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SBC, CBF differences cloud BWA General Council meeting

By Trennis Henderson

SEVILLE, Spain (ABP) -- The 11-year conflict between the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship and the Southern Baptist Convention reached the international stage last week in Seville, Spain.

Evaluating CBF's application for membership in the Baptist World Alliance, the BWA's membership committee issued a three-page report outlining the criteria for CBF to be recommended next year for BWA membership. Several members of the SBC delegation responded by voting against receiving the committee's report.

Despite SBC leaders' opposition, the 290-member BWA General Council voted overwhelmingly to receive the committee report. The action came during the BWA's annual General Council meeting July 9-13 in Seville.

Among the principal players in the unfolding drama, BWA is the international umbrella organization of Baptists. Founded in 1905, it represents more than 200 Baptist unions and conventions that include approximately 44.5 million baptized believers and 110 million worshippers in 193,000 Baptist churches.

The SBC, one of BWA's founding members, is the group's largest member body with 16 million church members. It also funds approximately 20 percent of BWA's \$2.1 million annual budget.

The CBF was established in 1991 by Southern Baptist moderates in response to conservative control of the SBC. CBF leaders repeatedly have refused to identify the organization as a separate Baptist convention.

The CBF-SBC debate overshadowed other actions at the five-day BWA meeting, including resolutions addressing such issues as terrorism, violence in the Middle East and evangelism. BWA President Billy Kim of Korea, completing the second year of his five-year term, even offered to resign if he could not help resolve the Southern Baptist stalemate in the coming year.

CBF officials first applied for BWA membership a year ago. The membership committee deferred action on the request at that time, citing concerns about the CBF's relationship with the SBC as well as whether CBF could be identified as a separate Baptist entity.

CBF leaders reapplied this year with additional supporting documentation, gaining a favorable hearing from the 20-member committee.

"All conversations between the CBF and the membership committee have been warm and favorable and we have been left with very positive views of the CBF as an organization," the report states.

While "we recognize the independent legal status of the CBF as an organization," the committee said it continued to study the issue of CBF's separate identity "given the overlapping constituencies between their fellowship and that of the SBC."

The report notes the committee's other primary concern "is the public nature of the deep differences which still mark the relationship between the CBF and the SBC."

Citing key objectives in the BWA constitution "to promote understanding and cooperation among Baptists" and "to act as an agency of reconciliation," the report emphasized that BWA's failure to address those issues would "bring into question the integrity of the BWA."

The committee added, however, that it believes CBF's application can be recommended to the General Council next year if the CBF will "affirm publicly . that they have separated themselves from the structures and organization of the SBC, and have a distinctly diverse understanding to the SBC of what it means to be an organized body of Baptist churches and individuals in covenant relationship."

The committee also called on Kim and BWA General Secretary Denton Lotz "to work with others toward enabling better understanding and respect between the CBF and the SBC."

Membership committee chairman Ian Hawley of Australia told General Council members, "We are dealing here with issues of great pain, hurt and sorrow for many people."

Noting that the committee "has sensed God's guidance in the process through which we have passed," he added, "We ask for your trust and acceptance of this report."

Morris Chapman, president of the SBC Executive Committee, responded by noting that Southern Baptist leaders "disagree with some of the presuppositions that undergird the process being recommended by the committee."

CBF Coordinator Daniel Vestal expressed appreciation for the committee's consideration of CBF's application.

"We want to pledge to you our willingness to cooperate in all ways to fulfill the requests of the committee," Vestal said. "We deeply desire to be a full participating member of this world body in serving God and proclaiming the gospel of Jesus Christ."

Chapman said in an interview that his concerns include the committee's view of CBF's organizational status.

"I differed with the statement by the committee that the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship had already with great clarity expressed its separation from the Southern Baptist Convention," he said. "That just has not happened."

He also expressed concern that the committee rejected SBC leaders' request that the committee's work not be made public until the group had reached its final recommendation on the issue.

Hawley said one reason the committee released a report this year was because of widespread misinterpretations about last year's decision to defer action.

"There were wrong motives given for our decision," he explained. "We wanted to give people the idea of our thinking. . We're trying to fulfill not just the legal requirements of the constitution but the spirit."

In a statement issued to Baptist Press, Chapman labeled the committee's decision a "swift and needless action." He said the SBC's "valued relationship" with the BWA "may have been damaged beyond repair."

While the CBF "has every right to make application" for BWA membership, Chapman added, "I feel the process has become flawed."

The SBC "historically has existed alongside Baptists who have differences, but this is totally different," Chapman emphasized. "It does not seem like there is a closing of a gap but a widening" between the SBC and CBF.

Despite Chapman's concerns, Vestal expressed hope for a positive outcome. "I would hope that the SBC would accept us as brothers and sisters in Christ," he said. "We accept them as brothers and sisters in Christ and desire fellowship, partnership and serving God together in the Baptist World Alliance."

Citing the committee's criteria for membership, Vestal said, "They've asked us to declare ourselves as a Baptist body that is not an integral part of the Southern Baptist Convention. That's not a problem because we're not and we feel like we haven't been since the beginning."

While the CBF Coordinating Council, the group's governing body, will need to take formal action on the issue, Vestal added, "I'm comfortable that the Coordinating Council will draft a document that will satisfy the requests of the membership committee."

Hawley said the committee is "desperate to see brothers in Christ able to coexist with one another."

"If we are brothers and sisters in Jesus, we ought to be able to accept one another and accept differences," he emphasized. "We're not asking for reconciliation but for respect and understanding and agreeing to disagree on some of the big issues."

Prior to the vote to receive the report, BWA President Kim told council members, "I believe we are moving in a right direction but we don't want to hurry. We need to have a healing of some of those wounds."

"My deep concern is I don't want to lose anyone or put out anyone," he added. "We need some time to work. Receive this report and let us work with both the Southern Baptist Convention and the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship."

During the council's closing session, Kim again addressed the issue.

"I leave this General Council with a heavy heart," he said. "I want to see peacemaking between the SBC and CBF."

Describing the SBC as "our big brother" among global Baptists, he noted, "I love the SBC. I do not want them to leave. . We hope for one big step of reconciliation."

Announcing that he will resign the BWA presidency "if things do not resolve," Kim said BWA leaders will seek to work with both sides in the coming year to achieve a satisfactory solution.

"If we do our part, God will do His part," he affirmed. "There are a lot of wounded soldiers but God has healing power."

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BWA gathering undergirds Baptist witness in Spain

By Trennis Henderson

SEVILLE, Spain (ABP) -- A Korean children's choir singing in English at a Spanish church reflected the international flavor of last week's Baptist World Alliance General Council meeting.

The "Evening with Spanish Baptists" was held July 12 at the 140-member Evangelical Baptist Church of Seville, the only Baptist congregation in a city of 700,000 people.

The annual General Council meeting attracted more than 540 participants from 65 countries, making it the BWA's largest council event. The international Baptist group also hosts a Baptist World Congress every five years that attracts several thousand participants.

Last week's meeting initially was scheduled for Beirut, Lebanon, but was switched to Western Europe after concern about travel to the Middle East in the wake of Sept. 11.

"It's a miracle tonight that we are gathered here in the name of Jesus," said Manuel Sarrias, general secretary of the Spanish Evangelical Baptist Union.

Describing Spain as a mission field with only 0.25 percent of the population identified as evangelical believers, Sarrias said, "We are here where God has placed us. We want to be faithful to our Baptist principles."

During the July 9-13 General Council meeting, members adopted resolutions on terrorism and violence in the Middle East.

Denouncing "the use of violence in the name of God and the service of religion," the resolution on terrorism called on BWA member bodies "to reaffirm the conviction that Christ's kingdom will be served only by means consistent with the Prince of Peace." It also affirmed BWA's "willingness to engage in debate and conversation with other religions and ideologies to resolve areas of tension."

The resolution on the Middle East deplored the continuing violence and called on all Baptists to "pray for reconciliation among the peoples of the Middle East." It also urged all nations to "work diligently for the positive resolution of this regional conflict" and called on the involved parties "to end the violence and to negotiate a lasting peace in the spirit of forgiveness and grace."

Other resolutions addressed such issues as evangelism, the worth of children and the need for increased financial support of BWA by its member bodies.

Denton Lotz, BWA general secretary, said a key focus of the organization is to "defend the rights and freedom of our suffering brothers and sisters" around the world.

He said the weeklong meeting, which included reports from Baptist work in nations throughout the world, was a reminder that "Baptists around the world want to be together and there is strength in unity."

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-- Trennis Henderson is editor of the Kentucky Baptist Western Recorder

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