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News Service of the Southern Baptist Convention

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July 11, 1980

80-113

Orthodox To Continue
Baptist Conversations

By C. B. Hastings

ATLANTA (BP)--The Greek Orthodox Church of the Americas is making a strong effort to open itself to the mainstream of American Christianity and will continue dialogue with Southern Baptists.

"We have broken away from the parochialism which we were forced into some 50 years ago, necessitated by the need to establish and balance our community identity," said Archbishop Iakovos, head of the Church in the Americas, at the 25th Biennial Clergy-Laity Congress held recently in Atlanta.

Speaking to the 525 official delegates representing 247 of the 535 parishes of the Archdiocese, the spiritual leader of the Greek Orthodox called for renewed concern for the Christian education of their youth, warned against inroads by "the so-called evangelicalism" and particularly by sectarians such as Mormons and Jehovahs' Witnesses.

At the same time, the congress voted without dissent the continuation of a second bilateral conversation with Southern Baptists, jointly sponsored with the Department of Interfaith Witness of the Southern Baptist Home Mission Board.

While the first conversation, hosted by the Greek Orthodox Archdiocese at Garrison, N.Y., in 1977, had seen progress in understanding, relations between the two denominations became strained a year ago after the appointment of a (Southern Baptist) missionary couple to "the 40,000 Greek Orthodox of Boston."

When asked by a layman from Tulsa, Okla., why relations with Southern Baptists were being continued, Robert Stephanopoulos, pastor from Cleveland and chairman of the Committee on Ecumenical Affairs, replied that both groups wanted to promote a healing of relations.

"We need to stay in dialogue with the largest Protestant denomination," Stephanopoulos said, pointing to a recent Gallup Poll that indicated "the more people understand the Orthodox the more they appreciate us."

The choice of Atlanta for the congress was especially significant. This year the Southeastern Diocese of the church will move the seat of Bishop John from Charlotte, N.C., to Atlanta. The congress also helped the Church of the Annunciation in Atlanta celebrate its 75th anniversary.

This was the first congress to meet under the terms of a new charter from the Ecumenical Patriarchate in Istanbul (Constantinople), under which all the bishops of the church in North and South America now function as full bishops. For the first 58 years of the Archdiocese in the Americas, all the bishops had functioned only as auxiliaries of the Archbishop, whose headquarters are in New York City.

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America has proved to be a unique experience for the Greek Orthodox, who established their first congregation in the U.S. in New Orleans in 1864. Coming from a country where church and state were united, they have experienced the pains of adjusting to the religious pluralism of this country. Many third and fourth generation young people are now calling for much more use of English in the "divine liturgy."

At the opening liturgy Archbishop Iakovos preached his sermon only in English, while, as customary, the liturgy was in Greek. The people, even the young, however, are still strongly committed to the preservation of their Greek customs and traditions. Much effort is made by most parishes to hold Greek language classes for children.

One evidence of the increasing stature of the Greek Orthodox Church in the U.S. is the recent awarding of one of the eight Freedom Awards to outstanding Americans by President Carter to Archbishop Iakovos, the only religious leader so honored.

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C.B. Hastings is assistant director of the Department of Interfaith Witness at the Southern Baptist Home Mission Board with responsibility for Roman Catholic and Orthodox.

Baptists Should Work
For Peace Says Wong

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TORONTO (BP)--In his final address as president of the Baptist World Alliance, Hong Kong architect David Y.K. Wong urged fellow Baptists "to work for justice, peace and reconciliation through Jesus Christ for all the peoples of the earth."

Wong, whose five-year term as president of the global Baptist organization ends this year, spoke before an audience of approximately 16,000 persons at the 14th Baptist World Congress in Toronto's Maple Leaf Gardens. The congress marks the 75th anniversary of the BWA.

Wong, the first Asian BWA president, reminded the audience of the "turbulence" and "political and socio-economic instability" that haunts many countries in the world. He called on Baptists to "remember the suffering people of the world--the hungry, the sick, the refugees, the oppressed and the underprivileged."

Wong, who has traveled to China four times in the past eight months, also gave several examples of the courage and endurance of Christian believers in China. He received applause after commenting that "the door to China was never closed at all; it could not have been closed because God was there all the time."

He also praised the BWA's work in worldwide relief efforts ranging from disaster relief projects to extensive immunization programs.

"What we have been able to do may seem small when compared with the overwhelming needs confronting us in the world," he said. "But we praise God for such opportunities to share his compassion, his grace, and his redeeming love."

William A. Jones, pastor of Bethany Baptist Church in Brooklyn, N.Y., and president of the Progressive National Baptist Convention, called for Christians to be honest with themselves and with God in their self-scrutiny and their appraisal of the human predicament. In his closing sermon, he warned Christians against "capitulating to culture," and "accommodating to the prevailing political arrangement."

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Baptist Wins
At Wimbledon

By Terry Barone

DALLAS (BP)--Anne Smith cherishes Psalms 27:1.

Unlike most people who display their favorite verse in a picture frame, Miss Smith frames "The Lord is my light and my salvation, whom shall I fear?" on her tennis racket--the one she used to win the women's doubles title at Wimbledon July 5.

The 21-year-old member of First Baptist Church, Dallas, teamed with Kathy Jordan of Pennsylvania to defeat Rosie Casals and Wendy Turnbull for the title.

"I really couldn't believe it," she said of her win at Wimbledon. "When you're out there, you really don't think about it being Wimbledon. You just have to think of it as another tournament."

After the tournament is over though "You can think, 'I won at Wimbledon, the grand slam of them all,'" she said.

The tanned, athletic young woman said winning the doubles was not as exciting as eliminating the top-seeded team of Martina Navratilova and Billie Jean King in the semifinals, a special treat because Billie Jean beat Miss Smith in second round singles play.

The confident Miss Smith said she didn't get nervous until the doubles awards ceremony when she had to walk to the service line at centre court and curtsy before receiving her trophy from the Duke and Duchess of Kent.

A Christian since age 10, the 5-foot-5 tennis champion said, "I realize God has given me the ability and talent to be a tennis player. I do my best on the court and I play to honor him."

The competitive Dallas native said: "I want to win. I hate to lose. I try to enjoy myself and do my best and I think that is all he (the Lord) expects of me. He loves me regardless of whether I win or lose."

"I think a lot of people think Christians are pansies," Miss Smith said. "But we're not." She feels her tennis is one way to show that a person can be a winner and a Christian.

She says she tries to please the Lord by the way she acts on and off the tennis court and she tries to share her testimony with others.

Miss Smith said she is not the type who could witness "from door-to-door," but says she does share Christ with people after becoming friends.

"To me, Christianity is something very personal. I want someone to know and like me enough so they will believe what I am saying to them when I witness to them," she said.

"The Lord is the strength of my life; of whom shall I be afraid," says the rest of Psalms 27:1, a verse she loves because her father shared it with her as a young girl.

Russian Baptists Must Resolve Own Dispute

TORONTO (BP)--The newly-elected general secretary of the Baptist World Alliance refused to take sides on the dispute between dissident Russian Baptists and the official government-recognized Baptist organization in the Soviet Union, saying both groups are partly right and that they must solve their own differences.

Gerhard Claas, 51, of Hamburg, Germany, new chief executive of the alliance composed of Baptist groups with 30 million members in 119 countries, urged Baptists around the world to pray that Baptists in the Soviet Union will be able to reconcile their differences.

Questions concerning the problems between the two Russian Baptist groups dominated the first news conference for Claas held just two hours after his election by 19,000 Baptists attending the 14th Baptist World Congress at Maple Leaf Gardens.

Expressing sorrow for the disputes between the Russian Baptists, Claas said they would be able to solve the problems only by prayer and discussion, not by confrontation and demonstrations.

Earlier during the congress, about 40 demonstrators had picketed Maple Leaf Gardens, carrying placards protesting the participation of Russian Baptists from the official All-Union Council of Evangelical Christians/Baptists. They claimed the church has been infiltrated by the Soviet secret police.

Georgi Vins, Reform Baptist leader who was released from a Russian prison in April 1979 and exiled to the United States along with four other Soviet dissidents, planned a protest meeting called the "Voice of the Persecuted Church" at the Harbour Castle Hilton Convention Center.

In the news conference for Claas, another Russian Baptist pastor, Paul Voronreff, asked why Vins and Gennadi Kryuchkov, Reform Baptist president hiding somewhere in Russia, had not been invited to speak to the 19,000 Baptists registered for the Congress.

Robert Denny, retiring general secretary of the Alliance who made preparations for the congress, responded that both Vins and Kryuchkov had been invited as fraternal delegates to attend the congress, but Vins had declined.

Voronreff, arguing with Denny, charged that Vins felt he was being slighted and insulted by not being asked to be a major speaker. None of the other Russian Baptists, however, are invited speakers to the congress.

Claas explained that there are two groups of Baptists in the Soviet Union, the officially recognized group which quietly complies with most (but not all) of the government regulations and restrictions, and the Reform Baptists represented by Vins and Kryuchkov who argued that all government restrictions on the church are wrong and must be openly challenged, disobeyed and changed by confrontation tactics.

Claas said he refused to judge which group was right or wrong. Only the official government-recognized group is a member body of the Baptist World Alliance, but Claas said the Reform Baptist group would be welcome to join the Alliance as soon as the two groups are reconciled. The Reform group has refused to seek membership in the Alliance as long as the official Baptist group is a member.

In response to another question, Claas urged Baptists around the world to become peace-makers and work for world disarmament.

Claas encouraged both U.S. President Jimmy Carter and Soviet Presidium Chairman Leonid Brezhnev to resume with new intensity disarmament discussions and SALT II negotiations, and to avoid resumption of the cold war as they seek peaceful co-existence.

Outlining his hopes and dreams for the Baptist World Alliance, Claas called for a new partnership between Baptists in the western world who have for too long dominated the Alliance, and smaller Baptist bodies in the rest of the world.

He said he sensed a new change of attitude among Baptists in the United States and Canada, who no longer look at smaller Baptist bodies in other parts of the world as "little brothers and sisters," but rather as equal partners in a worldwide challenge.

Asked if world Baptists would become part of an ecumenical movement toward one world church, Claas replied that Baptists should not lose their distinctive identity, but rather should walk hand in hand with other Christians as they work toward common goals.

Claas, a graduate of the International Baptist Seminary in Ruschlikon, Switzerland, was a pastor, youth secretary and general secretary of the German Baptist Union before he joined the staff of the Baptist World Alliance as its secretary for Europe.

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BWA Women Seek
Tolbert's Release

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7/11/80

TORONTO (BP)--Baptist women from around the world passed a resolution urging government officials in Liberia to free the widow of William O. Tolbert, president of Liberia, who was assassinated in a recent military coup.

Mrs. Victoria Tolbert, a member of the executive committee of the women's department of the Baptist World Alliance, is incarcerated in Liberia.

Earlier in the day her husband, a former BWA president and also a Baptist pastor in Liberia, was honored during a memorial service at the 14th Baptist World Congress at Toronto's Maple Leaf Gardens. He was one of eight BWA leaders who have died since the last meeting of the Baptist World Congress in 1975 in Stockholm.

The resolution noted that Mrs. Tolbert is "known and appreciated around the world as a leader among Baptist women" and "is sorely missed because her captors have not permitted her to come to or to communicate with her sisters in Christ at this meeting."

Recently the Baptist World Alliance, in a communique from its Washington, D.C., headquarters to Master Sgt. Samuel Doe in Monrovia, offered to pay travel expenses of Mrs. Tolbert to a country of her choosing.

Doe, who led the coup against Tolbert, has not responded.

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