

## 2019 Gathering unpacks liberty without liberation

by **Toya Richards**

Some 300 members and friends of the Alliance of Baptists converged on Washington, D.C. last weekend to explore liberty through the framework of liberation, and to consider the call to dismantle racism in their faith and community contexts.

All aspects of the April 26-28 Annual Gathering held at Calvary Baptist Church were infused with the theme “What is Liberty Without Liberation?” and many walked away from the yearly all-call with new or renewed energy to break down the multitude of barriers that separate individuals and the deeply rooted systems that privilege the white, dominant center.

“Especially for Baptists in the U.S. there’s a lot of privilege. We like to talk about our history of persecution, but we’re in this Protestant majority now,” said Brent Newberry, co-chair of the 2019 Gathering. “We’ve gotten comfortable with the freedoms that we have, but we aren’t looking at the responsibility that comes with that.”

“We need to come together and focus on what liberation looks like for a lot of different people,” he said.

Last week that examination actually began a day before the Annual Gathering got underway when the Alliance board of directors met for its spring meeting. Included in its business was a review of its commitment to making the 32-year-old Alliance an organization free of racism.

The board formalized that pledge in a statement it presented at the 2018 Annual Gathering, and now a board sub-group has been tasked with putting shape and form to the effort.

Alliance co-directors Paula Clayton Dempsey and Carole Collins echoed the board’s commitment to dismantling racism in the Alliance while presenting their staff report during the Alliance annual meeting, held over two days during the Gathering.

“As co-directors of the Alliance, we celebrate the statement adopted and presented by the board at this meeting one year ago which outlines ‘in order to maintain our integrity and live into the values we hold dear as the Alliance ... we are called to be a part of the solution to the pain and hurt caused by systemic racism in the world,’” Clayton Dempsey said.

“The staff are being called to take the next step and move out of the way so that those not a part of the dominant culture can be heard — not only loved by us, but heard, embraced — put out front for all to hear — leaders who teach and we follow.”

Included among the “teachers” present at the Annual Gathering was Jacqui Lewis, pastor of Middle Collegiate Church in New York City, who was the proclaimer for Friday worship. The activist and advocate for justice and equality also was part of a panel discussion examining the intersections between African American and Palestinian people.

Wherever there is suffering and injustice, “those are our people,” she said during the panel discussion shared with Alaa Hammouda, advocacy media officer at the Gaza Community Mental Health Programme in the Gaza Strip, Palestine. “No one is free until everyone is free.”

Lewis spoke of the importance of finding the “sweet spot” between liberty and liberation and love, and challenged those present to think about what that, then, should make them do. “We need a revolution.”

This call to change, and be a catalyst for change, was reiterated over and over again throughout the Gathering. It was heard in:

- Two statements – [Sex, Gender and Sexuality](#) and [Children in Detention](#) – approved by the Alliance body, and in another one submitted by the board for information – [Violence Against Places of Worship](#).
- A dinner and discussion (<https://youtu.be/ISQe3TDACyY>) sponsored by the Baptist Joint Committee for Religious Liberty which featured Linda McKinnish Bridges, president of Baptist Theological Seminary at Richmond; and Corey Walker, visiting professor at the University of Richmond and senior fellow in religious freedom at the Religious Freedom Center of the Freedom Forum Institute.
- A diversity of workshops centered on everything from liberation in song to the state of clergywomen. Presenter Christian McIvor, whose session dealt with creation justice, said, “I’m hoping that the people that came will be re-inspired and reinvigorated to go back into their home watersheds and be effective liberators of the land in their own contexts.”
- Bible study with Cláudio Carvalhaes, who also served as worship leader throughout the Gathering. “A major aspect of our faith is grounded in one thing – incarnation. God with us. Flesh and bones, sweat and tears, blood. God is here,” he said during his Sunday study.

“God refuses to let us tell God how to party, and who to party with,” Wendell Griffen, an Arkansas circuit judge and the pastor of New Millennium Church in Little Rock, Ark., preached during the Gathering. “God wants everybody in the party.

Griffen, a member of the Annual Gathering planning team, preached in place of scheduled Saturday proclaimer Otis Moss III, who was unable to make it to Washington, D.C. due to bad weather.

God says, “I’m the God who’s stuck on oneness; I’m the God who will not hang up because of your hang-ups,” said Griffen, who suggested the Annual Gathering theme. “God looks for us, waits for us, calls us and then brings us into the house.”

Videos of Gathering worship services are available on both the Alliance Facebook and YouTube sites. Attendees who downloaded and used the Gathering event app also still have access to materials housed there for the next six months.