

Women combat poverty, abuse by walking in the Spirit

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HONOLULU — As women from every corner of the world gathered in their native dress with festive country displays in celebration of God's movement among all peoples during the Baptist World Alliance Women's Leadership Conference, the sea of colorful garb soon contrasted with the harsh reality of the state of women in the world today.



The Baptist Women of Latin America (back row) prays over members of the Baptist Women's Union of Africa. (Photo by Kaitlin Chapman)

As the women participated in continental union ministry presentations, Bible studies, worship and fellowship, they learned about the 27 million women who will be trafficked into the sex trade in their lifetime and the other 1.5 billion who will be abused.

Many women were shocked to learn these atrocities were happening in their own cities. But no matter what view they had of abuse and poverty at the beginning of the conference, these 750 women who gathered at Waikiki Beach July 24-27 left motivated to take the gospel and rehabilitation to prostitutes, abused women and the impoverished caught captive in every corner of the world.

Patsy Davis, executive director for the BWA Women's Department, said the

goal of the gathering was to celebrate the steps these Baptist women have already taken to restore lives of the abused and impoverished but also to rally them on, allowing God to do more through them.

“Our theme of poverty and abuse really hit home with these women,” Davis said. “There were many who were ready to go do something about this. Some came up to me and said, ‘We live in some of these places where this really happens and we had no idea.’ They left with a passion to do something about poverty and abuse. And I think we will see a huge difference in the world because of that.”

The conference focused on combating abuse and poverty to coincide with the United Nations millennial goals focusing on ending poverty by 2015, though the Baptist women are striving to end these issues by walking in the Spirit, Davis said.



Amelia Gavidí (center), president of the Fiji Baptist Women’s Fellowship, and other fellowship members present a monologue on joining with other Baptist unions in combatting abuse. (Photo by Kaitlin Chapman)

“This year, the UN was focusing on stopping violence against women and we wanted to do our part,” Davis said.

During the general sessions, each of the seven continental unions involved with the BWA Women’s Department, painted a picture of women in their region of the world while sharing ways they are bringing hope to the abused and poor.

Ameila Gavid, president of the Fiji Baptist Women's Fellowship, presented a monologue about a woman she encountered who was rejected by her family, then turning to a life of crime, hurt and imprisonment because of the lack of love in her life.

Through the interaction of the Fiji fellowship, the woman gained hope through a relationship with Christ. This happened through Lydia's Sewing Project, a rehabilitation effort started by the fellowship to teach released prisoners a trade like sewing but also to show them the love of Christ.

"We go not only to help the women, but the main thing we do is share the love of Jesus with them," Gavid said. "Most of these women have never experienced love. They come from a low place. [They are]squatters in a low-level lifestyle where their mothers and fathers don't even care for them. And none of them know Christ. The word is that no one cares for me so they get involved in wrong areas. And instead of getting them involved in a better place, they get involved in a worse place. As Christians, what are we going to do about it?"

The lives they have seen changed have come through the Fiji Baptist women stepping out and having obedient faith, one way to walk in the Spirit, Gavid said.

"I believe that the Lord does not want us just to talk," Gavid said. "We have to step out and physically do what God is telling us. That is faith. If I just know the Word of God and I just sit there, that is not faith. We as born again believers should do it in faith. Whatever we do, we need to do in faith."



Korean women in traditional garb perform at the Women's Conference. (Photo by Kaitlin Chapman)

Many other international Baptist unions shared how they are approaching women caught in human trafficking, prostitution and abuse, but stated that some much more intervention based in the love of Christ needs to happen for these women.

Though much of the conference was about rallying women for the cause of abuse and poverty, it was also a time for the women who diligently lead ministries back in their homeland to experience a time of spiritual renewal as other women passionate about Christ lead Bible studies for them and ministered to their hearts.

“I’m a teacher. I’m preaching, but here at this conference, I can sit and hear from others,” said Ponzi Anne Nzuzi, the president of the Baptist Women’s Fellowship in the Democratic Republic of Congo. “This is a good time for me so I become like a baby and I am taking enough food for my life. I believe that when I am back at my home, I will be strong again.”

Though Nzuzi said she appreciates the time of renewal, she also stated she and others, though living in a country where poverty and political conflict touches many in her congregation, they must follow the Spirit and continue to serve the abused and needy.

“Suffering is there,” she said. “Poverty is there, but we cannot block our hand and never do something. We have to do something.”

In addition to the focus on abuse and poverty, the women elected new leadership to direct the BWA Women’s Department for the next five years. Raquel Contreras, president of the Baptist union of Chile, was elected president, and Donna Groover, director of human resources and finance at Columbus Baptist Church in Falls Church, Va., was re-elected as secretary treasurer for a second term. Both women were honored at a celebratory tea held at the closing of the conference.

“Oh, am I excited,” Davis said in regards to the new leadership. “I’ve

known Raquel a long time, and she knows the organization. She knows the women, and she'll be an amazing leader. And Donna is a very special, gifted lady. We are excited to have her for a second term. Even though we don't have much money, somehow she always makes it work."

Before the end of the conference, each union was paired with another to serve as prayer partners for the next five years. This partner union, as well as the conference theme of walking in the Spirit, will become an emphasis during the annual Baptist Women's World Day of Prayer held Nov. 1. This day is a way for women around the world to gather and jointly pray for issues in the world today and take an offering to support the ministry of the BWA Women's Department and their continental unions.

"My hope and desire is that they take what they learned and share it on the local level," Davis said. "From the Amazing Place, an interactive maze sharing about the Women's Department and giving prayer opportunities for the women, I hope they learned how to creatively share the information. And hope that the next time we see stats about women that they will be lower. Realistically, we won't get to zero, but I hope they get lower because of what the women will be doing."

An offering was collected to support BWA ministries and for some scholarships to attend the meeting. A total of \$14,759 was given by the women, many of whom gave sacrificially from the little that they have.

The Women's Department also commissioned two books. Coming Together is a history of the Women's Department of the BWA. The second, I'm a Woman ... Created in the Image of God is an English translation of a Spanish book written in the 1960s.

For more information on the BWA Women's Department or to view presentations made at the conference and resources for the Baptist Women's World Day of Prayer, visit www.bwawd.org. The women's

conference presentations will be available online after Aug. 3 when the BWA staff returns from the Congress.

—Kaitlin Chapman is a newswriter for the Baptist General Convention of Texas.