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Baptist Reconciliation  
in North America

By Mrs. Lawrence S. Casazza  
for Baptist Press

Sixty-three men and women representing nine of America's major Baptist conventions sat together in a hotel conference room in Washington last November.

For two days they reasoned together how they, and America's other Baptists, could make the greatest possible impact for Christ.

Robert S. Denny, general secretary of the Baptist World Alliance, reminisced to the group--an annual meeting of the general committee of the North American Baptist Fellowship--about the problems these same groups had faced in earlier years.

There had been jealousy then, and in many respects they stood as much in need of reconciliation as any other group on earth.

But now, Denny was able to say, "We've come a long way in our camaraderie to get the work of the Lord done." He said also that he felt the North American Baptist Fellowship (NABF) was demonstrating the truth of the scripture, "By this shall all men know that you are my disciples, that you love one another."

Sloan S. Hodges, president of the Fellowship, observed that the world "reconciliation" was coming to have real meaning to the Baptists of America.

And he was able to look back, as Denny had done, to the fact that there are 28 different "kinds" of Baptists in America. They are "different" for a variety of reasons: geography, racial and cultural backgrounds, and methodology. They were organized into conventions, conferences and associations back when travel was more difficult, and regionalism played a big part in the mapping of their membership and their programs.

As communications increased and travel became easier there was naturally an overlapping of interests and of geography. There came cries of "invasion" and "territorial encroachments." Some groups criticized others for an alleged lack of evangelistic fervor and were in turn criticized for their own excesses in outreach.

The beginning of a change can be dated at 1959--when certain leaders pointed to 1964 as the 150th anniversary of the beginning of organized Baptist work in America. A five year Baptist Jubilee Advance (BJA) program was organized with several Baptist Conventions participating.

Not even the BJA was all smooth sailing, however. The climax in 1964, the years of the sesquicentennial, found only two conventions able to respond to the dream idea of simultaneous meetings in the same city.

Enough semblance of working together had been achieved, however, that the concept of reconciliation could no longer be submerged. Some leaders suggested the formation of a "North American Baptist Fellowship," within the framework of the Baptist World Alliance.

At a planning meeting they agreed upon a simple constitution and decided that the new Fellowship would be activated when any five North American members of the Alliance had agreed to join.

The stipulation was met, and the initial meeting of the "General Committee" of the Fellowship was held on March 28, 1966.

Since then, the General Committee has met annually. Additional groups have joined the Fellowship so that now there are nine member bodies: American Baptist Churches in the USA; Baptist Federation of Canada; General Association of General Baptists; National Baptist Convention of America; National Baptist Convention of Mexico; North American Baptist General Conference; Progressive National Baptist Convention, Inc.; Seventh Day Baptist General Conference; and the Southern Baptist Convention.

The door is open for other Baptist bodies to join.

While the North American Baptist Fellowship has not provided an opportunity for Baptists of the continent to hold an over-arching convention or assembly, it has provided a meeting place for leaders of conventions to discuss matters of mutual concern in an atmosphere of mutual respect, trust and love.

Carl W. Tiller, secretary of the Fellowship, pointed to NABF as a forum in which they may "exchange information on the ways of accomplishing their work, gain inspiration for their tasks, and on occasion join together in accomplishing a common purpose."

Tiller goes on to say, that the NABF "is not a super-church. It has no authority over any Baptist church or convention, nor can it undertake any work except on request of its member bodies."

The meetings of the executive secretaries of the several conventions in 1972 and 1973 are indicative of the reconciliation that has taken place.

A major part of the 1972 meeting was devoted to a session of prayer for one another. An important feature in 1973 was a time for the frank sharing of concerns, personal more than institutional.

At the same time the executive secretaries were meeting, other leaders have shared their frustrations, their hopes, their plans with their counterparts in the fields of stewardship, missions and evangelism, church extension, lay development and Christian education.

All this comes about as the Baptist World Alliance pushes ahead on its World Mission of Reconciliation Through Jesus Christ.

There already has been, under sponsorship of The Woman's Department of the BWA, a North American Baptist Women's Union, organized in 1952. A continental fellowship of Baptist men is even now being organized.

Happily, there has been a spinoff from the meetings on the national level. Local churches of differing racial or denominational backgrounds have exchanged pulpit guests.

Citywide rallies of an interracial, interconvention nature have been an inspiration to the different "kinds" of Baptists in many communities. There has been an overall sense of cooperation in the thought that we all have vast common tasks and that we can do the job better in joint planning and understanding.

The Mission of Reconciliation has set annual themes for the final two years of its emphasis. "Reconciliation: God's Gift, Our Task" is the theme for 1974 and "The Cross, the Cost of Reconciliation" is the theme for 1975.

Now is the time for all our people, beginning in the local congregations and continuing through state and regional bodies, to put themselves fully behind the movement of reconciliation. We must unitedly set our hearts on working to bring all persons and the society into reconciliation with each other and with God.

Mrs. Lawrence S. (Letha) Casazza of Washington, D.C., is president of the North American Baptist Women's Union and a past president of the District of Columbia Baptist Convention.

Southern Baptist Center  
Bustles in Mid-Manhattan

By Tim Nicholas

NEW YORK (BP)--In mid-town Manhattan on West 72nd Street is an unpretentious six-story building that since December has housed the offices of the Metropolitan New York Baptist Association.

Here, Southern Baptists in New York, led by Ken Lyle, minister of associational services, are trying to cross some barriers to people in need.

Already four language groups hold meetings in the associational office building. One room in the building is used to teach English to recent Japanese immigrants. A Southern Baptist Home Mission Board missionary, Hiroshi Suzuki, is in New York on special assignment to begin development of a ministry to the Japanese there.

"These people have been sent by major Oriental companies," says Lyle. "They're affluent and not oriented toward Christianity, so we couldn't launch immediately into starting a Baptist church."

On Tuesday mornings a group of Spanish pastors meet in the building for fellowship and strategy planning in reaching the large Spanish-speaking population in New York. The association employs a bilingual part-time secretary, Terry Costa, who helps Spanish-speaking people in their everyday problems. Not knowing the local language makes everyday events, such as making dental appointments, a major operation.

Two nights a week a French speaking Haitian mission meets in the ground floor chapel in the building.

The other language spoken in the building now is English. Besides the associational offices, the Manhattan Baptist Church keeps its offices and holds services weekly in the buildings.

The Manhattan church is both a regional and community church, drawing its congregation from college students, teachers and professional people.

"A prerequisite for my getting the pastorate was that I live in the city," says John Halbrook, a Floridian who came last June from Duke University Divinity School with masters degrees both in divinity and in pastoral care.

Few children come to services, and there are no high school students. A woman heads the deacons, and the fifty church members alternate in their education hour at noon Sundays among discussion, Bible study, and seminars.

Worship service is at 1:30 p.m., and members are responsible for 11 a.m. services Sundays at the nearby French Polyclinic Hospital.

Sunday services usually include dinner. "Eating together is coming to be the best way to get to know other members," says Pastor Halbrook.

Another group activity is Project Gabriel, a ten-member music and drama group. One member who has videotape equipment makes it available for production of special dramatic newscasts.

Members have produced news in modern day terminology reporting such events as Jesus feeding the 5,000 and "sports casts" such as Daniel in the lions' den.

Another language group scheduled to enter the building in early summer is a Rumanian fellowship led by retired home missionary Cornel Pascu who also is developing fellowships in Brooklyn and Patterson, N.J., among the 27,000 local Rumanian refugees.

Lyle says that a Mandarin Chinese ministry is also a distinct possibility. "We have 1,000 Chinese a month coming into New York City," says Lyle.

"Since the United Nations opened to China, we now have Chinese Communists accessible for witness even though we can't get into their country."

Though the association has only occupied the building a few months, Lyle projects a number of other ministries springboarding from the building. Among these are a counseling center for pastors and their families.

"We're shooting for a 24-hour telephone service manned by retired laymen who can contact trained counselors from among a team of Christian doctors, lawyers, and other professionals," says Lyle.

"We are designing this associational office building to become a 24-hour-a-day, seven-day-a-week ministry," he adds.

"It's not just a Baptist headquarters; that's only a by-product.

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BP Photo mailed to Baptist state paper editors.

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Commission Urges Rights for  
Women; Better Race Relations

4/23/74

NASHVILLE (BP)--The Southern Baptist Christian Life Commission will bring a series of recommendations to the Southern Baptist Convention (SBC) annual session in June which call for specific actions concerning freedom for women, race relations, integrity in government and economic life.

The recommendations, approved by the commission's board, were released here in advance of the SBC meeting, June 11-13 in Dallas, "so that messengers can think about the issues, be better informed about them and be prepared to vote responsibly on them on Tuesday night at the convention," said Foy Valentine, commission executive secretary. The proposals will appear in the SBC Book of Reports.

One proposal of a five-part recommendation on women calls for the convention to amend its Bylaw 7 to "move toward more equitable representation" by stipulating that women make up one-fifth of the total elected members of the SBC boards, agencies and committees by no later than 1980.

Included in a four-part recommendation on race relations is a section which "encourages all Southern Baptist agencies to seek within their program assignments and employment practices to communicate the conviction that racism is theologically untenable, politically-destructive and fatally dehumanizing. . . ."

It further urges that Baptists "seek the leadership of the Holy Spirit in helping us to resist the temptation to practice racially selective evangelism, missions and ministry and in helping us to accept the obligation to share Christ's love and Christian fellowship regardless of race."

A section of a four-part recommendation on integrity in government urges Baptists to commit themselves to bring about "further reform of campaign financing to the end that elections may be taken out of the hands of big business, big labor and other special interests and returned to the voting public to whom they rightfully belong."

On economic life, a portion of a four-part recommendation "encourages those national leaders, including the President, who are seeking to develop a family support plan which will abolish many of the evils of the present welfare system and assist poor people to move toward the achievable goal of being self-supporting and tax-paying citizens."

Other portions of the recommendation dealing with freedom of women urge Baptists to "reaffirm our commitment to the Bible's teaching that every individual has infinite worth and that, in Christ, there is neither male nor female, and that we endeavor to communicate these basic truths through Christian education, by precept and example, in church and at home;

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"That we work to develop greater sensitivity to both overt and covert discrimination against women and that we endeavor through religious, political, social, business and educational structures to eliminate such discrimination, and;

"That our churches and our denominational agencies bear witness to the rest of society by rejecting discrimination against women in job placement, by providing equal pay for equal work and by electing women to positions of leadership for which God's gifts and the Holy Spirit's calling equip them."

In a preamble, the commission said that endorsement of "the great concept of human liberation of women in Jesus Christ is not to endorse the ideas or actions of every person who unfurls the women's liberation banner. Irresponsibility is no respecter of sexes and Christians must resist it no matter where it is found.

"Just as it is sinful for men to discriminate against women, so it is sinful for women to refuse to accept the dignity which God has bestowed on them," the preamble said. "Encouraging women to achieve their God-intended potential need not be detrimental to the stability of the family and the spiritual health of the church. The home and the church have crucial responsibilities for teaching the equal worth as well as the distinctive roles of males and females."

The race relations recommendation notes, "in thanksgiving" the "evident progress which has been made" and the "conviction that God is still seeking to lead us into his more excellent way of race relations."

It urges that Baptists "seek to be increasingly open as God speaks to us regarding race relations, recognizing ourselves as standing under God's judgment concerning the sin of racism, whether red or yellow, black or white, or brown;

"That we renew our commitment to the Bible teaching of justice for all human beings regardless of race, and that we work earnestly for racial justice in public education, employment, health care, housing, consumer concerns and citizen participation in the political process;" and

"That in a society where racial alienation and distrust are painfully evident, we renew our efforts toward cooperation between those who differ racially, ethnically or culturally, that through communication with God and with each other we may be more sensitive, more patient, more open and more humble, that together we may bear witness to Jesus Christ, who has broken down the middle wall of partition between races and who calls us into unity with each other and with him."

The integrity in government recommendation also calls for Baptists to pray for leaders at all levels of government "that we may be delivered from the current malignancy of deceit, distrust and discord;" to commit themselves, as did the biblical prophets, "to the exposure of evil at every level of government;" and call upon public officials "to follow the spirit and letter of the law" and where there is "gross failure" to follow legal procedures to assess guilty and remove from office those judged guilty.

Remaining portions of the recommendation on economic life urge stewardship of resources, full disclosure of facts on the energy crisis, control of excess profits, enforcement of anti-trust laws and removal of unnecessary tax burdens on the "poor and the near-poor."

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High Court Refuses to  
Review Church Dispute

4/23/74

By Stan Hastey

WASHINGTON (BP)--The U.S. Supreme Court declined to review cases from the states of Oklahoma and Washington in which local Presbyterian congregations challenged their presbyteries for dissolving them and appropriating their property.

Both churches were formerly associated with the United Presbyterian Church in the U.S.A.

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The two congregations, Westminster Presbyterian Church of Enid, Okla., and Hillcrest Presbyterian Church of Seattle, Wash., has asked the high court to hear oral arguments in their cases.

Facts in both cases are nearly identical. In each instance, the local congregation voted to withdraw from the presbytery because of opposition to unspecified church policies. Their presbyteries responded by declaring the congregations dissolved and by demanding them to deliver possession of their properties.

Both cases were appealed to the U.S. Supreme Court from state supreme courts. The Oklahoma case had been decided in favor of the presbytery, while in Washington, that state's supreme court had denied a petition to review a lower court's decision favoring the presbytery.

The two congregations argued that civil courts, rather than ecclesiastical authorities, should decide disputes involving property rights of churches. Property rights, they argued, are a purely civil matter. Therefore, to allow church tribunals to decide such a question violates the establishment clause of the First Amendment, they alleged.

The presbyteries, in turn, argued in their briefs that the dispute was whether local congregations may divert properties belonging to the denomination to their own use, in violation of the constitution of the United Presbyterian Church.

In declining to review the case, the Supreme Court appears to be standing by a long succession of precedents upholding the position of the United Presbyterian Church in the U.S.A. Since 1872, in *Watson v. Jones*, and as recently as 1969 in *Presbyterian Church v. Hull Church*, the high court has consistently ruled that denominations with hierarchical systems of church government may claim property rights over the claims of local congregations belonging to the larger bodies.

Legal precedents involving similar disputes between local Baptist congregations and their denominations are not as clear-cut, however, because of the variety of ways in which Baptist churches participate in the larger life of their denominations.

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BWA Granted "Consultative Status" by United Nations

4/23/74

NEW YORK (BP)--The Baptist World Alliance (BWA) has been accepted for "consultative status" by the United Nations Economic and Social Council.

Under this arrangement, provided for in article 71 of the U.S. charter, the United Nations and various non-governmental organizations may exchange information and views on matters of mutual interest.

The BWA is an international organization, with 95 affiliates (members) in 74 countries and dependencies. Its membership represents approximately 82.6 per cent of the Baptists in the world.

The U.S. admits an organization to consultative status only if it is international in character. Thus, individual Baptist conventions have not been eligible, although the three conventions in the United States have had "observers" accredited to the public relations office of the U.S. That relationship in no way compares to full-fledged consultative status.

Robert S. Denny, BWA general secretary with headquarters in Washington, said that the alliance does not plan on having a representative resident in the New York or Geneva areas.

"Our regional secretaries--Carl W. Tiller in North America and C. Ronald Goulding in Europe--will be responsible for maintaining contacts, even through their offices are in Washington and London, not New York and Geneva," Denny said. "On matters of major significance, our president, V. Carney Hargroves of Philadelphia, and I will be available of course to take part in such consultations as may be advisable."

Denny explained that "subjects of mutual concern" may include such things as relief, refugee resettlement, economic development program, human rights and the disposition of mandated and trust territories (in many of which there are Baptist churches).

The alliance at its congress in Tokyo, Japan in 1970, adopted resolutions on peace and other world problems which expressed support for the United Nations, but until this time it has had no channel for making views known to those in the U.N. structures.

The BWA staff introduced the idea of seeking consultative status during the organization's executive committee meeting in 1972. It was agreed to at the body's meeting in 1973, after the adoption of certain safeguards, instructing the officers and staff how to avoid embarrassment to Baptists in the course of the consultations.



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