

Associated Baptist Press

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Baptist group calls for justice in wake of Chiapas massacre

LAKE JUNALUSKA, N.C. (ABP) -- Directors of the Baptist Peace Fellowship of North America have called on Mexican President Ernesto Zedillo to "bring to justice" paramilitary soldiers responsible for the recent massacre of 45 Indians in the southeastern state of Chiapas.

A statement released Jan. 7 also called on Zedillo to disarm paramilitary groups and resume peace talks with Zapatista rebels and encouraged participants in earlier ecumenical peace dialogues not to be deterred by the new outbreak of violence.

Pro-government gunmen killed 45 villagers at Acteal in the state of Chiapas in late December, the latest outbreak in paramilitary clashes that have killed at least 150 people in Chiapas since 1995. Most peasants there support the anti-government Zapatista National Liberation Army.

The Baptist Peace Fellowship, a network linking Baptists involved in peace and justice issues in North America, co-sponsored two dialogues in 1997 between evangelical and Catholic leaders at San Cristobal de las Casas, the cultural center of Chiapas. In addition to violent political turmoil, conflict has long existed between a majority Catholic population and evangelical minority in one of Mexico's poorest regions.

"We realize that northern Chiapas is a region plagued with many social and political injustices, with conflicts which are multi-dimensional and complex to resolve," the statement said. "However, we are united in our commitment to remain with those who are taking great risks to bring hope to those caught in the crossfire of despair."

"As partners in this process," the group's leaders pledged, "we will do our part to encourage and support those who are implementing and facilitating this important ministry of reconciliation."

The statement called on the group's "greater constituency" to appeal to Mexico's president and other political leaders to "bring justice to those responsible for this massacre and to disarm such paramilitary groups operating independently of Mexican law."

It also called on Mexico's government to "return to the peace talks with the Zapatista movement so that a long-term peaceful solution to the conflicts in Chiapas may be accomplished."

In addition to the statement, the board sent a letter to the Mexican president urging free access by human-rights groups and the world media to ensure that those responsible for the massacre are brought to justice, to repair homes and the village of those affected by the killings and to fulfill the 1996 San Andres Accords and other agreements respecting the rights of indigenous peoples.

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-- By ABP staff

Baptists in Cuba may now receive direct aid, BWA official reports

McLEAN, Va. (ABP) -- Baptists in the United States and elsewhere will be able to send humanitarian aid directly to Baptist conventions in Cuba, rather than through an intermediary, reported an international Baptist official returning from a December visit in Havana.

During a Dec. 18-22 visit to Cuba, Paul Montacute, director of Baptist World Aid, reportedly met with Ministry of Religions official Silverio Platero to discuss needs of Baptist churches and opportunities for help from BWAid, relief arm of the McLean, Va.,-based Baptist World Alliance.

After much discussion, according to a BWA report, Platero gave BWAid permission to send medicines and milk to the Baptist conventions and unions in Cuba. Medicines will still have to be distributed in conjunction with Cuba's Ministry of Health.

Previously, all aid to Baptists was channeled through Cuba's Ecumenical Council, which is closely linked with the Castro government.

Baptist leaders in Cuba have reported problems in obtaining permission to build or renovate churches. They also report other needs, especially for powdered milk and medicines.

Montacute said he promised leaders of one Baptist group he would immediately seek permission from the United States government to ship a container of supplies.

In giving permission to allow humanitarian aid, Platero emphasized that no Bibles or other religious books should be included in the shipments, according to a BWA news release. Shipments of Bibles and books are classified under a different category than humanitarian aid.

Platero reportedly assured Montacute, however, that Baptists could carry in "mini-libraries" for students at a Baptist seminary.

Montacute said he also visited Cuban churches as they prepared for the first public celebrations of Christmas in 30 years. "In each of the churches I visited, there was great anticipation for Christmas," Montacute said. "All were hoping that a Christmas Day holiday was now back for good."

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-- By ABP staff

German Baptists locate seminary in Nazi, Soviet 'forbidden zone'

By Robert O'Brien

ELSTAL, Germany (ABP) -- German Baptists recently celebrated completion of a new seminary built in a former military "forbidden zone" dominated by Hitler's Third Reich during World War II and for decades later by Soviet troops.

German Baptists celebrated in November the completion of a 13-acre seminary complex in the village of Elstal, near West Berlin. Elstal Education Center merges several German Baptist institutions.

North Carolina Baptist Men and the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship coordinated the help of more than 300 construction volunteers from the United States. Another 300 volunteers from Eastern Europe were coordinated by German Baptists.

Adolph Hitler first developed the property as housing for the 1936 Olympic Games. Officers of the USSR military, which circled West Berlin with troops during the Cold War, used it as late as 1994.

Elstal Education Center "marks a new beginning for German Baptist theological training and the end of a key factor in German Baptist history," said Jim Smith, CBF liaison to Europe.

The center combines a German Baptist seminary in Hamburg which has educated pastors since 1880, a Bible school, a seminary for youth workers and institutes for laity and pastoral care.

Smith said development of the site, secluded by years of military use, caused "a constant stream of first-time events for building permits and logistical details" in the emerging state of Brandenburg, which surrounds the city-state of Berlin.

Three years passed from signing of the purchase agreement in 1994 till completion. Actual construction took one year, despite delays from 30 days of harsh winter conditions and a six-week strike by construction workers.

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Optimism taking over at Central Seminary

By Sarah Zimmerman

KANSAS CITY, Kan. (ABP) -- Five years ago, Central Baptist Theological Seminary faced an uncertain future. Today, enrollment is up, faculty positions are staffed, buildings are being renovated and a renewed sense of optimism is taking hold.

"This is a major rebirth, almost a resurrection," observed Molly Marshall, professor of theology and spiritual formation at the seminary in Kansas City, Kan.

Marshall and others credit the 1993 election of Central President Tom Clifton as a pivotal point in the school's turnaround.

Founded in 1901, the seminary originally served both Northern and Southern Baptists. It grew to more than 400 students before the 1950s. Then the Southern Baptist Convention, which was rapidly expanding into the north, voted to no longer support schools for which it didn't elect trustees.

After a compromise failed, the school aligned exclusively with what is now known as the American Baptist Churches, U.S.A. Southern Baptists opened Midwestern Baptist Theological Seminary in neighboring Kansas City, Mo., in 1958.

As competition grew for students from the Midwest, enrollment at Central began to decline. By 1993, only 85 students were on campus and buildings were in desperate need of repair.

Clifton, who came to the seminary following 20 years in local-church ministry, immediately rallied American Baptists to increase financial support, volunteer efforts and publicity. He also led a campaign to change the make-up of the school's board of directors to 51 percent American Baptists and 49 percent representing "the wider Christian family."

He also enlisted support from the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship, which has donated funds, resources and volunteer hours, and filled vacancies with faculty and staff displaced from Southern Baptist schools by conservatives.

Among new teachers is Marshall, who was a popular professor at Southern Baptist Theological Seminary before leaving under pressure in 1994. Faculty members James Hines, David May and Larry McKinney all formerly taught at Midwestern Seminary.

In 1993 Central's board changed its ministry statement to identify the school as "affiliated with American Baptist churches, and in full support of the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship." The Atlanta-based Fellowship was formed in 1991 by moderate Southern Baptists displeased with the Southern Baptist Convention's conservative leadership.

For Clifton, who was raised in Missouri as a Southern Baptist before becoming an American Baptist pastor in New York, "it was natural to reconnect" with disenfranchised Southern Baptists in the Fellowship, he said.

Some American Baptist leaders were hesitant about the shift of control. Some, Clifton said, chose to give him the benefit of the doubt. "I was absolutely convinced that Central could not rely on donors and students from a narrow base," Clifton said.

Last fall Central had 135 students, double the number from three years ago. Just over half were Baptists. Current students represent 22 denominations. Forty percent are female and nearly one fourth are non-Anglo.

Such growth, and positive feelings about new faculty and staff, have persuaded even the doubters. "In the last six months, I've heard nothing of resistance to the direction the seminary has taken," Clifton said.

Dub Steincross, pastor of Second Baptist Church in Liberty, Mo., was one of the early non-American-Baptist trustees. "I like the way Dr. Clifton has put it: it's a Baptist family reunion," said Steincross, who joined Central's board of directors in 1995. "The school is careful to keep its American Baptist history and heritage, but it's gladly opened its arms to Cooperative Baptist Fellowship and National Baptists."

At some risk, Central "borrowed from itself" to hire new faculty and improve facilities, said Larry McKinney, director of development and operations. "We really had to take some leaps of faith, but it's bearing fruit."

Volunteers from both CBF and American Baptist networks have donated about \$500,000 worth of labor to help renovate campus buildings, McKinney said. In addition to volunteers, the Fellowship also provides student scholarships.

Marshall, who grew up in Oklahoma and attended a Southern Baptist college and seminary, said she enjoys a smaller campus, where she can be attentive to specific needs and flexible about requirements. She also said she likes being in a setting where meals, prayers and worship have an ecumenical flavor.

"We have a great collegiality among students, faculty, administration and staff," she said. "We do community well. We prize community with all its diversity."

The school offers master's degrees in theology and religious education, as well as a diploma in theology. It is also the national headquarters for Baptist Women in Ministry, which used to be in Louisville, Ky.

Kerry Campbell, a master-of-divinity student from Overland Park, Kan., said she chose Central because of the school's "openness to theological inquiry and women in ministry."

Though Central is often contrasted to Midwestern, which has turned more conservative since the election of Mark Coppenger as president in 1995, Clifton said he does not view the neighboring seminary as a competitor.

"We don't feel we're in competition," Clifton said. "We're committed to women in ministry. They're not. We're ecumenical. They're not. We're not after the same mission."