

Editorial: We need a new missions story

July 5, 2023

[Baptists are “a missionary people,”](#) Elijah Brown, general secretary of the Baptist World Alliance, told those gathered in Stavanger, Norway, for the 2023 BWA annual meeting.

For centuries, missions has been at the core of who we are. Missions is so important to Baptists that those in the United States split over the issue of whether slaveholders could be appointed as missionaries, birthing the Southern Baptist Convention—and all its subsequent history, good and bad.

Yes, when Baptists talk about missions, we talk about monumental things. But our talk about missions tends to be one-sided in the United States.

The story Baptists in the United States often have told about missions tends to go something like this: If it wasn't for us and our missionaries and mission efforts, the world wouldn't know about Jesus.

Put another way: If the world is going to know about Jesus, *we* have to go tell the world, *we* have to send *our* missionaries, *we* have to give *our* money. And if *we* don't do it, it won't get done.

This isn't a verbatim recital of our story about missions. Rather, it is a distillation of the insinuated and perhaps also unintended message. A consequence of this message, however, has been the overestimation of our place in the world alongside a devaluing of other Christians around the world.

BWA provides a needed corrective to this problem.

True international relationships

I have spent the last three days with Baptists from all over the world. If you've never done that, you should make a point to do it at least once in your life, and sooner rather than later.

The annual meeting next July will be in Lagos, Nigeria, followed by the 23rd Baptist World Congress in Brisbane, Australia, July 7-12, 2025.

These annual meetings aren't about the places, though. They're about the people. Getting to be with people from all over the world is always a fantastic experience, especially if you don't spend the whole time cloistered among compatriots but actually spend time with people from around the world.

When you engage in conversation or share a meal with someone from another part of the world, you learn, you grow, you are expanded. And when this person is a fellow follower of Christ in the same faith tradition as yourself, you gain new insight into your shared faith. I have yet to spend time with a fellow follower of Christ from outside the United States when I wasn't challenged and deepened in my own relationship and walk with Christ.

But these annual meetings aren't centrally about the people. They are centrally about the one Lord we share, into whom we are baptized, by whom we are called and who is the source and reason for our mission. In fact, there is no reason for all these people to come together once a year except for what God is doing in and through them.

That's what these annual meetings are about—what God is doing in and through Baptists all over the world.

This week, as we have discussed missions, our brothers and sisters from

around the world have been a source of joy and wonder. Consider a few examples from my time with them in Stavanger.

True international missions

I traveled with a pastor from the Middle East. He said I could tell you where he lives and works, but I've been programmed to use the general designation "Middle East" and can't bring myself yet to name his location.

Anyway, we enjoyed our conversation on the flight to Stavanger and set aside time later in the week to eat breakfast together. Over breakfast, he told me his church of about 30 to 40 people planted a church in a far more difficult area of the Middle East than where he lives, and his church is funding the work themselves.

As mentioned in one of our news stories about the BWA annual meeting, [Nepalese refugees living in Tasmania](#), Australia, and who became Christians there through the work of Australian Baptists, asked to be sent to Germany to share the gospel with Nepalese refugees living there.

Fernando Brandão, executive director of Junta de Missões Nacionais in Brazil, happily reported his convention has deployed more than 2,000 missionaries.

Elijah Brown told those who attended an information session about the newly launched Global Baptist Mission Network that Moldova—one of the poorest countries in Europe—has 20 missionaries, and Venezuela—despite its catastrophic economic collapse—has 100 missionaries who planted 50 new churches last year.

Baptists in Papua New Guinea—a country that has featured so prominently in so many tales of foreign missions, as Baptists in the United States used to call international missions—are about to send their first missionary,

Brown added.

True mission story

If it ever really was up to Baptists in America to evangelize the world—in truth, it never was—it’s certainly not the case anymore and hasn’t been for 20 or 30 years or more. Some in the United States might count this to our shame. I would count this as joy.

Consider these numbers shared during the 2023 BWA annual meeting. Over the last 10 years, European Baptists have declined by 2 percent, North American Baptists have declined by 5 percent, Baptists in Asia and the Pacific have increased by 26 percent, Baptists in Latin America have increased by 27 percent, Caribbean Baptists have increased by 71 percent, and Baptists in Africa have increased by 102 percent.

Scott Pilgrim, executive director of Baptist Mission Australia, told us that by 2030, 70 percent of the world’s Christians will be in the Global South, and by 2060, 40 percent of the world’s Christians will be in Africa.

From what Baptists in Africa, Asia, Latin America and the Caribbean are showing, not only will they be among the majority of the world’s Christians, they will be among those leading the way in missions. In truth, they are leading the way already.

As U.S. Baptists and Christians talk about missions, we need to tell a different story. We have told ourselves for too long tales of our own importance, and in our believing it, we have grown complacent. Our fire has gone out.

We need to tell a new story—the true story—about what we are learning from our brothers and sisters around the world. And we need to be inspired by them, that our own passion for Christ and what he told us to do will be

rekindled. Lord, may it be so.

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