

# **Experiencing Our Essential Oneness in Christ: How Studying at the International Baptist Theological Seminary Influences My Global Ministry Through the Baptist World Alliance**

Julie Justus Williams

Julie Justus Williams reflects on how her time at the International Baptist Theological Seminary (IBTS) in 2004–2005 provided a foundation for ministry at the Baptist World Alliance (BWA) as the Director of Global Partnerships and Unity. At IBTS, Justus Williams experienced unity in Christ through intentional community, diversity, and corporate worship. The essential oneness in Christ that she witnessed in community at IBTS is instructive to her success at the BWA, and to carrying out the ministry entrusted to her by the worldwide Baptist family. The lessons she learned and relationships she created at IBTS are indispensable as she serves the BWA community of 47 million.

## **Keywords**

IBTS; BWA; community; worship; diversity

## **Introduction**

I attended the International Baptist Theological Seminary (IBTS) — the flagship institution of the European Baptist Federation (EBF) — from 2004 to 2005 when it was located in Prague, the Czech Republic. I am grateful for my theological studies and the way in which they have equipped me to serve global Baptists at the Baptist World Alliance (BWA). I did not know how deeply my experience at IBTS would influence my work at the BWA, where I have worked ever since I finished my graduate studies, but looking back I can see the profound imprint of my time at IBTS on my work.

Many people idealise their educational experience, but I firmly believe my experience at IBTS was exceptional. The international character and emphasis of the institution is unmatched, especially within the worldwide Baptist family. The seminary is also distinguished for its dual focus on both Baptist studies and fostering intentional community across cultures. Since its inception in 1949, IBTS has been devoted to bringing ‘together the faith community, academia, mission, church development, spirituality and community as: a learning community; a community of spirituality; a

multicultural community; a community of higher academic rigour specialising in research and reflection of Baptist issues'.<sup>1</sup> The IBTS community proved to be both life-changing and foundational in my calling to serve with the BWA. Of course, studying in picturesque Prague, where I often had to pinch myself when walking through the Old Town section of the city, gazing at the city's magnificent history, was a welcome luxury.

My decision to attend IBTS was initiated by Reid Trulson, then the American Baptist International Ministries area director for Europe and the Middle East, and who had previously been an American Baptist missionary in the Czech Republic. I met Trulson when I served on the American Baptist Churches USA General Board and the Board of International Ministries from 2001 to 2004. When he heard that I was considering pursuing my post-graduate studies outside the United States, he suggested that I visit IBTS. Since I had already started my career at the BWA, attending a seminary affiliated with one of the BWA's regional bodies felt like a natural decision, and my desire to move abroad was solidified by my participation in the BWA annual gatherings. I had taken several courses on mission at Eastern University and had participated in several short-term overseas mission trips thus I had some mission experience. At the time, the idea of attending IBTS was far more exciting than intimidating, though intimidating all the same. When I realised that IBTS was more affordable and offered a shorter graduate degree program than any comparable US seminary, it was nearly impossible to consider any other option. We all know it is hard to compete with time and money!

I soon discovered that I was not the first to affiliate myself with the BWA and IBTS; their shared history was already rich. Many leaders have woven the history of these two Baptist organisations together, most notably Josef Nordenhaug and Denton Lotz. Nordenhaug was the first president of the seminary, then located in Rüslikon, Zurich, Switzerland, serving from 1950 to 1960. He left the school to become the fourth BWA General Secretary where he remained until his death in 1969.<sup>2</sup> In 1973, American Baptist missionary Denton Lotz joined the Rüslikon seminary faculty.<sup>3</sup> Lotz then became the sixth BWA General Secretary in 1988, serving until his retirement in 2007. I was privileged to join the BWA under Lotz's leadership.

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<sup>1</sup> 'History', *IBTS Centre Amsterdam* <<https://www.ibts.eu/about/history/>> [accessed 22 June 2020].

<sup>2</sup> James Leo Garrett Jr, 'The Internationalization of the Alliance, 1960-1970', in *Baptists Together in Christ, 1905-2005*, ed. by Richard V. Pierard (Birmingham, Alabama: Samford University Press, 2005), pp. 129–168 (p. 133).

<sup>3</sup> Carol Woodfin, *An Experiment in Christian Internationalism: A History of the European Baptist Theological Seminary* (Macon, Georgia: History & Heritage Society, 2013), p. 97.

However, the shared history of the BWA and IBTS extends beyond these two iconic leaders. Long before the creation of the European Baptist Federation, members of the BWA committed to cultivating Baptist theological education on the continent. This commitment is recorded in a resolution passed at the first European Baptist Congress in 1908, establishing an ‘international European Baptist University College in a central place’.<sup>4</sup> Although there was a question as to the location of the school, the desire to create this international institution continued. In 1911 the continental committee of the BWA reaffirmed this commitment and even asserted that the BWA should own the school’s campus.<sup>5</sup> Many decades later, under the EBF’s stewardship, according to BWA Historian Ken Manley,

the regional body moved the school from Rüschtikon, Switzerland, to Prague, Czech Republic. When the new facilities were dedicated in April 1997, EBF Secretary Walter declared it would be the “bridge both of east-west and north-south”.<sup>6</sup>

The idea of a bridge between nations and cultures also is central to the BWA. Established in 1905, the ambitious mission of the global Baptist body is no less relevant today. The preamble to the BWA Constitution states the following:

The Baptist World Alliance, extending over every part of the world, exists as an expression of the essential oneness of Baptist people in the Lord Jesus Christ, to impart inspiration to the fellowship, and to provide channels for sharing concerns and skills in witness and ministry. This Alliance recognizes the traditional autonomy and interdependence of Baptist churches and member bodies.<sup>7</sup>

The essential oneness, our commonality in God, is at the heart of my current position with the BWA. The scope of my role as the Director of Global Partnerships and Unity can be daunting, but it is also a joy to serve in this capacity. One of my main responsibilities is to relate to our 241 member bodies, located in 126 countries and territories, who represent over 47 million Baptists around the world. Serving in this capacity for the past decade, I have sought to nurture the essential oneness of the Baptist community by shepherding 28 new member bodies into the BWA. In previous positions at the BWA I served by administering relief and development through Baptist World Aid, advocating for human rights through our Freedom and Justice office, advancing theological reflection

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<sup>4</sup> *Baptist World Alliance First European Baptist Congress, held in Berlin, 1908 (August 29th to September 3rd)*, *Authorised record of proceedings*, ed. by J. H. Rushbrooke (London: Baptist Union Publication Department, 1908), pp. 234, 237.

<sup>5</sup> Woodfin, *An Experiment in Christian Internationalism*, p. 1.

<sup>6</sup> Ken R. Manley, ‘Forward into the New Century, 1995-2005’, in *Baptists Together in Christ, 1905-2005*, ed. by Richard V. Pierard (Birmingham, Alabama: Samford University Press, 2005), pp. 275–299 (p. 291).

<sup>7</sup> ‘Constitution of the Baptist World Alliance as Amended by the General Council, July 2020’ <http://baptistworld.org/constitution> [accessed 27 August 2020] (p. 1).

through our Study and Research office, and promoting global mission through our Evangelism and Education initiatives.

The essential oneness in Christ that I witnessed in my community at IBTS has been instructive to my success at the BWA, and to carrying out the ministry entrusted to me by the worldwide Baptist family. While I might be able to fill this entire journal with stories and anecdotes, I will focus my reflections on how IBTS provided a foundation for my ministry at the BWA through its intentional community, intentional diversity, and intentional corporate worship. I have a deep respect for the vast differences among BWA Baptists and the unity we have, as Paul states in Ephesians 4:5, in ‘One Lord, One Faith, One Baptism’.

## **Intentional Community**

When I arrived at IBTS, I was instantly invited to join in community. My earliest memories at IBTS are of a faculty-led community walking tour of Prague, a lively open house games night with all the students, and the weekly van trip to the neighbourhood grocery store, where I tried to figure out what kind of milk to buy using a Czech phrase book (it took me three weeks). Even today, I am reminded of how important it was to take a break each day and fellowship over coffee. The IBTS custom was to pause mid-morning and offer students, faculty and staff a time to find a respite from studies, teaching and work to share life and be together as a community. The daily fellowship was where bonds of friendship and community began and were cultivated, among the ‘record 140 students from forty nations in the autumn term of 2004’.<sup>8</sup>

During those first weeks, IBTS instilled in me the value of getting out of my comfort zone to seek global community. Taking a leap of faith and choosing to study in Prague gave me the opportunity to share a flat with Helle Liht, who is now the Assistant General Secretary of the European Baptist Federation. By intentionally crossing cultures, I met Marko and Tina Grozdanovi, leaders in the Union of the Baptist Christians in the Republic of North Macedonia. Marko and Tina offered me lifelong friendship and introduced me to the joys of Balkan hospitality. There are so many others as well, and because of my time at IBTS I am blessed with relationships that help me get my work, the work of the BWA, done effectively.

Beyond the natural friendships, I learned the art of cultivating cross-cultural relationships at IBTS. Without this skill, I would not be an effective leader for the BWA, where gathering cultures is a priority. James Henry Rushbrooke, who was involved with the BWA from its beginning and would

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<sup>8</sup> Woodfin, *An Experiment in Christian Internationalism*, p. 361.

later become the organisation's first General Secretary, emphasised the importance of gathering together in person at Baptist World Congresses. In a 1938 article he stated,

These World Congresses are not merely occasions for the election of officers and committees and the delivery of speeches. They have furnished opportunities for a remarkable and intimate drawing together of Baptists from all parts of the world. Links of personal friendship now unite our people around the globe.<sup>9</sup>

I intentionally pursued practical community exposure to Baptist life in Europe when I was at IBTS. I volunteered part-time with the EBF while living on campus. This was convenient because the EBF offices had just moved to IBTS. From there, I witnessed the leadership transition of the EBF Regional Secretary, from Bulgarian Theo Angelov to Englishman Tony Peck. In my role at the BWA, I personally relate to each one of the BWA's current six regional secretaries. The first-hand experience and insight I gained from seeing how the regional secretaries' roles work and hearing their point of view on matters pertaining to the larger worldwide Baptist family, have proven to be invaluable. I understand some of the challenges that regional bodies face, including funding and how they strive to relate to the worldwide Baptist family. I believe this small insight helps me to relate better with the regional secretaries.

As part of my volunteer work with the EBF, I also had the privilege of working alongside British historian Alec Gilmore as he organised and catalogued both IBTS and EBF materials in the basement of the library.<sup>10</sup> Through his stories and passion for preserving the past, I came to appreciate the importance of maintaining the BWA records for those who will serve after me. I have been able to directly build on that interest because, for the past decade, one of my responsibilities at the BWA has been to publish the annual yearbook. This publication, in part, documents the leaders of the BWA, its member bodies, and the statistics for the worldwide organisation. It is a vital historical record for future generations. Through this publication we are able to preserve some of our shared history, which reflects our oneness in Christ. I am forever indebted to Gilmore for allowing me to see his joy in documenting and safeguarding the past, so that it can be a blessing and a catalyst for the future.

In addition to the yearbook, I oversee the modest BWA library. By recommendation from fellow IBTS alum Melody Maxwell, we asked Bill and Nancy Lively to catalogue the BWA library in 2018. I met Bill and Nancy during my time at IBTS, when they volunteered in a similar capacity to nurture the seminary's growing library. It was a joy to rekindle our

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<sup>9</sup> J. H. Rushbrooke, 'The Baptist World Alliance', *Baptist Quarterly*, 9, no.2 (1938): 67–79 <<https://doi.org/10.1080/0005576X.1938.11750454>> (p. 69).

<sup>10</sup> Woodfin, *An Experiment in Christian Internationalism*, p. 368.

friendship as they came to the BWA office to sort through our materials and make the catalogue available online, which enables researchers around the world to see what is included among the BWA's 1,700 volumes.<sup>11</sup> Their work has further enabled us to preserve and document the stories of the BWA's international community.

We always have the benefit of hindsight, and as I look back at my experience at IBTS I am exceedingly grateful for the people I met, who also valued the intentional community on offer, and nurtured it, and helped me to formulate the expansive vision I needed to work in a global church organisation. My efforts to serve God through my ministry at the BWA have been profoundly shaped by what I learned living in intentional community at IBTS. The people I met both inside and outside the classroom, and the relationships we forged, are the foundation of my service these past fourteen years.

## **Intentional Diversity**

More than just introducing me to intentional community, IBTS helped foster my deep appreciation for our diversity as Baptists. This was evidenced both in where students and faculty hailed from on the map, and in their cultural and theological understandings.

Diversity has been a feature and focus of the seminary since it was created. Although IBTS is in Europe, my attendance at the school was not an anomaly. The first cohort of students hailed from fifteen different countries, including the United States. It was especially enlightening to read that the first administration decided 'Americans should be carefully screened and the number strictly limited'.<sup>12</sup> I wonder if that was the case when I attended!

By living in a diverse community, where many different languages were spoken, my eyes and ears were opened in a new way and my perspective was uniquely changed. I echo the observation of one visitor to the campus during the early years, who reported that the seminary was definitively diverse after hearing 'grace said in five different languages at the five meals he ate with students in the dining room'.<sup>13</sup> Never before had I lived alongside so many who spoke a different first language than I did. Having to navigate the differences in linguistic understanding was formational for me. I learned to choose my words more carefully, because what we say and how we say it must be understood through the lens of

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<sup>11</sup> The Baptist World Alliance online library catalogue is available at <https://www.librarything.com/catalog/BWAlibrary/yourlibrary>.

<sup>12</sup> Woodfin, *An Experiment in Christian Internationalism*, p. 16.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 16.

another language. I also learned that humour does not always translate across cultures, which was a potential pitfall for my quick tongue. I was humbled when I realised that so many of my classmates were taking instruction and pursuing their master's level education in their third or fourth language. I quickly understood that since I was communicating in my first language — my only language at that — I had no excuse for not getting my assignments done on time!

Being exposed to such linguistic diversity at IBTS instilled in me the importance of having the BWA's publications and materials available in more than just English. In my time at the BWA, I have had the privilege of organising volunteers to translate important BWA documents, one of which has been translated into more than twenty languages. This year, the BWA also celebrated linguistic diversity through our virtual Pentecost services that took place in May. As a BWA team, we were committed to including songs and testimonies from all six regions and an Acts 2 scripture reading was voiced in five different languages.

With so many different languages and cultures gathered at IBTS, not to mention personalities, it was important to establish a unique culture for the seminary. Keith Jones, the then Rector, ensured we had a common understanding by capitalising on the concept of the 'Swiss Train' clock, which is revered for its punctuality. Jones often explained that if we arrived at 09:00 for chapel services, we would be late because the 'train would have already left the station'. There are so many different concepts of time around the world, we would never have known whose concept was governing without the obvious and emphatic example of the Swiss trains. Although it was sometimes hard to make it to chapel on time, I appreciated the need to develop a collective culture for a diverse group of people. In fact, I have tried to do the same in my time at the BWA, and I often think of the Swiss trains when I plan our worship and business meetings at Annual Gatherings. If we do not pull away from the station at the right time, I have found that our discussions often do get derailed!

The most extensive BWA document on diversity and creating a common culture is the *Principles and Guidelines for Intra-Baptist Relationships*. Drafted by the General Secretary's Special Commission on Intra-Baptist Relations, it was approved by both the BWA Executive Committee and General Council in 2013. The document 'aims to provide a framework for BWA's response to the diversity of language, culture, opinions and perspectives in meetings and in the various operations of the international body'.<sup>14</sup> I was fortunate to work alongside then-General

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<sup>14</sup> 'Covenant on Intra-Baptist Relationships', *Baptist World Alliance* (2013) <<https://www.baptistworld.org/intra-baptist-covenant/>> [accessed 27 August 2020]. I commend the work

Secretary Neville Callam and commission co-chairs Daniel Vestal and Edward Wheeler as they led the crafting of the covenant. The *Principles and Guidelines for Intra-Baptist Relationships* embodies both what I learned and experienced at IBTS, and what lies at the heart of our fellowship as a worldwide Baptist family:

BWA seeks to live out its commitment to unity in the face of the diversity that marks its membership. It regards this diversity as a God-given gift and therefore essential to effectively represent the kingdom of God despite certain obvious challenges. In order to achieve the goals for which the BWA was established, and which continue to be the foundation for cooperation among BWA members, the BWA must maintain a delicate balance. That balance is between maintaining a unity of purpose and common commitment even as the organization seeks to honor and be blessed by the diversity that characterizes the fellowship.<sup>15</sup>

I have the joy to work towards the balance mentioned above in my position as Director of Global Partnerships and Unity. Diversity is so vital to our life together that the *Principles and Guidelines for Intra-Baptist Relationships* is included as part of all our major meeting materials as a call to unity and intentional communication. While it is a lofty benchmark, I pray that the BWA continues its commitment to cultivating diversity by empowering Baptists from ‘various cultures, languages, customs, histories, racial identities, ways of expressing theological conviction, and personal and communal encounters with Christ in different cultural contexts’ to join, flourish, and be heard in the BWA movement.<sup>16</sup>

In addition to being introduced to a diversity of languages while studying at IBTS, I was also introduced to a wide array of theologies held by Baptists. Yes, in the classroom I was exposed to both Baptist and non-Baptist theological giants such as James McClendon, Glen Stassen, C. René Padilla, Stanley Hauwerwas, and Nancey Murphy. However, it was also through my many friendships that I learned more about differing theological understandings. For example, I heard stories about places in Eastern Europe where men and women still sit on opposite sides of the church aisle. I heard perspectives of Arab Christians living in Palestine. Not everyone held the same view of the role of women in ministry and other hot button theological topics. We also differed on what we thought a good Christian should or should not do. By sharing our lives and viewpoints we learned what mattered most was our unity in Christ.

I believe the unique diversities inherent in my experience at IBTS provided a theological perspective that enables me to relate with more

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to all who are interested in an archetype of criteria for cultivating respectful relationships and meaningful organisational dialogue.

<sup>15</sup> ‘Principles and Guidelines for Intra-Baptist Relationships’, *Baptist World Alliance* (2013) <<https://www.BaptistWorld.org/intra-baptist-covenant-english>> [accessed 23 June 2020] (p. 1).

<sup>16</sup> ‘Principles and Guidelines for Intra-Baptist Relationships’, p.1.



understanding toward each of our member churches within the BWA, scattered across the globe, but united under the umbrella of baptistic theology. This perspective is essential as I help shepherd new groups through the membership process and welcome them to the BWA family. Unfortunately, theological diversity can sometimes be a stumbling block in the life of the BWA. During my tenure, some member bodies have decided to disassociate from the worldwide organisation. It is always heart-breaking to receive news that an organisation has chosen separation instead of fellowship. However, more often than not, it is our diversity in theological understanding that gives us a beautiful glimpse of our unity in Christ.

The BWA maintains theological diversity among the member bodies and the fellowship of 47 million Baptists by focusing on our essential oneness in Christ. During the BWA membership application process, prospective members are invited to review the ‘Message to the Churches’ that was adopted in 1970 by the 12th Baptist World Congress in Tokyo, Japan. If they do not already have a statement of faith, applicant bodies are further invited to ‘comment on the views held by [their] organization in relation to this excerpt’:

We [...] recognize the Lord Jesus Christ, as revealed in the Holy Scriptures, as the sole and absolute authority in all matters of faith and practice, realizing that in so believing we ourselves are under a solemn obligation to be continually seeking to know more perfectly his will. We hold that each church has liberty under the guidance of the Holy Spirit to interpret and implement Christ’s teaching, understanding the responsibility resting on us of ensuring that each church is a true fellowship of believing persons. Our understanding of Christian baptism of believers [...] stresses the necessity of conversion and personal faith and carries with it the recognition that we are called in Christ to a new life of goodness with Christ and with one another.<sup>17</sup>

This essential statement of faith encourages members of the BWA to unify their fellowship with the global Baptist movement in spite of any focused theological debates that might distract from unity in Christ. It prioritises unity and an essential oneness in Christ over any litany of disagreements, while still allowing space for doctrinal growth. There are certain baptistic principles that members must adhere to in order to join the BWA, but they do not constitute an exclusionary theological examination. Recognising the beauty of unity that comes from cultivating diversity is something that Baptists have long been known for. IBTS showed me the importance of celebrating this diversity and it informs the inclusionary way I foster relationships with incoming member bodies to the BWA.

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<sup>17</sup> ‘Statement of Faith Claims Form’, *BWA Membership Application*, BWA files.

## Intentional Worship

The culture of corporate worship at IBTS prepared and trained me for my role with the global Baptist family. As part of my responsibilities with the BWA, I also oversee and coordinate the times of worship during our March Executive Committee meetings and our Annual Gatherings. Additionally, I contribute to the crafting of worship experiences for the Congress main sessions.

The fabric of corporate worship was woven into the DNA of IBTS at its inception. Carol Woodfin reports that when IBTS first opened, ‘religious activities, including daily chapel services, comprised a significant part of student life’.<sup>18</sup> Later, under the leadership of Josef Nordenhaug, ‘on class days, Tuesdays through Fridays, students and faculty worshipped together in a chapel led by a student, faculty member, or a guest’.<sup>19</sup> This communal spiritual practice continued throughout the years and so when I arrived in 2004, I welcomed the opportunity to worship each weekday morning with the rest of the IBTS community at 09:00, Swiss train time.

During these morning chapel gatherings, I encountered a multitude of perspectives and voices. Each member of the community would take turns organising and facilitating our worship together. We would sing songs that were both old and new to me, read Scripture, and pray for each other and the world. The call to pray for the world was tangible since, as described by former Rector Keith Jones, the IBTS chapel had

a large map of the world down one side as a reminder of people who will not and cannot pray for themselves. Prayer comes in many forms and many languages — perhaps extempore prayer in ten or fifteen languages. The needs of the world, nations, countries, peoples, are at the heart of this real intercession.<sup>20</sup>

Hearing the Lord’s Prayer in multiple languages at BWA gatherings still reminds me of IBTS chapel.

The experience of praying daily for the world at IBTS has served to centre my understanding of the BWA’s responsibility to regularly lift up all members of the BWA family in our prayers. Following the World Council of Churches Ecumenical Prayer Cycle, the BWA staff has a tradition of praying for each one of our member bodies in turn, throughout the year, through our weekly devotions. The rotation is organised in such a way that by the end of December, each year, all 241 member bodies of the BWA have

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<sup>18</sup> Woodfin, *An Experiment in Christian Internationalism*, p. 17.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 41.

<sup>20</sup> Keith Jones, ‘An Anabaptist-style Communion at Šárka Valley Community Church, Prague’, *Anabaptist Mennonite Network* <<https://amnetwork.uk/resource/an-anabaptist-style-communion-at-sarka-valley-community-church-prague/>> [accessed 23 June 2020].

been lifted up in prayer by the BWA staff. According to the World Council of Churches,

The Ecumenical Prayer Cycle enables us to journey in prayer through every region of the world and through every week of the year affirming our solidarity with Christians all over the world, brothers and sisters living in diverse situations, experiencing diverse problems and sharing diverse gifts.<sup>21</sup>

During our weekly devotions, before the BWA staff pray for the member bodies and other Christians in a specific country, space is given for individuals to share personal experiences. I am particularly grateful for the weeks that we pray for member bodies in Europe because it gives me an opportunity to share about the ministry of friends, most of whom I first met at IBTS.

The highlight of corporate worship at IBTS was sharing in the Lord's Supper each Wednesday. Understandably, this service was longer than the other days of the week and also included a short homily. Standing together in a large circle around the chapel, this was my first real experience of the common cup. The bread was baked every week by Denise Jones. After breaking and passing the bread, we were invited to partake in the cup, a 'simple pottery chalice made in Bohemia' filled with wine 'from the vineyards around Mikulov, Moravia, where once Hubmaier's Anabaptist community enjoyed a peaceful existence'.<sup>22</sup> Admittedly, my time at IBTS started with me hesitantly dipping the bread in the chalice, unaccustomed to anything so communal. However, I soon embraced the practice of the common cup. Jones notes that 'people gather in a circle round the table. Not for them the form and distance of pews or rows of chairs with a table set ahead and apart. The way of Gathering is inclusive and participatory.'<sup>23</sup>

This visualisation of equality, fellowship, and participation, both inside and outside of worship, impacted me greatly and the bond that I felt each week, and the feeling of shared community, is one that I have not experienced since leaving IBTS. Perhaps the closest I came to feeling the same sense of community was at the 21st Baptist World Congress, when all the participants from 80 countries were invited to partake in the Lord's Supper. General Secretary Neville Callam captures the experience well in his introduction to the Congress report book:

In this Communion service, the multi-cultural groups of followers of Jesus Christ from across the world remembered the story of God's saving actions in Jesus Christ, rejoiced over the presence with them of the risen Lord and treasured with

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<sup>21</sup> 'In God's Hands: The Ecumenical Prayer Cycle', *World Council of Churches* <<https://www.oikoumene.org/en/resources/prayer-cycle>> [accessed 23 June 2020].

<sup>22</sup> Jones, 'An Anabaptist-style Communion'.

<sup>23</sup> Jones, 'An Anabaptist-style Communion'.

deep anticipation the assembly at the eschatological banquet that their own gathering prefigured.<sup>24</sup>

IBTS also exposed me to different styles of worship that have impacted how I approach corporate worship on an international scale. Two notable European models come to mind. It was at IBTS that I first learned about the meditative style of worship that is associated with the Taizé community of monks based in France.<sup>25</sup> Asserting that ‘singing is one of the most essential elements of worship’, their signature ‘short songs, repeated again and again, give it a meditative character’ which ‘thus becomes a way of listening to God’. At IBTS I experienced how this form of worship ‘allows everyone to take part in a time of prayer together and to remain together in attentive waiting on God’.<sup>26</sup> This repetitive and meditative style makes worship accessible to all, using simple words and tunes, and is an invaluable source for me to draw from when I am coordinating worship for a group of global participants from vastly different cultures, languages, and traditions of worship. My experience with the Taizé worship style has also helped me see the importance of incorporating approachable elements of worship that are easily learned because there are few songs known universally. We must learn together and learn quickly.

The other European worship style that I was introduced to at IBTS was that of the Northumbria Community. Headquartered in Northumberland, England, the Northumbria Community is self-described as ‘a dispersed network of people from different backgrounds, streams and edges of the Christian faith’ joined in the ‘desire to embrace and express an ongoing exploration into a new way for living, through a new monasticism, as Christians that offers hope in our changed and changing culture’.<sup>27</sup> The partnership between IBTS and the Northumbria Community began in 2005, while I was a student, when the community sent a group to Prague.<sup>28</sup> I can remember vividly the morning chapel services during their visits where we shared together in portions of their daily office. I still find myself humming the tunes of the Celtic blessings they incorporate into their gathering times. The exposure to the community not only provided a resource to draw from when creating worship services, but their dedication to community is something I attempt to emulate with the global Baptist family.

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<sup>24</sup> Neville Callam, ‘Preparing for Congress’, in *Jesus Christ The Door: The Official Report of the Twenty-first Baptist World Congress*, ed. by Eron Henry (Falls Church, Virginia: Baptist World Alliance, 2015) pp. 5–10 (p. 9).

<sup>25</sup> ‘Meditative Singing’, *Taizé* <[https://www.taize.fr/en\\_article338.html](https://www.taize.fr/en_article338.html)> [accessed 23 June 2020].

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>27</sup> ‘Introducing the Community’, *Northumbria Community* <<https://www.northumbriacommunity.org/who-we-are/introducing-the-community/>> [accessed 23 June 2020].

<sup>28</sup> Woodfin, *An Experiment in Christian Internationalism*, p. 377.

When I was at IBTS, I also participated in the church community that met every Sunday in the seminary's chapel. My initial intent was to focus on investing in the community where I already lived since I knew that my time in Prague would be short, but my experiences there also became instructive. Many of my fellow students attended Šárka Valley Community Church (SVCC) for the same reasons I did, and so it became an extension of my communal daily experience with them. Woodfin notes that this was part of the intent of the church plant, 'because of so many diverse groups on the campus [...] building cohesive community proved to be a challenge. The Šárka Valley Community Church, constituted in June 1999, met in the IBTS chapel and enhanced the seminary's spiritual life.'<sup>29</sup>

One practice that deeply impacted me was the monthly agape meal following the SVCC Sunday morning worship service. This was more than the potluck fellowship meal that I was accustomed to. IBTS then-Rector Keith Jones also served as SVCC moderator for a time. He best describes the gathering:

When the meal takes place in the setting of an agape, of course the bread is broken and shared round the table before the meal begins. Children present have the special privilege of dipping their bread in milk and honey (this is not allowed to the baptized!) helping them see with anticipation the koinonia yet to come. After the meal, gathered from food all have brought, has been shared, the cup passes around the table.<sup>30</sup>

The notion of the agape meal, with everyone having a seat at the table, has also impacted my ministry at the BWA. I have come to understand that the BWA is responsible for providing more than just a seat at the table. The BWA provides an equal seat at the table for each member of the worldwide Baptist family. I strive to see all those that I interact with via email, at meetings, and at the BWA office as Christ sees them, as children of God. Dietrich Bonhoeffer's words express this: 'God did not make this person [...] to dominate and control, but in order that I might find above him the Creator. Now the other person [...] becomes the occasion of joy, whereas before he was only a nuisance.'<sup>31</sup> I have not always agreed with every person in the worldwide Baptist family, but the community we are called to be a part of is diverse, messy, and wonderful in all of its humanity. Our Baptist community is not only for the ordained, or the president of a convention or union. Our community is all 47 million BWA Baptists, regardless of age, gender, and theological education. Nothing is more expressive of our Baptist identity than loving and promoting equality in worship.

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<sup>29</sup> Woodfin, *An Experiment in Christian Internationalism*, p. 341.

<sup>30</sup> Jones, 'An Anabaptist-style Communion'.

<sup>31</sup> Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Life Together: The Classic Exploration of Christian Community* (London: SCM Press, 1954), pp. 92–93.

## Conclusion

One of the blessings of the Baptist World Alliance is that it is truly an international organisation. With 241 member conventions and unions in 126 different countries and territories, I have the pleasure of corresponding daily with individuals from vastly different cultures, ages, backgrounds, first languages, and time zones. While some of my international knowledge has certainly been acquired through the more than thirty Annual Gatherings, Congresses, Youth Conferences and other BWA meetings that I have attended, a significant portion of my experience comes from my time at IBTS.

IBTS taught me that there is no substitute for stepping out of your comfort zone and seeing more of the world and the people God has created. It is through this cross-cultural experience that I encountered our essential oneness in Christ. Our essential oneness in Christ was evident during the ‘the Inaugural Meeting of the first Baptist World Congress [...] held at Exeter Hall on Tuesday, July 11, 1905’, when the almost 3,000 participants from twenty-three nations joined their voices together to sing, ‘From distant climes, from every land, Behold us Lord, before Thee Stand.’<sup>32</sup> Our essential oneness in Christ was evident during the origins of IBTS, when the first twenty-eight students gathered from fifteen countries to learn and to find community amidst post-war rebuilding of trust and relationships between individuals formerly on opposite sides of conflict.<sup>33</sup>

Our essential oneness in Christ is still experienced today through these communities. It was felt during the two recent virtual Pentecost worship services hosted by the BWA during the Covid-19 pandemic. It was a joy to gather with 10,000 people from more than 100 countries in worship and thanksgiving. While IBTS has moved locations since I completed my studies, the core vision remains the same. From its new location in Amsterdam, the IBTS Centre remains committed to providing opportunities to reflect our essential oneness in Christ. The 2021 conference on ‘Dimensions of Baptist Identity: Past and Present’ continues in this tradition as the meeting ‘will explore the topic of Baptist — or baptistic — identity from different perspectives’.<sup>34</sup>

What drew me to IBTS, the desire to pursue a master’s degree in a cross-cultural setting, away from home, has also been listed as a criticism of the institution. Woodfin stated that

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<sup>32</sup> *The Baptist World Congress: London, July 11-19, 1905* (London: Baptist Union Publication Department), p. 1.

<sup>33</sup> Woodfin, *An Experiment in Christian Internationalism*, pp. 8–9.

<sup>34</sup> ‘International Conference 2021’, *IBTS Centre Amsterdam*, <<https://blog.ibts.eu/2020/06/11/international-conference-2021/>> [accessed 23 June 2020].

a frequent complaint against the seminary over the years [...] had been that it took students away from their home environment for several years, making re-entry into ministry there difficult. Yet the advantage to studying away from home was that students *had* the time to devote to study and reflection.<sup>35</sup>

My experience strongly contradicts this criticism. What I gained outside of the classroom was invaluable to me and strengthened my preparation for global service. In my experience, the trials of re-entry into ministry were worth the benefit of dedicated time in community, and in the library to research and write. I find this especially true now as I write this article, juggling work and parenting in the midst of a global pandemic.

I will never forget the community I encountered, the lessons on diversity, and the worship experiences that I shared at IBTS. Everything about the seminary was intentional, and through it I saw the essential oneness we have in Christ in each one of my IBTS community members. Because of this intentional lesson, I am able to mindfully celebrate our essential oneness in Christ as a worldwide Baptist family of 47 million members.

**Julie Justus Williams is a graduate of the International Baptist Theological Seminary and serves as the Director of Global Partnerships and Unity for the Baptist World Alliance.**

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<sup>35</sup> Woodfin, *An Experiment in Christian Internationalism*, p. 355.