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Group calls world's Baptists to combat racism, ethnic strife

By Bob Allen

ATLANTA (ABP) -- Meeting amid symbols of America's struggle for civil rights, an international gathering of Baptists issued a call for churches to combat racism and ethnic strife worldwide.

Delegates from 30 countries attended an International Summit of Baptists Against Racism, held Jan. 8-11 in Atlanta. It was sponsored by the Baptist World Alliance, a worldwide fellowship of Baptist unions and conventions based in Washington.

The summit was held at the historic Ebenezer Baptist Church, home church of civil-rights figure Martin Luther King Jr., with sessions also at the nearby Wheat Street Baptist Church, King's Alma mater Morehouse College and the Carter Presidential Center, where participants were greeted by former President Jimmy Carter.

Delegates drafted and affirmed a lengthy statement declaring a "decade to promote racial justice" beginning in 2000 and urging BWA member unions to promote efforts to eradicate racism and fight against ethnic conflict worldwide.

The "Atlanta Covenant" calls on Baptists to become "agents of reconciliation" and work for integrated worship, holistic evangelism, the elimination of unfair trade and protection of the rights of aboriginal and tribal peoples. It also affirms the various cultural expressions of Christianity and calls on churches to repent for complicity in racism and ethnic conflict.

A resolutions section affirms racial justice "as an integral part" of the gospel, promotes economic development as a means of achieving racial justice and cautions against use of only religious images that portray Jesus as a white man.

"We recognize that the almost exclusive use of white images of Jesus has limited our understanding of and witnessing to the incarnation," the declaration says. It recommends that Baptist publishing houses "use multi-racial images and idioms throughout their worship and educational materials" and urges churches of different races and ethnic groups to celebrate significant events and communion together.

Another resolution rejects paternalism by international missionaries toward indigenous peoples.

"We note with appreciation the rich heritage of Baptist commitment to international mission," the covenant resolution states. "Notwithstanding the noble intentions, sincere motives and significant contributions in the areas of education, health and church planting; we note that racism has tainted these efforts, and expressed itself in the forms of paternalism, and the manipulation of resources has caused much pain and frustration."

The summit asked that mission agencies "intentionally include the recipients of the gospel in the development of strategies, expenditure of resources, approval of mission personnel and development of policies."

The statement also calls for education and increased financial support for reconciliation efforts between races and ethnic groups.

Denton Lotz, the alliance's general secretary, said there are 100 million Baptists who live and minister in 200 countries around the world, including many nations suffering from conflict among races and ethnic groups.

"All over the world we have ethnic conflict and racism, and we said as Baptists we want to make a statement to the world," Lotz said.

Following the four-day summit meeting, some delegates stayed on an extra day for an optional bus tour of historic sites in Selma and Birmingham, Ala., which were significant in the civil rights movement in the United States in the 1960s.

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Speakers at Atlanta conference urge Baptists to combat racism

By Bob Allen

ATLANTA (ABP) -- While few churches today are formally segregated, most Americans still choose to worship with people of their own race and class for reasons of comfort and "aloofness," former President Jimmy Carter told an international Baptist gathering in Atlanta.

Carter, a lifelong Southern Baptist who teaches a famous Sunday school class at Maranatha Baptist Church in Plains, Ga., suggested fellow Baptists further integrate their worship services by establishing church partnerships across ethnic and racial lines.

Carter made brief remarks Jan. 11 at the Carter Presidential Center during a session of an International Summit of Baptists Against Racism before departing to attend the inauguration of Georgia's new governor, Roy Barnes.

Carter said America has not realized the dream of racial equality he articulated in the speech he delivered at his own inauguration as governor of Georgia in 1971.

While official segregation has ended, "there is still too much separation of the races," Carter said. He added there also has not been "adequate compensation or corrective action because of years of slavery and legal discrimination against" African Americans.

Carter described Christian churches in the South as "the last rampart of segregation," even though few white churches today still have policies against accepting black members that were once the norm in Baptist churches in parts of the South.

"There is some remaining discrimination against others: 'We don't want you in our church,' but I would say that is a minor factor these days," Carter said. "I'd say a major factor is the natural human inclination to build communities that are very small."

People tend to "cocoon" in churches with people "who look like us" and "don't put a burden of Christian action on us," Carter said. "We don't want the responsibility of learning about people who put a burden of responsibility on us."

Despite legitimate differences in church culture and customs, staying in their comfort zones has hindered efforts by American churches to transcend racism, Carter said. "We Christians are guilty of restricting our communities too small," he said.

Carter urged congregations to take initiative to "form a partnership with a nearby church that has a different racial and ethnic composition."

He said such a relationship can start with something as simple as a joint Easter service, with an African-American pastor preaching to both congregations one year and a white pastor the next.

Even that limited interaction could "stretch our hearts and stretch our minds and reach out to other Christians in a way that would open a wellspring of our understanding of worshiping Jesus Christ," Carter said.

Delegates from 30 countries attended the Jan. 8-11 summit of Baptists against racism and ethnic conflict. It was sponsored by the Baptist World Alliance, a worldwide fellowship of Baptist unions and conventions based in Washington.

At another session, held at a chapel at Morehouse College named after its most famous alumnus, Martin Luther King Jr., the slain civil-rights leader's widow also gave greetings to summit delegates.

"My husband once said 11 a.m. Sunday morning is the most segregated hour in America," said Coretta Scott King. "Though this is still largely true," King said she has "been encouraged" to see more integration of blacks and whites in numerous churches she has visited over the years.

She also acknowledged a Southern Baptist Convention statement three years ago apologizing for the denomination's "complicity in and indifference to racism."

Another speaker at the conference, however, took a dimmer view of the progress made in relations between whites and blacks in Baptist churches in America.

C.T. Vivian, a leader in the civil rights movement, said racism is deeply ingrained in America's faith structures. "If you're black in the United States, you become a Christian in spite of Christianity, not because of it," said Vivian, a former Nashville, Tenn., pastor who is now board chairman for the Atlanta-based Center for Democratic Renewal.

"In many ways the civil-rights movement was a confrontation between two Baptist groups," Vivian said. While Martin Luther King and other civil-rights leaders were "almost exclusively Baptists," opposition to the movement centered in white Baptist churches, because the South is largely Baptist, he said.

Vivian said "it is interesting" that the Southern Baptist Convention waited until 138 years after the civil war to apologize for slavery. "Is that how long it takes to overcome racism?" he asked.

"The rest of the Christian world" has already stepped in to show support for black Baptists, he continued. "Why is it that the Baptists of the world have just become serious enough to hold a world conference on racism?"

One reason, Vivian said, is because churches have "never dealt with the depth of that sin."

"Racism destroys more people in more places of the world than any other single factor," he said, "and has been doing it longer, does it both psychologically and physically, and we have no reason to believe it will stop, because even within the value-producing arenas it goes on its merry way."

"Secondly, no person of color under racism will ever know what they might have been, might have done or become for themselves, for their family, for their nation, for their faith," he said.

"Racism creates an unfair advantage for some and an unfair disadvantage for others," he said. "We have no values that are not daily compromised by racism."

White people around the world generally assume they are superior because of their color, Vivian said. People disputing that argument typically point to an example of a person of color who is highly respected, he continued, adding, "To talk about exceptions to the rule is dishonest."

Vivian said after sending missionaries to Africa for centuries, European and American Christians now need to receive black missionaries to "help them face their most atrocious sin."

"There is little reason to believe that the white church, dominated by a racist culture, can save themselves," he said.

Racism is now the greatest barrier to missionary work in a world that is three fourths "dark to black," Vivian said, identifying the "symbol of the white Jesus" as both a symptom and cause of racism.

Noting that Jesus was from the Middle East and undoubtedly had dark skin, Vivian observed: "We're so racist we can't even tell the truth about God. We have to make him white to even live with him. Why can't the church stand to have God as anything else than white?"

Vivian said while seeing Jesus as a person of color would mean a lot to blacks, it raises a serious question: "Could white people remain Christian if they had to bow down to a black Jesus?"

Vivian said neither white nor black Christians really believe that someone can go to hell because of racism. "Do you believe racism will send you to hell? No, but sex will."

"Neither of us believe that God would actually say to white people, 'Get thee behind me, I never knew thee,'" Vivian said.

In another major address, Otis Moss, pastor of Olivet Institutional Baptist Church in Cleveland, said reconciliation needs to extend to an "unreconciled moment" going on in the halls of Congress. When conservatives say the impeachment of President Bill Clinton is not about sex, "that's a half truth," he said.

"Well, it is not about sex," Moss added. "That's just a convenient tool to inflict a tragic, brutal and hateful blow against the president, his public policy and a program."

"It is not just about the impeaching of Bill Clinton," Moss said, but "the impeaching of a legacy" including Martin Luther King and the civil-rights movement which Clinton affirms.

"They demand buckets of blood while dispensing barrels of mud in the name of the rule of law," Moss said. "They're right. It's not about sex. It's not about perjury. It's about power and control."

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Seminary Foundation to transfer endowments to CBF Foundation

By Sarah Zimmerman

ATLANTA (ABP) -- A foundation established to support the International Baptist Theological Seminary in Prague is closing its doors after six years but continuing to urge financial support of theological education in Europe.

With donors' approval, the foundation's endowments of \$542,000 will be transferred to the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship Foundation by Feb. 28.

The Baptist Theological Seminary International Development Foundation was created in 1992, said Victor Varner, foundation president. The seminary was then in Ruschlikon, Switzerland but later relocated to the Czech Republic.

In 1997 the European Baptist Federation, which owns the seminary, changed the school's focus from a traditional seminary with bachelor and graduate programs to a post-graduate institution to work with Europe's national Baptist seminaries. Today, the International Baptist Theological Seminary is cooperating with the national schools to develop initial ministerial degree programs.

In response, the foundation began encouraging donors to contribute to 11 schools from Estonia to Jordan in addition to the International Baptist Theological Seminary, Varner said.

Donors, however, took a "wait and see" approach to the schools' future, and foundation gifts decreased significantly, Varner said. Consequently, foundation directors voted to close the foundation office by Feb. 28. Varner plans to retire.

"This action in no way minimizes the crucial need for financial support of theological education in Central and Eastern Europe and the Middle East," Varner said. "Without the continued support of U.S. friends, these institutions will be unable to meet the demand for ministerial training and preparation, and in some cases, be unable to survive."

The seminary foundation's endowment funds will be transferred to the CBF Foundation unless donors direct the money to be managed by another organization, Varner said.

"We will honor the donors' wishes and distribute the endowment revenues as they are earmarked," said Ruben Swint, president of the CBF Foundation. "We are the facilitators of the donors' desires." Donors may continue to designate their contributions to specific schools through CBF.

"This gives us another networking opportunity with the donors and the respective schools," Swint said. "We're grateful for the trust this action implies." The CBF Foundation currently has about \$1 million in endowments and manages about \$10 million in reserve funds.

The International Baptist Theological Seminary opened in 1949 as a project of the Southern Baptist Foreign Mission Board (now International Mission Board). The property was transferred to the European Baptist Federation in 1989, and FMB trustees quit funding the institution in 1991.

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North Carolina CBF names first full-time coordinator

ATLANTA (ABP) -- Bob Patterson will begin work Feb. 1 as the first full-time coordinator of Cooperative Baptist Fellowship of North Carolina.

The 55-year-old layman worked for the U.S. Department of Defense for 23 years. When he felt a call to ministry in 1995, he left his job to attend Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary in Fort Worth, Texas. There he joined Broadway Baptist Church and became familiar with the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship.

Patterson's undergraduate degree is in Russian and German languages from Murray State University in Kentucky. His lay church leadership positions have included teaching Sunday school and serving on long range planning, personnel and pastor search committees.

A native of Poplar Bluff, Mo., Patterson and his wife, Nancy, have two daughters and five grandchildren.

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-- By Sarah Zimmerman

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