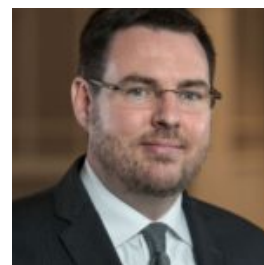


BWA chief speaks of kingdom courage on the front lines

February 7, 2024

BROWNWOOD—Baptist World Alliance General Secretary Elijah Brown told stories of “kingdom courage” to crowds at Howard Payne University.



Elijah Brown

Brown delivered the Currie-Strickland Distinguished Lectures in Christian Ethics, recounting examples of Baptist efforts to promote peace and justice on the front lines of conflict and persecution.

“We draw upon a Baptist history of over 400 years, with a global family of 51 million baptized believers and 130 countries,” Brown said. “Today, many of those Baptists must live out the convictions of their conscience with kingdom courage. They must navigate difficult ethical situations—war, violence and persecution—as they seek to live with kingdom courage.”

Brown recalled a trip he took to Ukraine early in 2022.

“The Baptist leaders in Ukraine outlined a strategy to encourage churches to stock up on food, basic supplies and medicine,” Brown said. “They said: ‘If the invasion happens, it will be the greatest flow of refugees in our country. If the invasion doesn’t occur, we will give away all these items, and we will become the greatest blessers to the homeless shelters in our

country.'



Elijah Brown (left), general secretary of the Baptist World Alliance, and Igor Bandura, vice president of the Baptist Union of Ukraine, stand behind a pulpit made from a missile shot down over Ukraine. (Photo from Twitter)

“Because of this strategic vision, in the first two weeks of the war, 600 Baptist churches in Ukraine served as centers of hope that helped thousands of people fleeing for their lives.”

He quoted a Baptist pastor in Mariupol who said: “I beg you to pray for us. You can’t even imagine what is going on here.”

The pastor went on to describe the harsh conditions he and his countrymen were experiencing, but he concluded, “But the Lord is with us, and he is stronger.”

Although war is tearing people, families and communities apart, God is still at work, Brown said.

“In Romania, the very first person, on the very first day of the war, to arrive

at the border carrying a sign that said, 'I will help you,' was a Baptist pastor. In Moldova, during the first 10 days of the war, 80 percent of all refugees to Moldova were welcomed first by a Baptist church," Brown said.

Since the Russian invasion, Baptist churches have reported more than 20,000 first-time visitors, seen more than 30,000 salvations and ordained 40 new pastors.

Ukraine is not the only place where suffering exists, he said, noting 30 percent of all BWA Baptists live in the midst of war, violence, extreme hunger and persecution.

"When almost 1 out of every 3 Baptists faces the reality of war, violence, extreme hunger and persecution, we must live with kingdom courage," Brown said.

Growth in Africa, Latin America and Asia

Brown identified emerging front lines he believes will help shape the next 10 to 15 years.

"With kingdom courage, we also need to engage these front lines, which are going to impact the world, the United States and Texas," Brown said.

"Baptists continue to experience the greatest global expansion we have experienced in 400 years, with members now in 130 countries and territories, representing 51 million baptized believers."

The Baptist family is shifting to locations outside of Europe and North America. In the last 10 years, Baptists in Asia grew 26 percent, Baptists in Latin America grew 27 percent, and Baptists in Africa grew 102 percent, he noted.

“So, on a global level, the question we’re asking is, ‘Are we building towards a Baptist identity as a worldwide movement, with worldwide concerns, with our largest demographic base in Africa?’” Brown said.

To grow, Baptists in particular and Christians in general must care for people in all situations and learn how to serve them, he asserted.

“All 8 billion people are made in the image of God, and every one of them is equidistant to the heart of God,” Brown said.

“Over the next 30 years, worldwide population will grow from 7 to 9.5 billion people. How will it change our strategy to account for the worldwide growth of 2 billion more people who will have spiritual and humanitarian needs? Will that growth influence our vision and our strategies?”

Challenges of urbanization and culture

Baptists need renewed mission engagement and significant institutional investment to respond to a changing world, he observed.

“The future is urbanization, and it will be disruptive. Urban living tends to increase better job opportunities, greater access and expectations for amenities, technological utilization, higher education opportunities, environmental pollution, social isolation, and religious, cultural and worldview diversity,” Brown said.

Over the next decade, the number of megacities—urban centers with a population of at least 10 million people—will increase from 33 to 39. These have a strong influence in culture. Twenty of the 39 megacities will be in Asia, where less than 10 percent or less claim any form of Christianity. Sixteen of the 39 megacities have a Baptist population of less than 25,000 in the whole of their countries.

“To engage in this emerging front line, we must embrace the Pauline

mission model of multicultural and multidisciplinary teams focusing on key cities as the doorway to reach nations,” Brown said.

Over the next 10 years, the culture war will center on education and schools, Brown predicted.

“Schools will be seen by every side as the location to concentrate their influence and to conserve certain values or to push forward certain values,” Brown said. “To engage in this emerging front line with the Holy Spirit, what we need is spiritual formation that communicates with Jesus, cultivates a character of humility, and embraces a deep discipleship in suffering.”

Brown offered a word of advice to Christians in the current context.

“There is no such thing as privacy anymore,” said Brown. “Those of you who are leading, especially in church contexts, lead and say and speak as if every single thing you do, is in the public sphere. If you wouldn’t say it in public, don’t say it at all to anyone ever.”

Almost half of all BWA Baptists—47 percent—face the most significant livelihood challenges, he reported. In responding to vulnerable people, Christians need to “engage in prophetic friendship” with them and to work collaboratively to meet challenges, he said.

“The most effective leaders of the 21st century, will be those who create systems of collaboration within their organization, build networks of collaboration with their organization, and leverage those networks to address the most complex challenges,” Brown said.

Rapid changes in technology

In an era of information overload, wisdom will be an increasingly valuable commodity, he observed.

“It is less about expertise and more about trust. Less about product solutions and more about people relationships. We don’t need more experts. What we need is more wisdom,” Brown said.

“Content is free and available, more than we could ever hope and have. What people don’t have is wisdom.”

He also addressed the challenges that arise with ever-increasing advances in technology.

“I believe this is the single greatest threat to religious freedom and human rights for the 21st century,” Brown said. “Ethicists who are leading the way, how are you pioneering a way to talk about the intersection of technology and human rights?”

“I’m not against technology. I’m for right use of technology.”



The School of Christian Studies at HPU named as Currie-Strickland Scholars (left to right) Heath Cook from Sugar Land, Cody Feist from Comanche, Nicole Rivera from Comanche, Alexis Gonzales from Idalou, Silas Ingram from Cisco and

Alexis Lively from Olton. (Photo by
Emily Hughitt)

The Currie-Strickland Distinguished Lectures in Christian Ethics, established in honor of David R. Currie and in memory of Phil Strickland, are designed to provide opportunities for students and the general public to consider the importance of Christian ethics in the workplace, classroom, ministry, national and world affairs and in the minds of Christians as they make decisions in daily living.

The School of Christian Studies at HPU named six students as Currie-Strickland Scholars based on their commitment to ethics and theology. They are Heath Cook from Sugar Land, Cody Feist from Comanche, Nicole Rivera from Comanche, Silas Ingram from Cisco, Alexis Gonzales from Idalou, and Alexis Lively from Olton.

Emily Hughitt, a student at Howard Payne University, is serving as an intern with the Baptist Standard this semester.