

Moderate Baptists test unity in diversity: Celebration of a New Baptist Covenant

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At a gathering in Atlanta of Baptists trying to mend fences and join hands, there was preaching by blacks and whites, scripture readings by women and men, and music by African-American and Hispanic groups. It was a visible, concerted push toward unity amid diversity, officials say, because Baptists have long championed freedom of expression.

“We respect that we have differences, and I think that we’re willing to find common cause even though we have those differences,” said Daniel Vestal, coordinator of the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship, a moderate Baptist group.

But the Celebration of a New Baptist Covenant, a three-day gathering of some 10,000 Baptists that ended February 1, is also testing the limits of that big-tent diversity. Some are asking how far Baptists are willing to go.

Over the years, Baptists have splintered over a host of issues, including race (North vs. South), theology (conservatives vs. liberals and moderates) and ideology (Southern Baptists vs. the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship). Black Baptists, too, have split over internal disagreements.

At this meeting, a pro-gay group was not allowed to be an official participant in the meeting, and the number of black attendees slowly dwindled over the three days of the conference. As expected, the 16 million-member Southern Baptist Convention was not an official participant, and some organizers aimed to show the potential influence of North America’s “other” Baptist churches—those that are not Southern Baptist.

“This is just a first step, and we’ve got a long way to go to become a community that overcomes all the divisions that the culture has imposed upon us,” said author Tony

Campolo, professor emeritus of sociology at Eastern University. “That’s one of the great challenges, and we hope that this new covenant is going to move in the direction of reaching that end.”

Campolo scanned the crowd at the Georgia World Congress Center on the morning of January 31 and pegged it as 90 percent white. Around his neck he wore a brightly colored stole to show solidarity with gay and lesbian Baptists.

The Association of Welcoming and Affirming Baptists had sought to be designated a “participating organization” in the gathering, but officials decided there was not a “broad consensus” on the issue of gay rights and denied the group an official role.

“We are not going to act as outsiders, trying to get in,” said Ken Pennings, executive director of the pro-gay group. “We’re already in. Some just don’t know it yet.”

Bill Leonard, dean of Wake Forest University Divinity School in Winston-Salem, North Carolina, said Baptists had other issues of division to overcome before they could tackle gay rights. “We may get to these issues at some point and how we talk about it together, but if we start with that, we’ll never do anything,” he said. “Rightly or wrongly, I think that was pretty much the consensus.”

The dwindling number of black attendees may reflect simple economics more than anything, one black church leader said. T. DeWitt Smith Jr., president of the Progressive National Baptist Convention, said some African-Americans couldn’t afford additional nights in a hotel after attending the preceding meeting of four black denominations.

In small-group sessions, Baptists have grappled with what to do next in their attempt to break down racial barriers. The large interracial turnout on the first night of the meeting gave them a glimpse of the possible.

“Thousands of people singing hymns together, to me, is a foretaste of . . . heaven,” said Joy Yee, senior pastor of 19th Avenue Baptist Church in San Francisco. “I love it. It gives me some hope and something to hold on to while we’re trying to do this messy work of coming out of our boxes.”

David Gushee, a professor of Christian ethics at Mercer University in Atlanta, attends a church in nearby Decatur that supports both the Southern Baptist Convention and the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship. He regretted that many Southern Baptist leaders

had stayed away.

“In light of just the celebration and the joy in the room, it felt sad to me,” Gushee said. “They’re a big part of the Baptist family and they were welcome here.”

The big question on everyone’s mind is what happens next.

For some, the meeting was a call to personal transformation. Arabella Rich, a retired educator who said she had once been turned away from the University of South Carolina because she was black, remarked, “I’ve got to be a stronger, unprejudiced person.”

For others, it’s about forging new relationships. Pat Anderson, who coordinates missions for the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship, exchanged business cards with members of black Baptist denominations whom he had not met before.

“It’s almost like a blind date,” he said. “We’ve sat across the table and we’ve shared these experiences together. We’re kind of holding hands a little bit. . . . We know we’ll go our separate ways, . . . but we’ve decided that we like each other’s company.” *-Adelle M. Banks, Religion News Service*