

SBC hints of leaving Baptist World Alliance: Cooperative Baptist Fellowship seeks BWA membership

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An 11-year conflict between the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship and the Southern Baptist Convention reached the international stage in Spain. The Baptist World Alliance overwhelmingly voted to receive a committee report outlining conditions for the moderate CBF to be recommended next year for membership in the world body, despite opposition of delegates from the SBC, which funds about 20 percent of the BWA's budget.

Morris Chapman, president of the SBC executive committee, labeled the committee's decision a "swift and needless action" in a statement to Baptist Press. He said the SBC's "valued relationship" with the BWA "may have been damaged beyond repair."

The 290-member BWA General Council, in its annual meeting July 9-13 in Seville, represents more than 200 Baptist unions and conventions that include about 44.5 million baptized members in 193,000 churches. The SBC, one of BWA's founding members, is the group's largest member body with 16 million members.

CBF officials first applied for BWA membership a year ago. The membership committee deferred action at that time, citing concerns about the CBF's relationship with the SBC as well as whether CBF could be identified as a separate Baptist entity. Formed in 1991 as a moderate response to the conservative control of the SBC, the CBF has refused to identify the new organization as a separate Baptist convention.

The CBF reapplied this year with documents to establish its legal and institutional independence, gaining a favorable hearing from the 20-member committee. "We have been left with very positive views of the CBF as an organization," the report states. Nevertheless, the report expressed concern over "the overlapping constituencies between their fellowship and that of the SBC" and "the public nature

of the deep differences” between the CBF and the SBC.

The committee added, however, that it believed CBF’s application could be recommended if the CBF will “affirm publicly . . . that they have separated themselves from the structures and organization of the SBC.”

CBF coordinator Daniel Vestal pledged to fulfill the committee requests for more response. “They’ve asked us to declare ourselves as a Baptist body that is not an integral part of the Southern Baptist Convention. That’s not a problem because we’re not, and we feel like we haven’t been since the beginning.” Vestal said the CBF Coordinating Council will need to take formal action on the issue.

Chapman responded by noting that Southern Baptist leaders “disagree with some of the presuppositions that undergird the process being recommended by the committee.” While the CBF “has every right to make application” for BWA membership, Chapman said, “I feel the process has become flawed.” The SBC “historically has existed alongside Baptists who have differences, but this is totally different,” he said.

The CBF-SBC debate overshadowed other actions at the five-day BWA meeting, including resolutions addressing such issues as terrorism, violence in the Middle East and evangelism. The meeting attracted about 540 participants from 65 countries, making it the BWA’s largest council event. The alliance also hosts a Baptist World Congress every five years that attracts several thousand participants.

BWA President Billy Kim of Korea, completing the second year of his five-year term, even offered to resign if he could not help resolve the Southern Baptist stalemate in the coming year. Describing the SBC as “our big brother” among global Baptists, he noted, “I love the SBC. I do not want them to leave. . . . We hope for one big step of reconciliation.” Kim said BWA leaders will seek to work with both sides in the coming year to achieve a satisfactory solution.

Chapman indicated in an interview with Associated Baptist Press that he was also disturbed that the committee rejected SBC leaders’ request that the report of the committee not be made public until the group had reached its final recommendation on the issue.

Committee chairman Ian Hawley of Australia said the committee released a report this year partly because of widespread misinterpretations about last year’s decision to defer action. “There were wrong motives given for our decision,” he explained.

“We wanted to give people the idea of our thinking. . . . We’re trying to fulfill not just the legal requirements of the constitution but the spirit.” —*Associated Baptist Press*