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News:

BWA speaks on religious liberty, women, immigrant families

Advocating for religious liberty in eastern Ukraine, protecting women and girls, and keeping immigrant families together were the focus of resolutions approved by the Baptist World Alliance General Council

Religious Liberty in Eastern Ukraine

The first resolution expressed concern about the curbing of religious freedom in an occupied area of the Lugansk region in eastern Ukraine, where Russian forces have taken control of the area and abetted its reorganisation as the “Lugansk People’s Republic” (LPR).

The “Resolution on the Freedom of Religion in the Lugansk Region in Eastern Ukraine” notes that a new law imposed by the LPR requires that “all religious organisations within the LPR, except the Moscow Patriarchate of the Russian Orthodox Church (ROC), must now prove their loyalty to LPR authorities through a re-registration procedure in order to maintain their legal status,” as well as “to report in detail their activities.”

The statement observes that the law “violates universal human rights, restricts religious freedom, and threatens the existence of existing religious groups and organisational networks,” which violates several articles of international law. Enforcement of the law threatens the futures of 43 Baptist churches in the area.

“All people are created in God’s image and endowed with freedom to worship and practice their religion according to the dictates of their own hearts,” the resolution states, urging the Lugansk Peoples Republic “to change the law in order to make it compatible with Freedom of Religion or Belief as stated in the international declarations, conventions and agreements.”

The resolution further calls upon the UN special rapporteur on Freedom of Religion or Belief to gather information, visit the region, and pressure LPR authorities to bring the law in line with international standards.

Protecting Women and Girls

A “Resolution Opposing Violence and Abuse of Women and Girls” responded to issues recently brought to the fore by the #MeToo and #ChurchToo movements. It “Affirms that women and girls are created in the image of God and invested with inestimable worth and dignity as gifts from God, and are essential to the health and vitality of families, churches, communities and national life.”

“The church has at times stood silent,” the resolution states, “or has been guilty of perpetuating biblical and theological interpretations regarding women and girls that render them vulnerable to violence and abuse in the home, the church, and society; and hinder their ability to live into the fulness of God.”

The resolution “Notes that the harassment and violence against women and girls worldwide are immoral,” and that “the church has too often been guilty of abusing and demeaning women and girls, and of covering up instances of abuse.”

In response, the resolution calls on BWA member bodies to “enhance the appreciation of the worth and dignity of women and girls in all aspects of family, church life, and in society;” to “provide access to counseling and safe places for women and girls who are victims of abuse;” to “ensure a system of transparent accountability that includes reporting of suspected abuse to appropriate authorities both inside and outside the church;” and to “design and implement culturally contextualized curricula to educate ministerial leadership and congregations about the multi-faceted problem of violence on women and processes to prevent such violence.”

Separating Immigrant Families

The resolution on immigrant families was inspired largely by U.S. actions that have separated many children from their parents at the border, but family separation was recognised as a global problem. The “Resolution on Preserving the Primacy of Family in Immigration” notes that “the human desire to preserve and protect one’s family from violence, disease, economic depravity, and other threatening conditions is universal and drives millions of people to leave their homelands seeking better lives for themselves and their family members.”

The resolution further “affirms the biblical mandate to welcome the stranger” and asserts that God created the family as integral to a healthy society. It, “Calls upon individuals, churches and religious organizations to be involved in immigration issues, supporting the primacy of family solidarity;” and “encourages all Baptists to prophetically challenge immoral policies that seek to undermine the rights and dignity of immigrants, migrants, and refugees.”

Finally, the resolution “urges all governments to follow international law regarding the proper treatment of immigrants, migrants, and refugees, and to uphold the primacy of the family unit.”

Churches to feed hungry children this summer

More than 100 churches are opening their doors this summer to help fill the holiday hunger gap

The 1.5 million children who are eligible for free school meals will be at risk of holiday hunger this summer - but several churches are stepping in to help.

TLG (Transforming Lives for Good) Make Lunch equips, supports and trains churches to run lunch clubs that serve hot and healthy meals, as well as providing engaging activities for children and families in local communities.

This summer the charity says that more than 100 churches are partnering with TLG to run Make Lunch clubs, and open their doors to struggling children and families at risk of holiday hunger over the long six week holidays.

Of those involved, 11 are Baptist churches. This includes Hay Hill Baptist Church in Bath, which is ready to open again this summer and is even thinking of expanding to other sites in future holidays.

Last summer Hay Hill opened twice a week in two areas of Bath. The sessions were designed to be fun and engaging, with games and craft ahead of the food.

‘Our guest families are starting to open up to us and relationships are developing between guests and volunteers,’ said Lea Lawton, one of the project’s co-ordinators. ‘One guest said that MakeLunch really helped her this summer, knowing that she and her children could get out of the house twice a week to somewhere safe and fun.

‘We’re hoping to develop the enrichment activities we offer to our guests to put on a really enjoyable event. We want to open another day a week in a different part of Bath to reach more children and their families.

‘MakeLunch is a great opportunity for the church across the city to work together to serve our community and practically demonstrate the love of Jesus.’

Hannah Widdows, a Make Lunch spokesperson, said, ‘For the 1.5 million children in the UK who are eligible for Free School Meals, the school holidays can mean a time of increased financial pressure and food insecurity for them and their families when that provision stops.

'We are always incredibly impressed with the servant-hearted nature of the churches we are working with and we are very proud of the work being done across the country as the church steps up to feed hungry children.'

'A voice to people who don't usually have one'

The latest film from a Baptist-supported ministry that seeks to train socially excluded people to become actors has premiered

Penalty is this year's offering from Acting on Impulse, a charity supported by Altrincham Baptist Church and set up by church member Lauren Pouchly.

All the actors are from Manchester's fringe community. Many have been homeless, and most of them have issues that have kept them out of the mainstream of life.

Acting on Impulse has enjoyed creating films and stage performances with people on the margins since 2007

Penalty tells the story of Danny and Jada who arrive at a hotel and discover they are surrounded by people who want something from them. Checking out may seem the best option – but do they have a choice?

Lauren, who wrote and directed Penalty, said, 'The focus of storytelling has always been to get beneath the surface of homelessness issues, using the ideas, experience and talent of the people who join our acting workshops.'

'But this year, Penalty felt like a chance to push the boundaries a little (well, a lot), to dare to be bold and not completely cling on to the usual format. We wanted to challenge the actors and create something with a fresh approach.'

'Perception and judgement are issues that confront their daily lives, so we picked this up. Horror as a genre came to mind as a chance to look at these themes in a wild, fun and slightly wacky way.'

The workshops, directed by Rachel Muter, enabled the actors to explore the themes and draw out ideas for characters, setting and plot. They also received training in movement, which plays a significant part in setting the film's atmosphere.

It was shot on location over three days at a hotel in Salford, with a cast of 21 and a 30-strong production team led by producer Luke Filz.

Luke said, 'I've been working with Acting on Impulse for five years now and every year the projects seem to get bigger and better. The part that the charity plays in supporting the cast and helping to develop their ideas is one of a kind.'

'They are giving a voice to people who don't usually have one.'

Baptist Deliverance study group

A new resource to support ministers dealing with requests for deliverance ministry has launched, explains Jayne Irlam

Supernatural700Ever had a member of your congregation ask you for help because something 'strange' or 'supernatural' is happening in their home? And ever thought, "Help! Not sure how to deal with this – where was this in my training?"

Well, you are not alone. Year-on-year, across the denominations, churches are seeing sharp rises in the number of people requesting deliverance ministry or 'exorcism'. At the same time, there are changes in UK law, both civil and criminal, which could have implications for this area. The Anglican Church long ago decided to set up a body of expertise to help train, inform and support their ministers. We have now decided to see if we can do something similar.

At the start of 2018, the North West Baptist Association launched a pilot project designed to help ministers (including trainees) in the North West. Its aim is to research, reflect, resource and support Baptist ministers in the safe practice of deliverance ministry. It consists of a group of Baptist ministers and medical professionals who can scratch their heads when you are scratching yours; three of whom have been trained to the same standard as Anglican Diocesan DM advisors, and two of whom sit on an Anglican DM panel.

The group has a number of external experts it can refer to, including a link worker to the Christian Deliverance Study Group – the body which advises the Church of England.

So if your congregant is telling you that they are seeing strange creatures in the night and you're not sure if this is a hoax, mental illness, too many late night horror shows or something more sinister, feel free to contact the group. They can give you a listening ear, offer advice, case collaboration, explain the law around deliverance ministry and pray for you before, during and after a ministerial encounter.

We also need to hear from ministers about what they are seeing, to develop our research base, and about what they feel they need from us. Although the idea was to pilot this for North West Baptist ministers, we won't turn anyone away who needs our help.

You can contact the service by emailing project lead the Revd Jayne Irlam at irlamjayne@gmail.com

'Your presence and wisdom will be missed'

Staff at Baptist House said goodbye to long-serving administrator Ian Millgate on Friday

Ian, who is retiring, has served the Ministries Team in a variety of ways for 25 years. Ministries Team leader Andy Hughes said Ian's 'greatest legacy' is his contribution to the Churches' Ministerial Counselling Service (CMCS), the cross-denominational service that provides confidential and independent help to ministers and their spouses. Ian served as administrator to the CMCS steering group from its launch in 1996, and has dealt with the day-to-day running of the service.

The service has continued to grow and develop, and the help it has given people over the years 'has been invaluable', said Andy.

The CMCS role is just one of the many ways Ian has helped to support ministers, Andy continued. He has been involved in co-ordinating several conferences such as the ministers' refreshers conference, the NAMS conference and a preparing for retirement conference; he has administered further studies grants, supported sector ministry and for several years took council minutes.

'You have blessed many people around the country as they seek to serve,' Andy said. 'Your presence and wisdom will be greatly missed.'

Ian is an accredited Baptist minister who was ordained in 1977. After pastorates at Tyndale Baptist Church in Bristol, where he was also a university chaplain, Longbridge Baptist Church (Birmingham) and Coleford Baptist Church (Gloucestershire), where he also served for the latter part of his ministry as Association Secretary, he began working at Baptist House in 1990, initially as a home mission officer. He joined the Ministry Department four years later and has worked under four department heads.

He has continued serving local churches, leading Marcham Baptist Church (1995-2002), and preaching regularly elsewhere. He has been a long-standing member of Abingdon Baptist Church in Oxfordshire.

Of his time at Baptist House, Ian said, 'There have been a lot of highs, some lows – twice we have been through rounds of redundancy – but on the whole it's been a great experience.

'The counselling service, in which I was there from the beginning, will always have a special place in my heart.'

Among the gifts presented to Ian were a framed copy of a Baptist Times report announcing his arrival in the Home Mission department back in 1990; part of an address given at the 10th anniversary of CMCS which highlighted how Ian's 'methodical, careful' work had been a 'godsend'; and a tie featuring photos of his two dogs, Morse and Lewis. Ian is a science fiction fan, and colleagues also knitted him a scarf in the style of that worn by Tom Baker's Doctor Who.

Joining Ian in his retirement is wife Jill, who retired from her own administrator role at BMS World Mission on the same day.