

Principles and Guidelines for Intra-Baptist Relationships

Proposed by the General Secretary's Special Commission on Intra-Baptist Relations

Preamble: Baptist World Alliance: Unity and Diversity

1. “The Baptist World Alliance, extending over every part of the world, exists as an expression of the essential oneness of Baptist people in the Lord Jesus Christ.”¹
2. The Baptist World Alliance (BWA) exists as “a global movement of Baptists sharing a common confession of faith in Jesus Christ bonded together by God’s love to support, encourage and strengthen one another while proclaiming and living the Gospel of Jesus Christ in the power of the Holy Spirit before a lost and hurting world.”²
3. BWA organizes its work around five clusters of commitments, namely, to join together in worship and fellowship, to nurture the passion for mission and evangelism, to defend religious liberty and human rights, to respond to human need through relief and sustainable community development, and to promote relevant theological reflection.³
4. From its inception, BWA was understood to be a family of “Churches of the Baptist order and faith throughout the world.”⁴ In its earliest years, however, BWA’s membership was mostly composed of conventions and unions from the Western world. Over the past century, the BWA family has grown into a truly worldwide organization with widespread membership from East and West, North and South.
5. The growth of BWA membership is marked by increased cultural diversity. This diversity includes various cultures, languages, customs, histories, racial identities, ways of expressing theological conviction, and personal and communal encounters with Christ in different cultural contexts. By God’s grace, the BWA reflects, in a visible way, the rich diversity of the one body of Christ.⁵
6. BWA seeks to live out its commitment to unity in the face of the diversity that marks its membership. It regards this diversity as a God-given gift and therefore essential to effectively represent the kingdom of God despite certain obvious challenges. In order to achieve the goals for which the BWA was established, and which continue to be the foundation for cooperation among BWA members, the BWA must maintain a delicate balance. That balance is between maintaining a unity of purpose and common commitment even as the organization seeks to honor and be blessed by the diversity that characterizes the fellowship.
7. One of the greatest assets in the BWA’s worldwide commitment to unity, in the face of our rich diversity, is its ability to foster space for open dialogue among the various constituencies that constitute the membership of the BWA. That space will allow the BWA to harvest the fruit of the various biblical, theological and experiential perspectives that the members bring to, and articulate in, BWA gatherings. The expression of new perspectives on, and cultural expressions of, our faith is a gift that is graciously shared and received within the BWA.

8. However, the BWA commitment to open dialogue and honest communication in the midst of our profound diversity also presents the BWA with perhaps the greatest challenge to the unity we are called to maintain.⁶ That challenge comes in the form of the difficulty of achieving clear, precise and commonly-understood communication through the use of language, especially when translation from one language to multiple languages is involved. That challenge is enhanced when well-meaning individuals do not know or fully appreciate the biblical, cultural, historical or theological distinctives and sensibilities that inform the perspectives articulated by various members of the BWA family.
9. The commitment to maintain unity within the BWA, while celebrating the diversity marking the movement, implies concern to take positive steps to advance our oneness and to reduce opportunities for misunderstanding. With this in mind, BWA affirms the following principles and guidelines for discussion and dialogue among Baptists attending the BWA meetings, and sharing in the work of the BWA:

Principles and Guidelines

1. “With God all things are possible”⁷ and apart from Christ Jesus, we can do nothing.⁸ Therefore, all BWA meetings take place within a context of worship, acknowledging God's presence and leadership.
2. Christians are finite beings and sinners saved by grace.⁹ Therefore, we cannot assume that our knowledge or understanding is complete and free from error. On account of this, our opinions and perspectives must always be offered in a spirit of humility and with the request for the Holy Spirit to guide us in our speaking and in our listening to others.
3. All humans are made in the image of God.¹⁰ In Christ, we are being conformed to the image of Christ¹¹ and we share in the one body of Christ.¹² We “affirm the dignity of all people, male and female, because they are created in God’s image and called to be holy.”¹³ Furthermore, as members of the body of Christ, we belong to one another.¹⁴ No matter how passionate BWA members may be about an issue or a position they articulate, the conversation/dialogue must always be focused on principles and not on individuals, cultures, regions, nations, or denominational bodies. Our conversations, dialogues and debates must never degenerate into attacks on the personhood, humanity or the authenticity of one's Christian faith and commitment.¹⁵
4. We are all members of the one household of faith.¹⁶ We “declare that, through the Holy Spirit, we experience interdependence with those who share this dynamic discipleship of the church as the people of God.”¹⁷ As a world community of Baptist believers, we remain incomplete until we have vigorously sought to hear, understand, and respect the diverse viewpoints reflected by others, especially those persons from cultures that have been marginalized through material poverty and the legacy of colonialism and imperialism. Therefore, we strive to avoid practices

or conversations that perpetuate the dominance of one cultural perspective as providing the normative experience or theological perspective for all members of the BWA.

5. The members of the BWA celebrate the gift of language that reflects our rich diversity. Language is an index of one's identity and affirms one's history and culture. The BWA therefore, recognizes the need to provide for greater opportunities to assist members to hear and speak in their own languages.¹⁸ To that end, the BWA will seek to identify and employ a variety of tools that will contribute to make communication in various languages plausible and possible during our meetings.
6. We are called to love one another.¹⁹ By this, we demonstrate that we are Christ's disciples.²⁰ We believe that true unity and fellowship can never be achieved until relationships move beyond acknowledgment of, and respect for the other, and toward care and concern. Therefore, representatives attending BWA gatherings seek to develop lasting and meaningful relationships through thoughtful and prayerful conversations both within and outside of formal meetings.
7. We acknowledge that Baptists are known to have a wide range of opinions and perspectives on many issues including what constitutes "truth." Yet, we love and accept one another.²¹ When we believe an opinion or perspective is seriously flawed, we challenge each other as beloved family members rather than as strangers and enemies. Even the correction of perceived errors must be done in love.²²
8. We are committed to seeking the interests of each other.²³ Therefore, we encourage and expect that, in situations where a person's point of view or perspective is not clearly articulated or understood, perhaps due to a language and/or cultural barrier, the person moderating the meeting will diligently and respectfully provide the speaker with the opportunity to clarify the point the speaker seeks to articulate. This will contribute to the ensuing conversation being focused on the intended meaning of statements rather than inaccurate presumptions about what was said. Each person who speaks during our meetings shall be free to conclude the point being made without unwarranted interruption, except by the moderator of the meeting when the requirement of gracious speech and proper decorum is violated.
9. In our gatherings, everything should be done decently and in order.²⁴ All participants will respect the authority of the moderator and endeavor to respect the diversity and live into the unity that is the gift of the Holy Spirit to the BWA family.

¹ Preamble to BWA Constitution.

² BWA Vision Statement developed by the 21st Century Committee and adopted at the 19th Baptist World Congress in Birmingham, England, in 2005.

³ The statement on BWA clusters of commitment emerged in the deliberations of the 21st Century Committee.

⁴ "Preamble" to BWA Constitution as approved at the inaugural congress in 1905. See *The Baptist World Congress, London, July 11-19, 1905: Authorised Record of Proceedings*, (London: Baptist Union Publication Department, 1905): 330-31.

⁵ 1 Corinthians 12:12, 27; Romans 12:4.

⁶ Ephesians 4:3.

⁷ Matthew 19:26.

⁸ John 15:5.

⁹ Ephesians 2:5, 8; I Corinthians 13:9.

¹⁰ Genesis 1: 26-27.

¹¹ Romans 8: 29.

¹² Romans 12:4-5.

¹³ *BWA Centennial Statement* § 11.

¹⁴ Romans 12:5

¹⁵ See Colossians 4:6.

¹⁶ Galatians 6:10.

¹⁷ *BWA Centennial Statement* § 8.

¹⁸ See Acts 2: 5-12.

¹⁹ John 13:34; 1 John 4:7-12.

²⁰ John 13:35.

²¹ Romans 15:7.

²² Ephesians 4:15.

²³ Philippians 2:4.

²⁴ 1 Corinthians 14:40.