

Monday, 9 February 2009

More than 350 Baptists and others—including the larger Christian community and people of the Islamic faith—from 59 countries gathered at the Mondo Migliore conference center near Rome Monday for the 2009 Global Baptist Peace Conference. Many participants came from deeply troubled, war-torn regions. For many, simply making their way to the conference was a struggle.

Dan Buttry, a minister from Michigan and a conference organizer, said, “We even had a couple of Buddhist monks who wanted to attend, but, in the end, they were not able to obtain visas.”

These people have come together to share stories of their struggles to bring about peace, in their own communities and cultures and across the world.

Sharon Buttry, a minister from Michigan, said that, for her, the most beautiful aspect of the conference is the interaction between the people. “My theology is relational, and peacemaking for me is relational,” she said. “I had heard stories for years about many of these people, but I had only seen photos. They were two-dimensional to me. Coming here and meeting them is like seeing the statues around Rome and then seeing them suddenly come to life.”

The conference opened last night with a worship service conducted in Italian, Spanish, English and Shona, a Zimbabwean tribal language. The celebration of music ranged from traditional hymns, sung in various languages, to original, contemporary music written especially for the conference by Emanuele Aprile.

Anna Maffei, president of the Italian Baptist Union and a conference organizer, presented a plenary address, based on Matthew 18:14: “It is not the will of your Father in Heaven that one of these little ones should be lost.”

Maffei spoke of the effects of violence on children in every country in the world. “There are 50 countries currently in armed conflict, but I do not think it is only 50 countries who have declared war on children,” she said. She spoke of those who plan conflicts and violence as ones who look down from above and “play God,” instead of seeing the world from below as the victims do, and as Jesus chose to do.

“We need to stop playing God and become human beings again,” she said.

For Doug Donley, a Baptist minister from Minnesota, the music was what affected him most. “I felt awash in the diversity of the people, in the beauty of the music, and the ease of the inclusivity of the group,” he said.

Lancelot Muteyo, a young Baptist leader from Zimbabwe, said the most moving part of the service came with an audio-visual presentation of children from around the world—child soldiers in Africa, street children, victims of bombings in the Middle East, and one child at whom a gun was being pointed by another child.

“As I watched these pictures, I realized that I am not doing enough,” Muteyo said. “The future does not belong to us; it belongs to the children. And yet no one looks at the children. In my country there are so many children in the street, and no one cares about them.”

This is the fifth international peace conference held among Baptists in the last 20 years. For the next five days, the group will continue to worship together, attend a variety of workshops, and listen to the stories of others who struggle for peace and justice. Perhaps best of all, they will come to know each other individually, during breaks in hallways and during meals. Many peacemaking efforts now taking place around the world were born in conversations such as these.

Tuesday, 10 February 2009

The Global Baptist Peace Conference at the Villa Mondo Migliore in Castel Gandolfo near Rome continued Tuesday with morning devotions, followed by six-hour training seminars. Morning devotions centered around women and violence, with Elizabeth Green, a Baptist minister in Italy, preaching. The conference participants then chose from the following training seminars:

Building a Theology of Peace (Paul Fiddes). The seminar focused on developing a theology of peace and peace-making, beginning from Biblical principles of human wholeness and their implications for Christian theology. They then moved to the nature of a “gospel of Peace,” reflecting on a doctrine of salvation which has non-violence at its heart, with a corresponding practice of evangelism. Participants presented their own views, along with those of Dr. Fiddes.

“Do No Harm”: Development Assistance and Humanitarian Aid in Conflict (Daniela Rapisarda). This seminar identified ways in which international humanitarian and/or development assistance given in conflict situations can be provided to help local people disengage from fighting and develop systems for settling the problems that prompt conflict in their societies, based on the “Do No Harm” framework.

Intercultural Conflict and Peace-Building (Barry Higgins). Based on personal experience in Cambodia, Barry provided participants insight on how to become aware of the way their own cultural lenses and perspectives often prevent people from understanding dynamics in cross-cultural conflicts.

Holy Ground (Lee McKenna). “Holy Ground” describes the risky territory on which Sudanese Muslims and Christians, women and men, encounter one another in a joint project to build peace in Sudan. Participants discussed the methodology and analyzed tools from the Sudanese Non-violence Forum, a unique training-of-trainers that addresses economic literacy, historical analysis, and conflict transformation.

Rompiendo regias y creando paz en zonas de conflict (Lee McKenna). This Spanish-language seminar addressed structures and relationships that impede the process of peacebuilding, drawing upon examples in Sudan, Mindanao, Colombia, and First Nation (Canada).

Restorative Justice: Principles and Applications (Marinetta Cannito Hjort). This seminar introduced and facilitated an understanding of the core values of restorative justice. With interactive exercises and video presentations, participants gained an appreciation of how restorative justice can be applied in various social contexts.

Bible-based Conflict Transformation (Dan and Sharon Buttry). This seminar provided an in-depth look at some biblical teaching related to various aspects of conflict transformation, including dealing with marginalization, nonviolent struggle, and trauma recovery.

Nonviolent Struggle (Daniel Hunter and Akum Longchari). Nonviolent struggle as a technique to wage justice has grown around the world. Participants were challenged to develop sharper skills as they analyzed various experiences of human rights and community-based campaigns.

Evening prayers led by Brad Bergland and Rusudan Gotsiridze in the Taize tradition concluded the day’s activities.

Asher Israel Quimson of the Philippines said he most enjoyed the workshop on building a theology of peace. This was a day-long process led by Paul Fiddes of Oxford, England. “The facilitator took thoughts and insights from the participants and by the end of the day we had found a better way of expressing this theology—including insights from the third world,” he said.

Jihosuya Jena of India recalled the morning devotions as his favorite, with intercessory prayers for suffering people all over the world. “But I have also found the workshops helpful—learning about how to do peace work in our communities, how to take it to our people,” he said. “The workshop ‘Do No Harm’ about development assistance and humanitarian aid in conflict was very helpful for my work.”

Wednesday, 11 February 2009

On Wednesday the theme for morning devotions was "War, Violence and Immigration," with Carmine Bianchi leading the worship.. Orestes Roca Santana and W. Hernandez Murga, both Cuban pastors, presented the sermon.

In the morning plenary session, Gustavo Parajón, a Baptist pastor and physician in Nicaragua, was the plenary speaker. Parajón played a key role in mediation between the Nicaraguan government and rebel fighters at the end of the Sandinista-Contra conflict in his country. The two storytellers for the morning were João Matwawana, an Angolan native now living and working in exile in Nova Scotia, and Nancy Hastings Sehested, a prison chaplain from North Carolina. João spoke of his work attempting to mediate within the Angolan context 20 years ago and of his dramatic departure that resulted in living in exile. Nancy dramatically spoke of the challenge to bring a different and hopeful perspective to the culture of violence that exists in U.S. prisons and of the transformation she has witnessed in some.

The afternoon workshops were divided into Session I and Session II, with offerings in English, Spanish, and Italian.

In the evening, participants were blessed with extraordinary talent from Italy with

Pat Kember of the United Kingdom was inspired by Nancy Hastings Sehested's presentation, during a storytelling session, about her work in A North Carolina prison. Norman Kember, Pat's husband, said he appreciated the evening Taizé prayer service (a musical, contemplative style originated in the Taizé monastic community in France) led by Brad Bergland and Rusudan Gotsiridze.

For April Baker of Tennessee, the most important aspect of the conference has been in conversations, connecting with new people and reconnecting with old friends. "This morning there was an informal roll call of the countries represented, and I was moved just realizing that there were that many peacemakers, in this place, at this time," she said.

Ohio pastor Steve Hammond said that, although all of the plenary sessions and workshops have been extremely helpful and inspiring, his favorite aspect of these days has been the worship. Deborah Lynn of Tennessee said that she has been astounded by the hospitality of the Italian people. "I've never been around such vivacious, warm, people. I appreciate their good food, their music and their love of gathering and talking."

Thursday, 12 February 2009

A worship theme of “Justice, Peace, Creation and the Vision of Words” led the way Thursday morning as the Global Baptist Peace Conference continued at the Villa Mondo Migliore in Castel Gandolfo near Rome. Herbert Anders, a pastor in the Church of La Spezia and a theologian, created a service using water images, a sermon about the power of words and a communion in which participants shared a drink of water.

Due to the inability of our plenary speaker, Grace Shatsang from India, to receive a visa, we filled the session with additional storytellers. Rusudan Gotsiridze began recounting the experiences of Georgian Baptists to address both the Chechnyan crisis, including dealing with refugees, as well as with the more recent Russian-Georgian conflict. She and Malkhaz Songulashvili, who had planned to attend but could not due to ill health, have led the Evangelical Baptists of Georgia to do some outstanding work in peacebuilding. Akum Longchari followed her with the stories of reconciliation ongoing in northeast India, or Nagaland. This has been a civil war with India but with elements of internecine fighting among the Nagas themselves. Baptists play a crucial role of leadership in bringing warring parties together at the peace table. Dennis Datta from Bangladesh also offered his story, based on his long-time peacebuilding work in his country, especially addressing the economic conditions, human rights, and Christian/Muslim conflicts. Dennis, who received the BWA Human Rights award last year, has been a leader among Baptists in this important work.

Other stories of the morning included Norman Kember, a Baptist peace activist from the United Kingdom, with a moving account of being kidnapped in Baghdad at age 74 and held hostage for four months, along with three other members of a Christian Peacemaking Team. Karen Thomas Smith, a native of Kentucky, followed with stories of partnership and empowerment in her work as a chaplain among Christians and Muslims in Morocco. C. H. Chiromo, a pastor and Baptist leader in Zimbabwe and a founding member of the African Baptist Peace Network, told stories of the economic and political struggles in his country. He called for a renewed global commitment to justice in embattled African countries.

In the afternoon, the workshops were once again divided into Session I and Session II.

For example, Samaresh Nayak of India led a workshop outlining a Christian response to religious persecution in the eastern part of his country, including recent violent attacks on Christians by militant Hindus. Rusudan Gotsiridze, a Baptist bishop in the Republic of Georgia, facilitated a session on male-female equality. Bill Apel of Oregon led a session about the interfaith letters of Thomas Merton. Other workshops included “Transformative Listening Capacities,” headed by Dwight Lundgren of Pennsylvania, and “Forgiveness Among the Unforgiven,” conducted by Nancy Hastings Sehested of North Carolina.

Several groups met after supper, including 25 members of the Asia Pacific Baptist Peace Network, which initially formed after an international conference in Thailand in 1996. Members of the group—from Burma, India, the Philippines, Nepal, Indonesia, Japan, Bangladesh, Nagaland, Australia and Cambodia—pledged to strengthen their network and to organize a training event in peacemaking during the coming year.

The day ended with a variety of musical offerings from conference participants, with a great deal of excitement and joy.

Many conference participants have also had the opportunity to enjoy an exhibit of peace art sent by children from around the world. Organizers collected more than four hundred drawings, paintings and collages marked with the children’s names, and, in some cases, accompanied by photographs. Attached to several pieces is a message: “With love from the primary department of Harrow Baptist Church, London, England.”

Through all these activities, Baptists and their fellow peacemakers are asking themselves, in words from Herbert Anders’ sermon during morning devotionals, “Can we believe in God’s vision for the world? Can we believe we can believe?”

Saturday, 14 February 2009

On Saturday, participants of the Global Baptist Peace Conference in Castel Gandolfo, Italy wrapped up a profound week of worship, storytelling, listening and training.

In a morning plenary session, the group watched an audiovisual presentation about the current crisis in Gaza, prepared by Graham Sparkes, from the UK and a member of the conference planning team. Some of the participants of this week's conference will leave this weekend on a Friendship Tour of the Holy Land, meeting and speaking with Palestinians and Israelis--with Christians, Muslims and Jews. The trip will include Lebanon, Jordan, the West Bank and Israel. Conferee Barbara Taft leaves Rome tomorrow to lead the tour, which is sponsored by the Baptist Peace Fellowship of North America.

Sparkes presented a conference statement intended to challenge participants for further work and to communicate to the rest of the Baptist world important matters and concerns of this gathering. "We intend for it to reflect the spirit and content of our gathering, and also to be a statement of affirmation and declaration to our wider Baptist family," Sparkes said.

"Inspired by our work together and our witness to one another," the statement begins, "we make the following declarations, and call upon all our Baptist sisters and brothers to join us in the urgent gospel task of being justice seekers and peacemakers in our world by making the same affirmations and commitments."

The statement concludes, "In the midst of a world of violence, terror and division, let us stand together as those who have heard and answered the call of God who wills justice and promises peace. Let us seek the joy of those who know the freedom that is found in Christ. Let us seek the hope that is the gift of the Spirit who unites us."

Following a brief discussion of the conference statement, several groups presented statements to the assembly. Luis Rivera-Pagán presented a statement from the Latin American delegation, which includes 28 people from Costa Rica, Puerto Rico, Cuba, Mexico, El Salvador, Nicaragua and Colombia. The delegation met twice during the week, as did several other regional groups. The statement touches on a number of issues, including several Puerto Ricans who have been incarcerated by the United States government without hearings for more than ten years.

The Italian Baptist Union (UCEBI) presented an eloquent statement for peace, justice and human rights in the Middle East. "The time is coming, and must be met urgently," the statement reads, "when God will open up a pathway in human blindness which leads to the enemy's house not to tear it down but to build it up, not to make war but to live in peace."

UCEBI further urged delegations from local churches to make pilgrimages to Israel and Palestine "not out of respect for stones but people."

Rev. Dr. Jesurathnam of India presented a statement from the Indian delegation that included concern about social discrimination in their country. Indian society is still stratified along hierarchical and discriminatory grounds on the basis of the caste system," he read. The Dalits, once known as "untouchables," are an oppressed caste and constitute the majority of Indian Christians.

Carl Cann of Nova Scotia, Canada offered a poetic statement on the Christian responsibility to creation. "God's peace is like still water that reflects the beauty of our differences," Cann wrote. "We implore, with all our hearts, that the storms of conflict cease, so that the water calms and we can see ourselves again."

Jimmie Diggs of Liberia spoke for the African participants, urging that the group come to Africa for the next global conference. The consensus of the assembly was that another meeting should be organized for 2012 or soon after, if at all possible, in Africa.

After the plenary, the group moved to the final worship service, officiated by Daniela Lucia Rapisarda, an Italian Baptist who serves as the Coordinator of the Ecumenical Peace Platform for the Christian Council of Norway, with a sermon by Marinetta Cannito Hjort, also an Italian who is presently the Baptist chaplain at American University in Washington DC. The service ended with worshippers weaving a web of peace, using yarn with peace doves on it to commemorate our network of global Baptist peacemakers. Worship leaders emphasized that this group is committed to working for peace, beginning with Baptist brothers and sisters around the world and extending to people of all faiths and none..

Evelyn Hanneman of North Carolina said that she will be taking away from the conference a strong sense of the pain that has been expressed here, by many of the participants. "How do we teach ourselves to have a response that is not a response of aggression?" she said. "That is our challenge."

"This was a great opportunity to meet with people from around the world who are dedicated to striving for peace and justice among peoples and groups that don't always manage to live in harmony," Taft said.

"I feel like I've been to a banquet table all week," Ken Sehested of North Carolina, a conference organizer, said.

Paul Hayes of Connecticut, another conference organizer, said, "One week doesn't change the world. But it *does change people*, many of whom will go back to their homeland encouraged and equipped to help bring about meaningful change."