

# Interview: First Black BWA Head on Christian Unity

By [Lillian Kwon](#) | Christian Post Reporter

After two weeks of trying to adjust to his new U.S. office and the streets of Falls Church, Va., Jamaican native Neville Callam is now preparing to embark on a one month, 17-city tour across North America to introduce himself as the new head of the Baptist World Alliance.



The Rev. Neville Callam is the first non-white general secretary of the Baptist World Alliance.

The Rev. Callam is the first ever non-white general secretary of the 38-million-member global body. Hailing from the Global South, Callam brings a unique perspective to the position while finding himself surrounded by a very different image of Baptists in the United States. But he enters his office convinced that this is the will of God and hopeful of carrying on a new phase in the BWA.

The Christian Post had a chance to sit down with Callam at his Falls Church office on Wednesday to talk about his aspirations and the challenges that lie ahead.

**CP: You just settled into your new office and position around two weeks ago. What's the first thing on your mind that you want to start working on as general secretary?**

Callam: To be honest, my effort has always been to try to learn more about the organization, to understand how it works, how it functions. And the fact of the matter is that over the first two weeks, I

had the great privilege of having Denton Lotz, my predecessor, attending to initiate me into the position, explaining aspects of the new role of the Baptist World Alliance.

However, I'm going to be going on a tour of 17 cities in the U.S. and [Canada](#), so I have been concentrating on making preparations for these visits.

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**CP: Is the tour for introducing yourself to Baptists?**

Callam: Right, to get to know the constituency, to introduce myself to them and to have an opportunity for an exchange of ideas.

**CP: You're the first non-white BWA general secretary. You've already spoken of diversity and unity within the BWA. Do you feel your election marks some kind of new era for the BWA?**

Callam: The way I characterize it is like this – that a new phase has begun in the life of the BWA, not a new era. The reason I say a new phase is that over the years, particularly under the [leadership](#) of Denton Lotz, there has been a definite program of internationalizing the BWA, strengthening the limbs of the BWA with the various regions of the world, giving a voice to people coming from the two-thirds world. And so, it's natural with the growth of the Christian churches in the South and with the recognition of what we have always said – 'the dignity of all human beings created in the image of God.' It's not surprising that somebody who is black – I don't want to describe myself as non-white, I'm black (laughter), I'm of African descent – should come to the position. And I'm sure that other people from other [cultures](#) will in the future also have this opportunity since there's a genuine relationship of family among Baptists across the world. My appointment is an expression of this reality.

**CP: I actually don't know the exact statistics of BWA membership around the world. Do you know in what part of the world the membership is most concentrated?**

Callam: Well, not all the Baptists of the world are members of the Baptist World Alliance, of course. And the majority of the Baptists in the world are in fact in the United States. The present time, we enjoy a membership of some 38 million people around the world – that is members of Baptist

churches. If you add to that affiliates of the Baptist churches, those who [worship](#) in Baptist churches, those who come to Sunday school but are not yet members, it would be over 100 million.

**CP: Do you see any exponential growth of Baptists in a certain region?**

Callam: In the South, particularly in Africa and Latin America. The churches are growing rapidly. We are delighted at what's happening there. The growth is not uniform across the world, but certainly, in [Africa](#) and Latin America.

**CP: So your election definitely speaks of that growth trend?**

Callam: Yes, but it is not just on the sheer force of numbers. It is a realization that there is one body made up of members from all around the world and any one may produce a leader within the BWA according to the will of God.

**CP: Going back to the issue of unity and diversity, that's something the Baptists, particularly in the United States, are working on. The New Baptist Covenant, led by former president Jimmy Carter, involves BWA member bodies. They're trying to unite around social issues and create a more positive image of Baptists to the world. You've been in the BWA for about 20 years. What have you witnessed in terms of Baptist unity effort and how critical do you feel this effort in the U.S. for unity is?**

Callam: Very interesting question. When we reflect on the question of the unity of the Church, I go right back to the Scriptures. And I believe that it is in the mind of Christ that Christians should be united. This is clearly taught in the sacred Scriptures. As one expression of the Christian faith, the Christian family, Baptists therefore by themselves ought also reflect the unity that should characterize the lives of all Christians. There's a crying need for all Christian communions to live out a life of unity, as a way of modeling to the world what it means to live in a united life despite your diversities.

Within the BWA, because of our ecclesiology, our understanding of the church ... each local congregation and each expression of a [denomination](#) – that is, each fellowship or convention or union – has the autonomy to take their own positions on a range of issues, not including those that we would regard as essentials of the faith. Because of this, from time to time, prevailing situations, circumstances or theological emphases, etc, yield differences in the way we come down on some

social issues. And that diversity sometimes challenges the unity that we want to express to the world. It's a reality that we have to struggle with especially here, it seems to me, in the U.S. And I think it is highly commendable that the Baptists in North America (the North American Baptist Fellowship), which is the group sponsoring the new covenant, have seen the need to come together to galvanize around some issues that they have no contention about. That is, the social issues that impinge upon the Christian faith.

Within the two-thirds world from which I come, we do not make a distinction between the proclamation of the Gospel orally and the proclamation of the Gospel in action – social work. We think that they are two sides of the same coin. We are very pleased to see that Baptists in the U.S. are able to galvanize around a social agenda that is dictated by the demands of the Gospel, not motivated by political concerns.

**CP: So would you say there will be great progress in the United States on unity?**

Callam: I have served for a long time in the faith and order movement of the World Council of Churches where the accent is on striving for the visible expression for the unity of the church. The unity of the church is something deeply embedded in me. The unity of the Baptists is even more so of great significance to me. And I would be doing all I can to serve in the interest of the unity of the Church to the glory of God. Not unity for its own sake but unity because I believe this is what God requires.

**CP: The BWA is also placing much emphasis on social issues such as [poverty](#), Darfur, HIV/AIDS, and so forth. How would you like Baptists to respond to these issues during your term as head?**

Callam: To be honest, there's quite a movement now within the Baptist churches around the world, an awakening to the urgent demands relating to HIV/AIDS, [human trafficking](#) and the like. And this movement is gathering momentum. I see myself as contributing as much as I can – all of my vigor and energy – to supporting this particular movement as I think the demands in those particular areas are extremely urgent. If we believe that human beings are created in the image of God, if we believe that they have a dignity that is inalienable, I think we have automatically a responsibility as Christians to work for the alleviation of poverty, for the renewal of human life, and for the assistance of people in all sorts of need. Therefore, I will be giving myself entirely to that. Therefore, what I want

to do is to work through the agencies that we now have and also to use the opportunity that I have to share with Baptist brothers and sisters around the world to urge a sustained assault on these difficulties that people face today. The Baptist World Alliance is deeply concerned about people who are passing through difficulties, going through crises, and the Baptist World Alliance is committed in the spirit of an understanding of the compassion of Christ, in the spirit of Christ, to do something about it.

**CP: You mentioned the awakening that's happening right now. That's also taking place in the Church on a wider scale, but when did you see that happening with the Baptists specifically and what do you think prompted that?**

Callam: I am not clear about what prompted that. I want to say theologically that it is the spirit of God making us aware as we move from day to day of the needs that arise within human life and our responsibility to address these. But I remember particularly when BWA had the centennial congress in Birmingham, England, in 2005, passionate sharing by people in various contexts within the congress about experience. Working Baptist people sharing their experience working with those who are victims of the human trade is not merely about announcing a theoretical position. It's about sharing the experience one has engaging the people who are suffering and calling on others to join in this struggle to liberate those who are passing through that kind of situation. As far as HIV/AIDS pandemic is concerned, in many countries in the two-thirds world, the church is integrally involved together with other [NGOs](#) in seeking to educate people in our churches about the urgency of the problem, seeking to alienate from the people's minds any sense that AIDS is God's punishment for sin, which is nonsense, and seeking to galvanize people around decisive action both to welcome and to receive those who are suffering from AIDS and to work for their [relief](#), to develop programs that will assist them in securing the drugs that they need to use and of course the educational aspect will also help with the prevention of the problem.

**CP: Let's talk about the young Baptists. There's always a concern among Christians about the younger generation not stepping up to be leaders of the Church. Can you describe what concerns you have regarding the younger generation and also what progress you wish to make with them?**

Callam: I believe that if we are going to talk about young people and the Church, you have to think globally. And I think that the situation that is said to characterize the American context is not typical

of the situation across the world. I speak primarily about the South where the young people, numerous young people are very happy to be Baptist Christians. We are not living in those parts of the world, in any post-denominational age that is talked about in many contexts. We are very much living in an age when people are very proud. Many young people are proud to be Baptists. Part of the reason is that the Baptists have an enviable record of engagement in prophetic social action fighting against slavery, involvement in housing development, in the provision of healthcare, in the running of educational institutions. And people see the church as being a mature and responsible agent promoting social change in keeping with our understanding of the mandate of the Gospel. I believe that that will continue. I cannot see that there is any change that is possible in that orientation.

However, in the North, I believe that there are many questions that are arising partly because of the post-denominational age in which the North operates, partly because of the struggles and trials of post-modernity with Christian tirades about authority, about truth and the like, and the relativization of life. Within this context I think the churches have a particular challenge to reach the [youth](#) with the unchanging Gospel of Christ. I think that I will need spend more time in the North to be able to offer any kind of advice as to how this might be achieved. My expertise really would be a perspective from the South. And so I am not anxious to comment on that at this time. I want to wait until I'm in a better position to suggest some strategies that might work.

**CP: Now that you're the head of the BWA, how much of your time does the BWA take up?**

Callam: After two weeks, I'm able to say that this job is going to consume a lot of my energy (laughter) and all of my time. But the fact of the matter is that I'm excited about this possibility because I am convinced that it is part of the will of God for my life to be serving in this position. If that wasn't the case, it wouldn't have been likely for me to have been elected, to be honest. I think that it's going to consume all of my time because I'm passionate about the Baptist World Alliance and its commitments. The Baptist World Alliance is about uniting Baptists in fellowship and worship. The Baptist World Alliance is about reaching out to people in need with relief and development and especially the Baptist World Alliance is about [evangelism](#) and mission, reaching the Gospel to the world.

After that, the Baptist World Alliance is also about promoting relevant theological reflection that is grounded in the Word of God and reflective of the reality that people face. Then this is something I would find exciting and will fulfill as a part of my own calling.

**CP: It seems like the strengths of the BWA are addressing the social concerns, helping unite Baptists worldwide. What are some of the weaknesses of the global body as you're entering into your term as head?**

Callam: I believe that the big challenge that we're going to face over the next few years is to work towards greater progress in the manifestation of the unity of Baptists and I'm careful how I word it. 'Greater progress' – that means there's some progress now. I believe that the unity that we are talking about is going to be a unity that is grounded in truth. It is not a wishy-washy unity that you secure in order to look good but a genuine unity that flows from our understanding of our common baptism, our oneness in Christ Jesus and of the admissibility of diversity in some of the areas of our lives. That is to say we may not all believe that women should be ministers, we may not all believe this or that, but in the central tenets of faith, if we are one, we are going to be able to reflect a unity that the world needs to see, that the world may find the message of the Gospel credible. I think that is the challenge.

**CP: Are there any [interfaith](#) or [ecumenical](#) dialogues going on?**

Callam: Over the years, Baptist World Alliance has had conversations with a number of other Christian communions – the Reformed world; we have a dialogue with the [Anglicans](#) and just completed a phase of the dialogue the other day; we have just resumed dialogue with the Roman Catholics. Yes, we do have dialogues because we believe that conversation among and between churches is vital for mutual understanding and these conversations attempt to clarify those things around which we can express consensus and also to clarify those things around which we experience a difference of opinion. And then the effort is to work conscientiously and sincerely to see whether it is possible to overcome the differences that we have without compromising the truth that we hold to. And those dialogues will continue. In fact, I expect that once the constituencies [are] willing, we'll intensify the efforts to promote dialogue between the churches and ourselves.

**CP: Where does your excitement and hope lie in the BWA?**

Callam: I believe that we have a wonderful and a very strong tradition of theological reflection within the BWA. And once that theological reflection is faithful to the Baptist tradition, I think we are going to have a foundation on which to build, an edifice of ministry that is going to take the world by storm. To be honest with you, I believe that we have that foundation because we are very secure about what we believe in terms of the essentials of the faith and once we are able to gather cogently to work out the implications of those beliefs for social action, for our relationship with others, I think that we can make a great difference in this world. That's where my hope lies.

I'm hopeful that with the help of God and with the cooperation of a great staff that we have here that we'll be able to serve the Baptists of the world well and that together as Baptists, we will serve the whole world well. That's my hope and my dream.

**CP: Do you feel Baptists are pretty prominent and on the radar among Christians and non-Christians around the globe?**

Callam: In some parts of the world, they are very well known. Their advice is sought on many issues. In some parts of the world, there's a negative image of the Baptists. And these are peculiarities of cultures and places. The perception that some people, not all, have of some Baptists in the U.S. is a negative perception. There are so many Baptist groups in the U.S. that it's difficult to have a coherent image that is credible and I think that this is part of the genius of the new movement that is being attempted under the new covenant that the Baptists may yet emerge with a fresh image that is true to the Baptist faith. And it will be something that is admirable I think.