. Each brings their own distinctiveness, their own gifts and talents, and they’re all valued. It’s shared learning but more importantly shared mission.”

His own country may be slow learning that concept, Upton said.

### **‘Get over suspicion’**

“The United States has got to get over its suspicion. We’re so polarized politically, religiously, and everyone is trying to figure out everyone else. Our young ones coming along have seen enough of that. There’s a world to be changed, they say. ... As they become part of groups like the Baptist

World Alliance, they are able to be free of those kinds of encumbrances.”

The world is different in 2015 than it was in 2010, and that’s impacting the shape of the BWA, Upton added.

“A lot of emerging countries are in a different place in 2015 than in 2010. A lot of established countries are in a different place. The church is not as strong there as it was. The center of Christianity is shifting. The center of population is definitely shifting. The movement of the southern hemisphere into the northern hemisphere is having a huge impact. The world is experiencing a huge migration, and that includes a migration of religions, so much so that Islam is a major factor even in the U.S.

“We’ll have to learn to exist in a much more diverse society than we did even in 2010.”

But the BWA is successfully navigating that shift, he said, with Neville Callam, a Jamaican, as general secretary and Msiza, a South African, as president.

### **‘It’s a new day’**

“Have we ever had a time when we’ve had an African and a person of African descent heading this organization?” he asked rhetorically. “It’s a new day. The organization is much more international than it’s ever been. The North Americans and Europeans are having to find themselves as one of the family, not as the leader of the family.”

The internationalizing of leadership leaves Upton optimistic about the BWA’s—and Baptists’—future.

His optimism is founded in a “great deal of excitement about having a South African who came out of apartheid, comes out of the margins, who also knows what reconciliation means, who has stood in the gap between

faith and society.”

“I have no concerns about the future of Baptists around the world,” Upton said.