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Where in the world were the Baptists?

Peter BENTLEY was at the Baptist World Congress, and reports:

A major religious event occurred in January 2000 in Melbourne, but received very little coverage in the secular or religious media. It was a gathering of the representatives of one of the world's Christian communions - the Baptists - for their 18th Baptist World Congress.

The congress is the official meeting of the global fellowship of Baptists known as the Baptist World Alliance. The Baptist Union of Australia is a member body of the Alliance, and most Baptist Churches in Australia are union churches. There are also a number of independent Baptist churches and groups. The Alliance was formed in London in 1905, and it is appropriate that London has been chosen as the location for the Centenary Congress in 2005.

Official membership of the Baptist World Alliance for 1998&endash;99 totalled nearly 43 million, spread among 160,000 churches. The bulk of the membership is in the North American continent (primarily the USA), with just over 33 million members and nearly 100,000 churches. The continents of Asia and Africa have about three and a half million members each.

The largest Convention or Union (local churches belonging to a particular Baptist body in a country) is the well-known

Southern Baptist Convention, with over 15 million members.

The Baptist Union of Australia has about 66,000 members and perhaps 100,000 affiliates overall.

The Alliance estimates that the overall Baptist affiliation of all its churches would be around 100 million when adherents and non-member attenders are taken into account.

For the World Congress around 7,000 Baptist representatives gathered, with the largest group at any one time from Australia (particularly for special events). The next largest group came from the USA, particularly the African American Baptist churches.

I was surprised that there were not more from the southern Baptist churches, but Australia is perhaps a long way for them to come!

A Congress is primarily a gathering for fellowship and inspiration.

Speakers from different Baptist traditions and countries preached and different groups led worship. Australia was well represented by Rev Tim Costello, the current President of the Baptist Union of Australia. The closing night speaker was Anne Graham Lotz, daughter of Billy Graham, perhaps the best known Baptist of the 20th Century.

Apart from gatherings for men, women, pastors and youth, there was also a formal time of reporting from the Alliance. The state of the Alliance was presented, as well as many other short overviews and introductions to the Alliance and member churches.

The General-Secretary is Dr Denton Lotz, who focussed on what makes Baptists distinctive, including the idea of the "Believers church: the priesthood of all believers", or as it was put, Baptists do not have "men in long robes telling us what to do".

This was a time to reinforce to the whole Baptist community

that the Baptist organisational structure encourages inter-dependence for united purposes and common goals, rather than dependence on an organisational structure which dictates to the local church what to do.

This was a common theme throughout the Congress, broadly raised as local freedom for local conventions or unions and local churches.

However, along with this stress that their churches are not compelled by hierarchical government, there was the recognition that too much stress on individual freedom and individual conscience for local churches can lead to rampant individualism which still leads in Baptist circles to frequent division and schism.

It would appear that a purpose of the World Alliance is to point Baptists to a broader base, a focus as part of a wider family, so that individualism can be tempered by global identity.

While some policy matters are brought to the Congress in the form of resolutions, there is no debate. They are presented and accepted as part of the process of being together in the Congress meeting.

Resolutions do not address any controversial aspects of current theology, but rather focus on Baptist fundamentals and issues of human rights, social justice and liberty.

One strong theme running through the congress was Baptist identity, as Baptists themselves begin to be affected by changing denominational patterns (eg, the Community churches, rather than Baptist Churches). There was quite a lively debate about the nature of, or even existence of, post-denominationalism in the Heritage Sessions.

It was stimulating to learn about the different emphases of Baptist traditions, and different regional emphases. For example, some Baptist churches withdraw from ecumenical

activity, particularly if Catholics are involved (this has happened in Australia), but there were also reports of strong ecumenical endeavours in England and parts of Europe. Another strong theme was Baptist unity. The congress consistently brought forward speakers who focussed on the positive elements of being together and common points for being Baptist: Mission (a broad context), concern for Human Rights and Religious Liberty or Freedom (very much stemming from Baptist heritage and experience), Evangelism and Witness focussed on Jesus Christ.

Controversy is clearly something that is avoided at the World meetings, with a real focus on fellowship as Baptists and learning about and supporting Baptist work in different parts of the world.

The elections for office-bearers were also not designed for controversy, with the decisions already made by the General Council (like the governing body of the Alliance which meets regularly between Congresses). The Congress role was to affirm the nomination of those designated as President-elect and Vice-President.

One Australian Baptist, Rev Dr Ken Manley, principal of Whitley College, the Baptist Theological College near the University of Melbourne in Victoria was presented as one of the 14 regional Vice-Presidents.

It is worth noting that Australian Baptists have provided a President in the past, Western Australian theologian Reverend Dr Noel Vose, who was President from 1985–1990.

Dr Billy Kim, a Korean Baptist leader and pastor of a medium-sized Korean church (10,000 members) was presented as the new President-elect. He will take office in July 2000. Billy Kim aims to continue the Baptist emphasis on evangelism and mission, with a strong positive focus on working together.

I thought it was interesting that the Korean Ambassador to Australia was present to read a personal message of congratulations from Korean President Kim Dae Jung. There were also video messages of welcome from John Howard, who would have been greatly helped by a few lessons in public charismatic leadership from some of the Baptist preachers at the Congress, and Steve Bracks (Victorian Premier), who spoke warmly of Baptist involvement in Victorian public life, perhaps because Baptist figures like Tim Costello were such prominent critics of aspects of the Kennett Government.

I must admit I did quietly ponder whether these elements were perhaps making church-state relations a little too close for some in the Baptist tradition!

Overall, it was a stimulating time meeting people from many different countries and hearing about experiences of being church far removed from the usual mediocrity of Australian church life.

Information particularly about Baptist Heritage can be found on the web at: <http://www.congress.baptist-vic.org.au/hc.asp>

Peter BENTLEY is secretary of the Sydney Presbytery of the Uniting Church.

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