

THE BAPTIST WORLD CONGRESS 2025 FEEDBACK:

What is the Baptist World Alliance? The Baptist World Congress is presented by the Baptist World Alliance, a fellowship of 266 conventions and unions in 138 countries and territories, comprising of 51 million baptised believers in 178,000 churches. The mission is networking the Baptist family to impact the world for Christ. In the past, the Baptist Congress has included keynote speakers and guests such as, Martin Luther King Jnr, The Reverend Billy Graham, William Tolbert (former president of Liberia), and Jimmy Carter (former president of the USA).

The opening session set an amazing tone and spirit for the congress. There was a procession of people carrying banners from every country at the Congress. They walked through the auditorium in single file except for two. The Palestinian territories and Israel were the only two to walk side by side with their arms linked. The theme was "living the good news".

The session that impacted me the most was a breakout session on the church in the middle east. We had three Baptist speakers; one from Jordan, one from Lebanon, and one from Israel. Yes, there are Baptist churches in all these countries. They said that they will try to stick to time but those who live in the middle east do not really care about time.

The speaker from Lebanon told us that there are eighteen different religions in his country. As with the other speakers, he told us that Christians are a minority and don't have a voice in the country. They all agreed that the only way forward was the great commandment. ²⁸

One of the teachers of the law came and heard them debating. Noticing that Jesus had given them a good answer, he asked him, "Of all the commandments, which is the most important?" ²⁹ "The most important one," answered Jesus, "is this: 'Hear, O Israel: The Lord our God, the Lord is one. ³⁰ Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind and with all your strength.' ³¹ The second is this: 'Love your neighbour as yourself.' There is no commandment greater than these." Matthew 12: 28-31.

He also told us that while they want this war to end, the war helps spread the Gospel. The power of God's love shown and covered in prayer changes everything. Then we had a pastor from a Baptist church in Nazareth, Israel. He told us that only 1.9% are Christian in Israel. He also shared that they face discrimination. If you are an evangelical, you are not even recognised. Further, they have one of the highest crime rates in the world. They also struggle with their relationship with the Arab majority as often they have shared family roots.

On October 7, 2023, Hamas and several other Palestinian militant groups launched coordinated armed incursions from the Gaza Strip into the Gaza envelope of southern Israel, the first large-scale invasion of Israeli territory since the 1948 Arab Israeli War. The attacks, launched on the Jewish holiday Simchat Torah, initiated the ongoing Gaza war.

On October 8 2023, Israel responded with air force attacks on Palestine. The military's aim was to pound the Gaza Strip to "devastate the capabilities of the Hamas terror group."

So, as a Baptist church on October 7, we wept with Israel about the attacks and kidnappings and on October 8 we wept with the Palestinian's. We cried with both sides. Cried about the pain in Israel and the pain in Gaza. Our spirits ache in this conflict and we long for peace. It is hard to convey the amount of pain and suffering this war has caused.

As a Baptist church and especially as an evangelical church we have no voice in this conflict. In fact, it is dangerous to have a voice. We have a shared language and culture but there is much tension in co-existence. Sadly, we are also losing Christians as they move out of the middle east.

As Baptist churches in Israel we face many challenges. Our churches have become fearful and defensive. We struggle with being too inward focused. Many want to protect traditions at all costs. As we have no voice we struggle with our silence in the face of injustice. We also must deal with imported theologies that divide us. The prosperity Gospel is just one of these. We long for a stronger prophetic voice amongst us.

Why do we stay when we have all these challenges. We stay because we are called. Called to lead and do God's work. We invite you to pray for us. We also invite you to visit. We would ask that you don't come to save us, but you come to get to know us. Come and bear witness to what God is doing in the middle east.

This is especially hard for us because Baptists do not support Christian nationalism. We believe strongly in the freedom of religion. At the Congress it was announced that as an Alliance of Baptist Churches we would be aiming at one million signatures on a document that supports religious freedom.

Interestingly, the speaker went on to say that Islam is tired of Islam. There is a growing dissatisfaction amongst Muslims in the middle East with their religion being used for war and violence. They are challenging the notion that they must 'hate America' and hate 'Israel'. They are tired of the fact that 5% of Islam are causing all the problems, they do not support extreme Islam. Unfortunately, this minority has all the power. For example, in Egypt there are now estimated to be five million atheists and growing. This in a country where Islam is the state religion, they simply don't like what they see in religious terrorism.

We also had a speaker from Jordan. He said that the middle east is bleeding. The number of indigenous Christians in Jordan is decreasing. The figures from 2020 indicated that the Christian population has diminished by 4.2%. Christians are being driven out.

The Arab world believes that all westerners are Christians. They also believe that they are as corrupt as they see in the movies and media. They see the church in the west as imperialistic. They also struggle with the Christian doctrine of the trinity.

In the middle East, all westerners are considered evangelical Christians. In America they believe that Christians and the government work hand in hand. For instance, when President George Bush Junior announced the invasion of Iraq, he used the word 'crusade.' This is a loaded word for the middle east. Many took it to mean that America was launching a Holy war. He was also asked about the trustworthiness of the media reporting. He said that all media are biased in one way or another.

Christianity is growing the fastest in Africa. There are more Baptists in Africa than in any other continent. There are Baptists in forty five out of fifty African countries. This equates to fifty-five thousand churches and growing. For instance, in Nigeria, they have built on the work of the missionaries. Over time, they have added education and theological training. They have worked hard on evangelism and church planting. They have regular pastor fellowship meetings. It is now fashionable to say, "I'm a Baptist."

In China, the church faces religious restrictions. There are no youth or children allowed in the church, adults only. Despite this, a conference was held in 2025 in Malaysia that had representatives from ten thousand Chinese churches.

This was the key verse shared from the congress, **⁷ How beautiful on the mountains are the feet of those who bring good news who proclaim peace, who bring good tidings, who proclaim salvation who say to Zion, "Your God reigns!" ⁸ Listen! Your watchmen lift up their voices; together they shout for joy. When the Lord returns to Zion, they will see it with their own eyes ⁹ Burst into songs of joy together, you ruins of Jerusalem, for the Lord has comforted his people he has redeemed Jerusalem.**

¹⁰ The Lord will lay bare his holy arm in the sight of all the nations, and all the ends of the earth will see the salvation of our God. ¹¹ Depart, depart, go out from there! Touch no unclean thing! Come out from it and be pure, you who carry the articles of the Lord's house. ¹² But you will not leave in haste or go in flight; for the Lord will go before you, the God of Israel will be your rear guard. Isaiah 52:7-12

This verse is in a wider sense God wanting to rescue and restore his people. It reminds me of the old saying, "God helps those who help themselves". A true biblical response to this is, "God helps those who cannot help themselves". The same is true today for each one of us. If we think we are the solution to our problems, we are liable to think of God as an assistant or as a fall-back device. If only I had more money or a better job. This thinking deprives us of God's aid and help. What we need is more of our great God.

He is not our servant. We can fall into the trap of thinking that we don't need a saviour, maybe a teacher, a friend, or an example to follow, but not a saviour. It is only when we admit that there is nothing we can do for ourselves that we can receive the forgiveness, cleansing and empowerment he has been wanting to give us all along.

As we participate in the life of Christ and his church then his nature and character become available to us. This what Jesus meant when he prayed, ¹¹ **I will remain in the world no longer, but they are still in the world, and I am coming to you. Holy Father, protect them by the power of your name, the name you gave me, so that they may be one as we are one. John 17:11.**

These verses in Isaiah are about the wonder and the joy of the “Good News” of redemption. The early Christians understood that their message about Jesus Christ was the ultimate “Good News.” Further, they realised that the “Good News” referred to in such Old Testament passages as this one found their ultimate meaning in Jesus.

So, this is what hit me at this gathering of Baptists from around the world. Firstly, there are still so many lost people in the middle east that need the saving grace of Jesus. The best way to reach them is through the great commandment, our love and dedication to God and our love for our neighbour. However, it is dangerous to be a Christian in this part of the world. Further, I must lift my prayer life and always include the persecuted church not just in the middle east but around the world. One of the missions' speakers for mission month will address this, Graham and Sandy will be coming from the voice of the martyrs.

While I was there, I felt a fresh anointing to be your pastor and a fresh anointing on our church. I have been sitting on this verse for a while now. ¹² **For our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the powers of this dark world and against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms. Ephesians 6: 12.**

I have been asking God how all this relates to us at Ranui. While I was at conference the answer came. ¹ **In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. ² He was with God in the beginning. ³ Through him all things were made; without him nothing was made that has been made. ⁴ In him was life, and that life was the light of all mankind. ⁵ The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it. John 1: 1-6.**

We are that light and no matter how much the evil one throws at us he will not extinguish our light. Verse five says the light shines in the darkness and we will be that light. We will shine through our leadership, our ministries, the work, and love shown by our Trust and all those who work for the trust. I sense more is coming. We must keep praying and asking for the Holy Spirit to pour out its ministry amongst us for the sake of others.