

Baptists in Texas, Virginia may join world alliance: Southern Baptists asserting independence

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In what would be a first for the Baptist World Alliance, state associations of Southern Baptists in Virginia and Texas—who at times assert their independence from the Southern Baptist Convention—have been recommended as full members in the Baptist World Alliance, the organization that the SBC left last year in an ideological dispute.

British Baptist Alistair Brown, who sits on the BWA membership committee, said in March that it is “the committee’s unanimous view that both be recommended” to the BWA General Council to become full member bodies of the worldwide group of Baptists.

The Baptist General Association of Virginia and the Baptist General Convention of Texas, which are already major financial contributors to the Baptist World Alliance, in January joined the North American Baptist Fellowship, one of BWA’s six regional groups.

Both state groups relate to the Southern Baptist Convention, as well as to the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship and other nationwide missions organizations.

But if the recommended membership is approved by the BWA’s General Council during its meeting in July, it would mean the two state conventions would become members on the same level as CBF, the American Baptist Churches, or any of the 200-plus other national and regional Baptist groups that make up BWA’s membership. They would be the first U.S. state conventions to join.

The moves by the two conventions come after the SBC voted last year to leave the global fellowship amid charges that it was too liberal, a charge denied by BWA leaders. “Both bodies express sadness at the withdrawal from membership from the

BWA of the Southern Baptist Convention,” Brown told the assembled BWA leaders. “And they said that the withdrawal from the BWA had removed from them a means of fellowship with Baptists from around the world.”

BWA rules require that member bodies not be an integral part of any other Baptist denomination in their countries. However, Brown said the committee felt both BGAV and BGCT meet that requirement. “In each case, they were founded before the establishing of the SBC, and neither has ever seen themselves as part of the SBC,” he said. “Both grant freedom to churches to apportion giving to a variety of causes for missions work overseas.”

But Virginia Baptist chief executive John Upton, who was present for the vote, told Associated Baptist Press that Brown’s statement reflected a slight misunderstanding of the application. “We see ourselves as a partner of the SBC and always have seen ourselves as a partner of the SBC. . . . But we’re an autonomous body,” Upton said. “We’re very excited about being a part of BWA and we value our partnership with the SBC, and we don’t see a conflict between the two.”

Likewise, Charles Wade, Texas Baptist executive director, attempted to clarify that group’s relationship to the SBC in a statement released through a spokesperson. “While it is true that every state convention is free and autonomous—as is every Baptist entity—we have had and continue to have a relationship with the Southern Baptist Convention,” he said.

In its March meeting, BWA leaders heard an encouraging financial report. Despite large reductions in the group’s budget over recent years—including a \$425,000 annual loss as a result of the SBC withdrawal—the group’s revenue in 2004 was more than \$500,000 greater than in 2003. And BWA came in more than \$561,000 over budget for 2004.

Ellen Teague, BWA’s finance director, attributed much of that increase to giving by local churches. Last year, BWA began allowing local churches to become “associate members,” and more than 300 local churches—including SBC congregations—have sent contributions directly to BWA. *-American Baptist Press*