

Voices: ‘I am a global Baptist’

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While a young faculty member at Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary in 2000, my colleagues William Estep Jr., Leon McBeth and James Leo Garrett came to my office with a request. They wanted me to attend the Baptist World Alliance annual gathering on Prince Edward Island, Canada, and sessions of the Commission on Baptist Heritage and Identity.

I knew the Baptist World Alliance was a voluntary organization of more than 200 Baptist conventions, fellowships and federations from all across the globe, grounded upon one foundational tenet—“One Lord, One Faith, One Baptism.”

I never had attended, but my colleagues had been part of this group for many years, had served in various leadership roles, and were hoping I would become part of BWA as a representative from the seminary.

They spoke so glowingly of the global Baptist body that I was intrigued. I attended that year and was hooked. They were right. I felt like I had come home for the first time in my life.

BWA has a place for everyone

When I attended my first BWA meeting, I met and became close friends with brothers and sisters from around the world. The Baptist family was large, welcoming and encouraging to all people.

I saw women serving in leadership roles and heard routine public acknowledgements of their infinite value to the Baptist family and to the church. I heard women preach and saw them lead their denominational bodies.

The first year I attended, women served as presidents of European Baptists, Swedish Baptists, Chilean Baptists and Italian Baptists. They were gifted, respected and skilled. I was amazed, for I never had seen this level of leadership in my own denomination. From that point, I met Baptist leaders year after year from almost every corner of the Earth.

Attending has become almost like a family reunion. I have come to know them as friends, to know something about their families, to appreciate the different ways we think, to hear and value perspectives genuinely different from mine, and sense a broader scope of understanding as we all approach God's word, its interpretation and its application to our current contexts.

I am reminded consistently I do not have all the answers, my way of thinking is but one way of seeing things, and it takes all of us together to have a more robust and fuller view of God.

That Jesus Christ is the way, the truth and the life is never in doubt. But there are other issues, traditions and interpretations I have loved to explore at the safe, open and respectful global dialogue table. There is a seat available to everyone.

Amazing BWA experiences

Many BWA experiences have been so meaningful to me. They include a hike through the woods to the hidden Anabaptist cave and worship service above Lake Zurich in Switzerland; a reconciliation service at the now-derelict slave castle on the Ivory Coast in Ghana; the centennial celebration of BWA in Birmingham, England, in 2005; and the testimonies of and service with persecuted Chin pastors in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia.

During a gathering in Birmingham, England, I saw something I will never forget. I turned the corner after a morning session and saw Raquel Contreras standing against a wall in a long hallway with perhaps two dozen

Latin American pastors standing in a long line, waiting patiently to speak with her.

Dr. Contreras was president and general secretary of the Baptist Union of Churches in Chile for eight years, president of the Latin American Baptist Union and, at the time, vice president of the Baptist World Alliance.

I stood still and watched. She took each pastor by the hand as they approached, spoke a warm word of greeting, inclined her head to listen quietly, and then bowed her head and prayed for them. There they stood, pastor after pastor, seeking her wise counsel and prayer for them and their ministries. How they loved and respected this woman of faith. I do, too.

Being a part of this larger Baptist family has changed me in substantive ways. I have discovered I am more understanding, careful, tolerant and sensitive for having been a part of BWA.

BWA brothers and sisters have taught me more about prayer, God and service to him than I ever could have anticipated or learned otherwise. I have learned so much about how other followers of Christ live and work, and it has improved vastly my own teaching of Christian history and our Baptist heritage.

I attend and leave each year with a greater measure of comprehension about the struggles of others, how I can join God's Spirit where he is working, and how to love others more intensely and serve more effectively.

Why BWA matters

The BWA has become my second family at a time when my own denominational tribe has been wounded and divided by conflict. I love to support, attend and be a part of the BWA.

The BWA matters because it is the only place right now that offers a table

around which Baptists from the world can safely come to sit; listen; dialogue; interact theologically, biblically and doctrinally; and have opportunities to learn from one another.

It is the place we are reminded we are so much more alike than different. We hold dear the same God, Bible, music, heritage, and urgency for evangelism, discipleship and advocacy.

Although I do not always share every opinion others voice, I welcome the opportunities given to think with others and pray through issues together. I love the diversity we represent and the unity we choose to embrace.

We all long to serve as Christ's ambassadors of reconciliation to our devastated world. We all are made in the image of God. When we take time really to see and be with one another, we recognize again how much greater God is than what we each know individually. We need each other.

We are indeed a beautiful community of faith. I am so very grateful BWA stands—solid and welcoming—as a home for all Baptist believers. When people ask me what kind of Baptist I am, I respond: "I am a global Baptist. I stand in solidarity with Baptists around the world."

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