

The Miami Beach Congress in Perspective

EACH Baptist World Congress has its own special character. The circumstances of the time and the place of meeting have more to do with this than the programme. By and large there has been too much similarity in the structure and main events of these gatherings, too much repetition of themes on which Baptists are presumed to agree, often too obvious an avoidance of controversial matters and joy in record-breaking statistics.

The Congresses cannot but be memorable occasions for those able to be present, however, and when one can look back on a number of them it is possible to see some progression and to note changes, both conscious and unconscious, in Baptist attitudes. My own first experience was in Berlin in 1934. The Congress had been postponed a year because of the international situation. To hold such a meeting in Hitler's Germany was a brave move, though some of the things said and done perhaps gave a false sense of security to many of those who attended from overseas. The declaration of Reichsbischof Müller to the imposing deputation that waited on him that the authorities had no intention of forcing Baptists into a united, national Church was, in fact, irrelevant. Much of the attention of the 3,000 delegates was focused on the celebration of the death of Carey, the birth of Spurgeon and the baptism of Oncken, a strange but significant conjunction of anniversaries. A resolution on "Racialism" made specific reference to "all racial animosity and every form of unfair discrimination towards the Jews, towards coloured people, or towards subject races in any part of the world", but the significance of the Barmen Declaration to which a group of Lutheran pastors had put their names in May 1934 was little understood. Lutherans and Baptists still looked upon one another with considerable mutual suspicion and displeasure.

Five years later, when the sixth Baptist World Congress met in Atlanta, the mood was one of relief, exhilaration and confidence. The summer of 1939 was a tense and clouded one so far as international affairs were concerned, but the threat of war, acute at the time of Munich and again over Danzig, was thought by many to have receded. To meet in Georgia was to meet in a state where Baptists are the dominant religious group. There were over 12,000 registered delegates of whom only a few hundred came from overseas. A pageant of Baptist history drew more than 60,000 people to the Ball Park and the title given by Dr. Rushbrooke to the

popular report he had commissioned me to write was *Baptists Speak to the World*. But few listened to what was said for before many of the European and Australasian participants had reached home World War II had begun. Nevertheless, the memory of the enthusiastic Atlanta meetings was a fillip to hope and endurance during the years of conflict.

Not all in high places were agreed as to the wisdom of holding another Congress within two years of the end of the War. There were doubts as to whether Copenhagen was the right venue and whether, in any case, a Baptist community as small as that in Denmark could carry the local arrangements. But Dr. Rushbrooke, in spite of advancing years, had set himself to restore Baptist fellowship as speedily as possible and, though he passed away a few months before the Congress opened what was there achieved was a justification of his persistence and his faith. More than 5,000 delegates attended; the departmental agencies of the Alliance for women, youth and relief were strengthened and developed; and carefully drafted declarations on peace, race relations and religious freedom were adopted. But aside from the renewal of Baptist fellowship, the two most important happenings on Copenhagen were the decision to move the headquarters of the Alliance from London to Washington and the defeat of an attempt to get before the Congress a motion critical to the World Council of Churches, the first Assembly of which was to be held the following year.

The holding of another Congress after an interval of only three years was dictated by a number of considerations. Dr. Arnold Ohrn succeeded Dr. W. O. Lewis as General Secretary in 1948. Dr. C. Oscar Johnson, one of the outstanding figures at the Copenhagen gathering, accepted the presidency for a limited period and agreed to give special attention to the raising of funds in America for the new headquarters. A Congress in 1950 would provide the opportunity for the normal interval of five years before a Golden Jubilee Congress in 1955. Moreover, the many loose ends inevitably left in Copenhagen, because of the circumstances of the time, gave added importance to the work of the new Executive. Its meeting in London in 1948 was as significant for the development of the Alliance as that held in the same place in 1920, shortly after the end of World War I.

Perhaps the most important contribution made to Baptist life on a world scale by the Cleveland Congress was the meeting of the Commissions which immediately preceded it. The setting up of such Commissions had been one of Dr. Rushbrooke's cherished projects. Made up on an international basis, in spite of the relatively limited number of delegates from outside the American continent, they considered Religious Liberty, Evangelism, Baptist World Missions, Contemporary Religious Movements and the

Doctrine of Baptism. Considerable divergencies of opinion were registered within each of the Commissions, not least in that on baptism, which in place of a report produced a questionnaire aimed at provoking discussion throughout the Baptist constituency and discussion related to the renewed interest in the rite of Christian initiation in other communions.

The Golden Jubilee Congress, held in London in 1955, is still a vivid memory to many in this country. In the preceding five years the visits of Dr. Townley Lord as president to many European lands including the Soviet Union, to South America, the United States and Canada, and to Australia and New Zealand, had made the Alliance a living reality to a greater number of Baptists than ever before. There were more than 8,500 registered delegates, just over half of them from the Americas. But more than 400 came from Australia, the Asian contingent numbered nearly 100, and the presence of representatives from the Soviet Union and from Yugoslavia meant that the "iron curtain" was no longer an impassable barrier, though the Baptists of China, Rumania, Poland, Hungary, Czechoslovakia and Bulgaria remained unrepresented. Dr. Billy Graham had become a member of a Southern Convention church a few years earlier and addressed the closing rally in the Arsenal Football Ground.

Five years later, when more than 12,500 delegates gathered for the Congress in Rio de Janeiro, Czechoslovakia, Hungary and Poland were represented, though not the other three countries. The Rio Congress proved a historic event for the Baptists of Brazil, but it quickened the evangelistic and missionary zeal of groups in many other lands as well. Dr. Billy Graham spoke to a gathering of perhaps as many as 185,000 persons, many of them Roman Catholics, in the great Maracana Stadium on the final Sunday afternoon. The impulse to evangelism which came from the Rio Congress continues. The Baptists of Brazil have since had their own nation-wide campaign. A united effort by all the Baptists of South America is planned for 1969 and the delegates from Brazil at Miami Beach appealed for a World Baptist effort in 1975. That many addresses in Rio had to be translated, that the amplifying system was inadequate, that transport to and from the meetings were unsatisfactory and that the European contingent numbered only 55 (including 14 from Britain) did not prevent the Congress being an important landmark in the history of the Alliance. The election of Dr. John Soren of Brazil, as president of the Alliance was more than a gesture to the host country. Of the previous nine presidents five had come from the United States, three from Britain and one from Canada. The danger of keeping effective leadership solely in Anglo-Saxon or North American hands had become increasingly apparent.

And so to Miami Beach 1965. It was twenty-six years since the Congress had been held in the area of the Southern Convention, far and away the largest single Baptist unit. Miami Beach is a luxurious, if artificial, creation for the purpose of expensive holidays and congresses. Baptists are numerous throughout Florida. In view of the increase in Southern Convention membership since 1939, it is perhaps surprising that the registrations did not number more than some 17,500. The European contingent was again small, though there were three times as many from Britain as in 1960. Brazil and Australia each sent substantial groups. Travel between the hotels and the Convention Hall and the Orange Bowl was little easier for many of the participants than that in Rio, but the accommodation in the Hall was markedly better. What will be remembered in the future? Not many of the addresses, I think, though they were of good quality. Almost all were based on the Congress theme "And the Truth shall make you free" and this meant that their range was limited. A series of panel discussions, ably directed by Dr. Theodore Adams, were appreciated and were a new feature. Two largely attended evening sessions in the Orange Bowl were addressed by Dr. Billy Graham, but they did not excite as much interest or feeling as the similar occasions in 1955 and 1960. What none who were present will forget was the interruption of the performance of the Oratorio "What is Man?" by a bomb hoax necessitating the immediate evacuation of the Convention Hall — a sorry end to an evening approached with high expectation and much careful preparation by choir and orchestra.

The three happenings at Miami which — at this short distance of time at any rate — stand out, are the interest shown in the sectional meetings, particularly those on the Doctrine of Baptism, the changes in the constitution and bye-laws affecting the Executive, and the election of the first African as president. Each of these matters is likely to have considerable significance in the future.

Dr. Beasley-Murray was responsible for a provocative opening up of the subject of baptism on the first afternoon, but it is likely that a paper on "Baptist Churches and the Baptism of other Churches" by almost any speaker would have attracted attention. He was followed by Dr. Willie Wickramasinghe on "The Discussion of Baptism in Ceylon". Four afternoons later an even larger company of both men and women gathered to hear a panel discussion on "Baptism and the Child", "Baptism and Confession", and "The Necessity of Baptism". At Cleveland in 1950 a dozen tutors discovered with some surprise their differences about both baptismal doctrine and practice. Fifteen years later at Miami a realisation of the complexity of the matter, theologically, ecclesiologically and practically, has begun to spread to far wider circles. Ought Baptists to be Anabaptists? Is the baptism of children of

ten years and under believers' baptism? These questions will continue to agitate Baptists in the years ahead and if they continue to receive widely divergent answers they will lead on to the query as to what really are Baptist distinctives regarding the Church and its ordinances.

At Berlin in 1934 it was agreed that the Executive consist of twenty-nine members, together with the president, past-presidents, seven vice-presidents, secretaries and treasurers, and that of these twenty-nine members four be from Britain, nine from the U.S.A., two from Canada and ten from other countries, "the remaining four to be chosen to represent special aspects of Baptist enterprise without regard to country". In Copenhagen in 1947 it was decided that the Youth Committee have two places on the Executive and that the number of ordinary members be increased to thirty-four, the countries named above retaining the existing quotas, the number of women being at least five; in addition, provision was made for the possible co-option of seven additional members. In London in 1955 the number of vice-presidents was increased to nine, the number of ordinary members to thirty-nine and the number of possible co-options to nine. The allocation of places to Britain, the U.S.A. and Canada disappeared. In its place came a statement in the bye-laws that "the minimum numbers from each continent shall be: Australasia two, Africa three, Latin America four, Asia five, Europe thirteen, North America twenty-three".

At Rio in 1960 two other small changes were made. Past general secretaries were made members of the Executive and it was decided that "any department duly established shall nominate two Executive Committee members", thus recognising the Women's Department and the new Men's Department along with the Youth Department.

All the above changes were the result of the growing number of Baptist Unions, Conventions and Associations in membership with the Alliance. In 1934 the total number of members in the churches was said to be some 11,000,000; it is now nearly 26,000,000. There are two and a half times as many in North America and Asia, three times as many in Australasia and in Central America, four and a half times as many in Africa, and more than six times as many in South America. In Europe the figure remains stationary.

The changes in the Constitution adopted in Miami Beach provide that each member organisation shall be entitled to a place on the Executive, additional places being allocated in accordance with the bye-laws, no one organisation holding more than 10% of the number of places in this category. The number of officers remains as before and each department continues to have two places on the Executive. The bye-laws can be amended by the

Executive itself, whereas the Constitution can only be changed by a two-thirds majority present and voting at a Congress. The by-law on membership of the Executive as now re-stated runs :

“ Each member organisation shall be entitled to representation . . . as follows : one for each organisation of up to 40,000 members; two for each organisation of 40,000 up to 200,000 members; and three for each organisation of 200,000 or more members. An additional ten places shall be allocated by the Executive Committee in the year before each Congress, taking into consideration the size of the member organisations and their support of the activities of the Alliance.”

At the same time the power which the General Secretary has had of himself appointing proxies disappears. Only the member organisation itself will be able in future to name a proxy in place of a committee member unable to attend a meeting.

Clearly, if all the Unions take advantage of these changes, the Executive will become much larger, more varied in personnel, but also much more representative. Up to now the individuals elected to the Executive have been those who have by some means or other found their way to Congresses and had their names presented to the Nominations Committee. They will now be directly appointed by their Unions. So long as the Southern Convention retains its actual and relative preponderance and contributes the largest share of the Alliance income, it will constitute the largest single group on the Executive, but only 10%.

Their readiness to accept these changes is greatly to the credit of the leaders of our Southern Baptist brethren. There are many Southern Baptist churches where the changes will not be easily understood. Talk of too close fellowship with the Baptists of the American Convention and the Canadian Baptist Federation is viewed with some suspicion. Challenges to the customary ways of observing and speaking of baptism are to them mystifying and disturbing. It will be necessary for Baptists of every land to show mutual restraint as together they work out the implications of what has been done and prepare for the next Congress, the suggested venue of which is Hong Kong.

Finally, there took place at Miami Beach the election as president of William R. Tolbert, jr., the Vice-President of the Republic of Liberia — the first African and the first layman called to this high office. This also represents a notable step forward and one that not all had anticipated would come so soon. Its warm acceptance was dramatically symbolised on the last morning of the Congress when Dr. Herschel H. Hobbs of Oklahoma City, a recent president of the Southern Baptist Convention, publicly embraced Dr. Tolbert and assured him of support.

The Miami Congress has helped to bring the Alliance a little nearer to the declared purpose of its Constitution that it serve as "the nerve centre and corporate will of Baptists throughout the world". But it will need the constant prayer, the informed interest and the generous support of Baptists of all lands, if it is to maintain and deepen the unity of faith and purpose, of which Dr. Oscar Johnson spoke in the final address at Miami Beach; if it is to develop wise relationships with its sister confessional bodies — a matter of growing importance; and if it is to adopt right attitudes to the World Council of Churches and to the Roman Catholic Church. At Miami Beach the B.W.A. Executive side-stepped any reconsideration of its attitude to the Vatican Council, but among the new vice-presidents of the Alliance are two members of the Central Committee of the World Council of Churches.

British Baptists still have an important role to play in the life of the Alliance. They are looked to by those of both east and west. The re-appointment of Sir Donald Finnemore as Eastern Treasurer and the appointment of the Rev. C. Ronald Gouling as Associate Secretary in Europe are indications of this, and a challenge to continued fellowship, service and co-operation with our brethren throughout the world.

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