

Baptists, Pentecostals seek common ground

by [Bob Allen](#)

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BIRMINGHAM, Ala. (ABP) – Leaders of two large Christian traditions held preliminary conversations Dec. 13-15 to lay groundwork for ecumenical dialogue between Baptists and Pentecostals around the world.

Delegations from the Baptist World Alliance and Pentecostal World Fellowship set guidelines for anticipated multi-year meetings to pursue closer ties between two groups that together represent about one fifth of the world's Christians.

"The purpose of the dialogue is to examine what it may mean for Baptists and Pentecostals to walk together in step with the Holy Spirit," representatives of the two groups said in a statement issued at Samford University's Beeson Divinity School in Birmingham, Ala. "Our intention is for the dialogue to be holistic in its evaluation of faith and practice."

Future talks tentatively scheduled annually from 2012 through 2014, with findings and recommendations to follow, would explore areas where Baptists and Pentecostals already agree, what the two groups offer to each other and "How do we walk together in the Holy Spirit?"

A new Pew Research Center [report](#) on global Christianity estimated there are 279 million Pentecostals around the world. They comprise 4 percent of the world's population and 12.8 percent of all Christians.

Pentecostals are members of Protestant denominations or independent churches that hold the teaching that all Christians should seek a post-conversion religious experience called the baptism of the Holy

Spirit. They believe that people who experience the baptism of the Holy Spirit may receive one or more spiritual gifts, including the abilities to prophesy or utter messages from God, practice physical healing or speak in tongues.

Another 305 million Christians worldwide are defined as “charismatic.” They belong to non-Pentecostal denominations but engage in spiritual practices associated with Pentecostalism, such as speaking or praying in tongues. That includes some Baptists, but in general the denomination teaches that miracles described in the New Testament ceased with the apostles and there is no need for a “second blessing” beyond salvation.

The Pentecostal World Fellowship is a cooperative body of Pentecostal churches and groups worldwide with 56 member organizations. It sponsors a triennial meeting first held in 1947 and in 1961 was named the Pentecostal World Conference.

The Baptist World Alliance has 221 member organizations with 176,000 churches and a combined membership of 41.6 million. That doesn’t include the largest Baptist group, the Southern Baptist Convention, which left the BWA in 2004 over theological differences with some of the more liberal Baptist member bodies in Europe and the United States. A catalyst for the break was the BWA’s acceptance into membership of the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship, a group of disenfranchised former Southern Baptists formed in 1991.

The Pentecostal dialogue team includes both a conservative Southern Baptist who remains active in the Baptist World Alliance, Beeson Divinity School Dean Timothy George, and Curtis Freeman, who directs the Baptist House of Studies at Duke Divinity School, one of 15 theology schools that partner with the Atlanta-based CBF.

The dialogue falls under work of the Baptist World Alliance’s Commission on Doctrine and Christian Unity. It exists to promote greater understanding with other Christian communions about Baptist beliefs such as believer’s baptism and religious liberty, while seeking areas of possible cooperation in areas like missions and evangelism.

BWA General Secretary Neville Callam, who led the BWA delegation, said he "was pleased that the time had arrived in which Baptists and Pentecostals could meet to consider how they might work together in the spirit of Jesus' prayer for the unity of the church."

Callam's predecessor, Denton Lotz, first proposed dialogue with Pentecostals in 2001. The BWA executive committee authorized Callam in March to identify a small team "to explore the commencement of BWA/Pentecostal bilateral dialogue." In July Callam presented team members, who in addition to Callam, George and Freeman include Fausto Vasconcelos, BWA director of the mission, evangelism and theological reflection, and Bill Brackney, a professor at Acadia Divinity College in Nova Scotia.

A separate BWA dialogue team held exploratory talks Oct. 30-Nov. 2 with the Ecumenical Patriarchate of Constantinople, "first among equals" in the Eastern Orthodox communion and regarded as the representative and spiritual leader of the world's 300 million Orthodox Christians.