

Voices: Lifting our global voice at BWA

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Our conversations on theological and ethical subjects often can become products of our own culture, to the point where we lose sight of their scriptural underpinnings and instead become caught up in the talking points of culture.

Spending time with Baptists from around the world helped me hear again the voices for which Scripture often advocates.

Through my work at Truett Theological Seminary at Baylor University, I was afforded the opportunity to attend the 23rd Congress of the Baptist World Alliance in Brisbane, Australia.

This year, more than 3,000 people from 168 countries gathered for a week of worship, community, learning and inspiration focused on evangelizing the world. These attendees represented more than 178,000 Baptist churches and 266 member partners from around the world.

People from organizations in Texas were present, including Baylor University, Buckner International, Dallas Baptist University, Texans on Mission and Texas Baptists. All told, BWA includes 53 million Baptists around the world.

Baptists coming together

What a wonderful experience it was to meet and visit with an international group of Baptist siblings. I met a missionary working with refugees in Austria, pastors from India, leaders trying to educate the next generation of

ministers in Nigeria, the president of a Baptist education institution in Ukraine, young people from Argentina to New Zealand, and an entire contingent of lay leaders from Papua New Guinea.

The opening night worship started with an Aboriginal didgeridoo and culminated with a reading from Revelation 7:9-12, and as we sang *Agnus Dei*, people from all 168 countries entered carrying banners representing each land from whence they came.

Every banner bore the image of an animal or plant from each person's country of origin (Collared Lory for Fiji, American bison for the United States, olive tree for Syria, Masai giraffe for Tanzania, etc.). I loved seeing a global representation of God's creation rather than flags of human-created political powers and borders. Rick Warren summed it up best when he said that evening, "If you don't like this, you're going to hate heaven."

I was overjoyed to see the broad scope of the church and of the Baptist tradition. I was honored to meet countless brothers and sisters in faith, and I was humbled to be reminded of just how privileged my faith experience is.

It was at a luncheon hosted by Baptist World AID where I heard Amanda Khozi Mukwashi, the United Nations resident coordinator from Lesotho, speak and these words stuck with me, "God hears the cry of the oppressed, he confronts the power of empire, and he calls us to reconciled liberation."

She described the challenges her people face, the oppression that is being overcome and the faith of so many that shines brightly amid trials. The luncheon was full of several hundred Baptists, and we were all moved—she received a standing ovation for her bold call to action reinforced by the words of minor prophets in scripture and Jesus.

A need for prayer and action

Three weeks ago, at Chalk Bluff Baptist Church, I preached from Amos 7. Two weeks ago, I preached from Amos 8, and last week we read the entirety of Amos for our Wednesday night Bible study.

Reading the warnings of judgment Amos had for Jereboam II and the people who followed his leadership, I cannot help but be reminded of the ways in which a global ear for happenings in the kingdom of God leads to an ear for the way in which our global family needs prayer and action.

This need for action is what James called for: “Suppose a brother or a sister is without clothes and daily food. If one of you says to them, ‘Go in peace; keep warm and well fed,’ but does nothing about their physical needs, what good is it?” (James 2:15-16).

James’s letter for the early church picks up on what Amos and others were writing more than 800 years earlier and God’s call for the righting of wrongs, provision for the poor and support for the oppressed.

It was from these scriptural foundations that Liberian minister Emmett L. Dunn, executive secretary/CEO of the Lott Carey Baptist Foreign Mission Convention, spoke these convicting words: “We build orphanages, but stay silent on the wars, violence and economic systems that create orphans. ... Charity alone is not enough. ...Go beyond charity and pursue justice in the name of Christ.”

Unified in Christ

At the closing worship session, the family of Baptists from around the world took the Lord’s Supper together. We paused after the bread and cup to say the Lord’s Prayer together, but in that diverse room, it was handled

differently. That night, we all were given instructions to pray the Lord's Prayer in our native languages.

With that instruction, the room was filled with more languages than anyone could make out. It was a beautiful cacophony of prayer in which my own voice did not merge with any other English speaker but was instead swallowed up into a rush of diverse voices everywhere.

I preached recently about the Lord's Prayer from Luke 11, and one of the things I pointed out was that the disciples asked Jesus to teach them a prayer like other teachers of the time taught their followers.

These prayers then became a defining and shaping process for each school or group. With Jesus' teaching the disciples the Lord's Prayer, he gave us a prayer that unifies and defines us. It is a prayer that orients us toward God and toward the values, community and future of Christ. Praying the Lord's prayer in English amidst the holy noise of a global family was beautiful.

There are times when differences can make someone feel like an outsider, but in that moment, there was an immense feeling of belonging. My voice and my neighbors' voices did not blend together, but our prayer did.

That night, we celebrated our unity despite our differences. The Lord's Prayer gave shape to our community in a unifying way, built around Jesus.

My takeaway from the BWA was to work toward global unity and to work toward seeing the kingdom of God be a place of hospitality, beauty and justice.

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