

Editorial: Baptist World lessons for local Baptists

July 13, 2022

One of the most enlivening and enriching educations comes from being with people from other places. The more different those other places are, the more enlivening and enriching the education. I'm in one of those places right now, and I am learning a lot.

As a former educator and a teacher at heart still, I want to share with you some of what I am learning.

Sharing pain and joy

I am writing during the 2022 Baptist World Alliance annual gathering, hosted by Samford University in Birmingham, Ala. As I write, I am surrounded by people from all over the world—approximately 66 countries—and it's wonderful.

BWA is made of 245 member bodies—which include state, regional and national groups—from 176,000 churches in 128 countries and territories representing 51 million Baptists.

In every session so far, we are being reminded it wasn't easy for all of us to arrive at this gathering. Too many of us left war-torn and conflict-ridden places to be at BWA's annual gathering. We are together now, and we are sharing one another's pain and joy.

This lesson—Christian brothers and sisters sharing each other's pain and joy—is something we talk about locally but often don't understand thoroughly until we are with those experiencing deep pain and also vibrant

joy. To be with the person living that story is to practice incarnation.

Another lesson in this: Some of those here expressing the deepest pain also are expressing the greatest joy. This is a profound paradox of the Christian life.

Singing a new song

During worship services, we are singing songs from around the world. In just one service, we sang songs from Egypt, Argentina and New Zealand. Each was beautiful and different; each one pointed us to God in a unique way. The melodies charged the heart, and the lyrics engaged the mind.

The songs seemed to be new to most of us. I couldn't tell that anyone but the worship leader knew any of them. Even so, we did our best, usually picking up the tune by the third stanza.

I did not hear or see any complaints. I didn't see any frowning faces or hear anyone complain with: "I didn't like the worship. I didn't know any of the music."

The lesson in this is when something is new for everyone, and when we've all chosen to be together in Jesus' name anyway, we can learn new and wonderful things, such as a song about God's peace in and through us, written by people in a conflicted part of the world.

Surely, in our local congregations, we can release the tight grip on the known and comfortable and learn a new song—meant literally and figuratively. After all, the more important thing is not the song, but that we are called together in Jesus' name and empowered by his Spirit.

The Macedonian spirit is alive

Take a moment to read [2 Corinthians 8](#), Paul's telling of the generosity of the Macedonian churches. I heard proof here that the same generous spirit of the ancient Macedonian Christians is alive today. Just as those churches "gave as much as they were able, and even beyond their ability," Baptists in Eastern Europe have done the same.

Immediately following Russia's invasion of Ukraine on February 24, Ukrainians poured out of their country and into neighboring countries along Ukraine's western border. We were told some Baptist churches and individuals in those neighboring countries emptied their bank accounts to take in and care for refugees. Emptied their bank accounts.

I dare say, we are not emptying our accounts to help others. We are trying to be good stewards and make sure we can pay the bills and safeguard our retirements. As if Eastern Europeans don't have bills to pay.

Not only did Eastern European Baptists sacrifice their ability to meet their own present needs in order to care for their neighbors, they did so with no guarantee of future financial recuperation.

I think you see the lesson in that. When our brothers and sisters in Christ—*and* our neighbors who may not be in Christ—are in need, Jesus told us to be like the Good Samaritan. Sacrifice for them. Lord, help my unbelief.

Young and multicolored

I've been in plenty of Baptist gatherings over the years, and in addition to hearing people remark about all the white hair, I've seen it for myself. When I look around the room each time we gather here in small groups and large, I don't see much white hair. Instead, I see the full spectrum of hair

color. I also see the full rainbow of skin color.

We talk about wanting our churches to be more diverse in various ways, but BWA is the only place in my experience I've seen people so committed to diversity that they've traveled from all over the world to be together. In our local churches, we're not even getting people to cross the street.

Now, I know that's not an uplifting word ... at first. But it's meant to upbuild.

The lesson in simply looking around the room during BWA is Revelation 7:9 is possible here on Earth.

John saw a heavenly vision of it: "I looked, and there before me was a great multitude that no one could count, from every nation, tribe, people and language, standing before the throne and before the Lamb."

What is it that brings such global diversity together each year for 117 years, the time BWA has existed? There is something for us to learn in this.

In all likelihood, our local communities are more diverse than our churches. This means we have the ability to be more diverse congregations if we will work at it with commitment and intent for as long as it takes.

We don't see very well

I've enjoyed fascinating conversations with people from all over the world. During one walk, I had the opportunity to talk with a minister from India. We asked each other where we are from. When I told him I'm from Dallas, he commented on the wealth of that city.

I said: "Yes, there is a lot of wealth in Dallas. Not me, though. I'm not rich."

He stopped me cold, squared his shoulders, faced me directly and dressed

me down. He told me all the ways I am rich bodily and, more importantly, spiritually. He told me never to say, “I’m not rich.” And then he smiled and blessed me.

It was a humbling and necessary moment.

One lesson in this is that I don’t know myself very well. Though I live in a self-help culture with all the self-awareness tools at my fingertips, I still need a man from India to teach me about myself.

What are you missing about yourself by not building relationships with people completely outside your everyday experience? You may be missing God’s word to and for you.

A drop in the bucket

I have learned so much and am learning still. The 2022 BWA annual gathering does not end until Friday, but I have a Thursday morning deadline. And a single editorial can’t contain all the lessons I’m learning here, anyway. I’ve already left much on the cutting room floor.

So, I’ll leave off with one last lesson.

To learn what the Baptist world is teaching, we have to be with people not like us from places not by us. We have to pay attention and listen fully. We have to be open—to learning, to confessing, to changing. And we should be ready to be filled with God’s joy along the way.

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