

American Baptists, Cooperative Baptists celebrate their links: First national joint worship service

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Worship infused with music and missions, cooperation and communion, and doses of laughter marked a historic reunion of Baptists in Washington, D.C.

The American Baptist Churches USA and the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship held their first national joint worship service—a long-awaited coming together of Baptists whose shared commitment to missions and Baptist principles once was shattered by slavery.

“This is an awesome God moment,” General Secretary Roy Medley of the ABC told the crowd of almost 4,000 participants, divided almost evenly between representatives of both groups.

The service June 29 in the Washington Convention Center marked the end of the CBF’s annual general assembly and the start of the ABC’s biennial meeting on its 100th anniversary. Program organizers noted the joint session had been five years in planning. Actually, it was 162 years in the making.

Baptists in the U.S. first united to support missions in 1814, but they divided acrimoniously in 1845. Northern Baptists, who opposed slavery, organized successively as the Northern Baptist Convention and the American Baptist Convention. In 1972 the Pennsylvania-based church body adopted its present name.

The Cooperative Baptist Fellowship formed out of the Southern Baptist Convention in 1991 after more than a decade of conflict with fundamentalists. Although not all CBF churches relate to the SBC, almost all trace their roots to it.

Daniel Vestal, the CBF’s coordinator, and the ABC’s Medley agreed that while each tradition brings unique gifts to the table, combined efforts have made their ministries more effective. “God has blessed us with diversity in the ABC,” said

Medley, although, he added to laughter, “We don’t always know what to do with it.” But diversity “is a sign of the way God brings us together.”

Joining Vestal and Medley for a three-way discussion during the worship service was Tyrone Pitts, general secretary of the Progressive National Baptist Convention—one of several predominantly black Baptist denominations.

The three churches they lead are among key groups promoting a “celebration” of the New Baptist Covenant, which will be held in Atlanta January 30–February 1, 2008. The convocation, supported by former presidents Jimmy Carter and Bill Clinton, involves about 40 groups that comprise 20 million Baptists in America.

Pitts highlighted the Progressive Baptists’ historic commitment to social justice, freedom and human rights. “We were the denominational home of Martin Luther King Jr. and the civil rights movement,” he said. “We have brought these issues to the attention of the nation.”

The traditional Baptist commitment to religious freedom sparked the CBF’s creation and still energizes it, Vestal stressed. “Fundamentalism is really not so much a theological perspective as . . . an attitude—my way or the highway,” Vestal said. “The CBF exists in the belief that every individual is free in Christ.”

The CBF and the ABC are collaborating in multiple ways. Vestal cited the partnership between the fellowship’s Church Benefits Board and the ABC’s Ministers and Missionaries Benefit Board. Both also take part in Central Baptist Theological Seminary in suburban Kansas City; the Green Lake (Wisconsin) Conference Center; and the Baptist Joint Committee for Religious Liberty.

In addition, “on a grassroots level, there are five churches that have been started by both the CBF and the ABC,” Vestal said. Joint missionary efforts, Katrina cleanup efforts and new cooperation between campus ministers were mentioned by church leaders.

“The 19th century was the century of the Baptist missionary society,” Vestal said, quoting Rob Nash, the CBF global missions coordinator.

“The 20th century was the century of the Baptist denomination. But the 21st century will be the century of the local church,” Vestal said. “The future of the church in North America will be determined by those churches that discern God’s mission in the world and discover their participation in that mission.” —*Associated Baptist Press*