

Connections

December 2003

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The Alliance of Baptists is dedicated to the preservation of historic Baptist principles, freedoms, and traditions, and to the expression of our ministry and mission through cooperative relationships with other Baptist bodies and the larger Christian community.

Alliance vice president Shanta D. Premawardhana, a pastor and leader in interfaith work in Chicago, has been selected by the National Council of Churches' Executive Board to serve as the Council's Associate General Secretary for Interfaith Relations and Director of the NCC Interfaith Relations Commission.

For the past 14 years, Shanta has been senior pastor of Ellis Avenue Church (formerly Cornell Baptist Church) in Chicago, where he has done extensive work in developing interfaith relationships – a role he has played almost since birth.

“Growing up Baptist (my father and grandfather were both Baptist pastors) in religiously pluralistic Sri Lanka, questions of how my evangelical theology intersects with the depth of spirituality and religious devotion evident in persons of other religious traditions were a part of my early religious formation,” Shanta said.

“I also had a lot of ecumenical influence in my teenage years,” he said. “My father was a professor and principal of Sri Lanka's ecumenical seminary and I came to meet many influential ecumenical leaders from the World Council of

Shanta Premawardhana

Alliance vice president elected to interfaith relations post with NCC

Churches. As a result I became involved in the WCC's work on ‘Dialogue with Living Faiths and Ideologies.’”

Shanta came to the United States in 1981 for graduate study in the Phenomenology of Religion, specializing in Buddhism and Hinduism at Northwestern University. He intended to return to Sri Lanka as director of the Ecumenical Institute for Study and Dialogue.

“Unfortunately that opportunity became unavailable to me,” he said. “At the same time, the church that we were a part of, Crawford Avenue Baptist Church in Skokie, IL, called me to begin an outreach ministry to South Asian immigrants in Chicago. A ministry that came to be called the Chicago Ashram of Jesus Christ specialized in ministering to intergenerational and cross-cultural conflict in South Asian immigrant families, and in interfaith dialogue.”

Since 1989, he has been pastor of Ellis Avenue Church in Hyde Park, a Chicago neighborhood that is well-known for its religious and racial diversity.

As the Associate General Secretary for Interfaith Relations, Shanta will have two main responsibilities. “First, I will develop and encourage close relationships between leaders of different faith traditions.

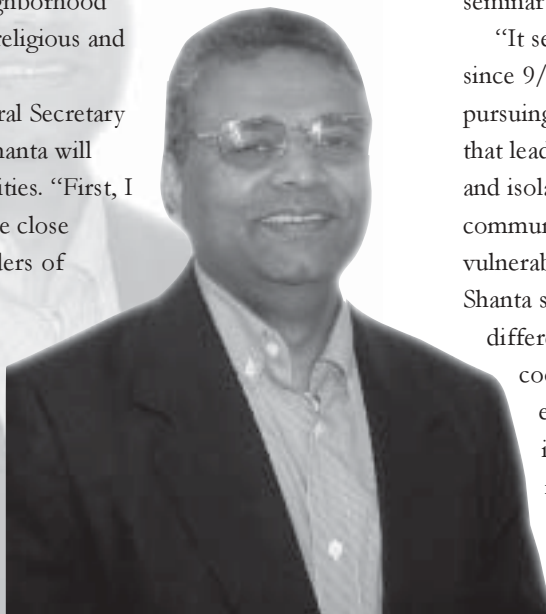
Initially, we will need to bring them together for issue-related events on topics such as peace, poverty, and environment. But I will work to encourage these relationships to move beyond

that. As one Muslim leader said to me recently, religious leaders must know each other well enough to pick up the phone and call a leader of another religious tradition to talk about anything, including personal matters, because they are friends.”

“Secondly, I will educate Christians in denomination-wide contexts, local communities and in local churches to understand the importance of interfaith relations and train them on how to engage in such relationships,” he said. “That education will necessarily include rethinking our exclusivist theologies, and should eventually permeate the Christian education curricula from Sunday school to seminary.”

“It seems clear, particularly since 9/11, that our nation is pursuing policies and practices that lead to more polarization and isolation — religious communities are particularly vulnerable to this trend,” Shanta said. “But there is a different paradigm, one of cooperation and coexistence. And that requires intentional and careful relationship building between religious communities.”

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alliance **f**inances

Through October 31

2003 Operating Budget

Needs:	\$250,013
Receipts:	\$226,195
2003 Mission Offering	
Goal:	\$111,000
Receipts:	\$60,324

Worcester church affiliates with Alliance

The newest congregation to affiliate with the Alliance of Baptists is **First Baptist Church** of Worcester, MA. The pastor, Tom McKibbens, serves on the Board of Directors of the Alliance, chairing the committee on Affiliate and Member Services. This church will host a mini-convocation following the fall meeting of the board next September. The congregation is also affiliated with American Baptist Churches in the USA.

Robert Tiller, a long-time Alliance member, is the new Legislative Coordinator for the Religious Coalition for Reproductive Choice, headquartered in Washington D.C.

happenings

Shanta Premawardhana

(continued from page 1)

His new work coincides with Alliance philosophy, Shanta said. "The Alliance's attitude towards ecumenical and interfaith relationships was refreshing to me. Our seeking membership in the NCC and dialogues with other denominations are examples of that ecumenical attitude. Our statements on Jewish relations and Muslim relations are landmark events in religious life in the US."

"It is fair to say that I would not be in this position had not the Alliance allowed the nurturing of my own ecumenical spirit. For this I am immensely thankful."

Shanta hopes his new position will help elevate that of the Alliance of Baptists. "Isn't it interesting that as soon as the Alliance was received into NCC membership, an Alliance member came into prominent leadership at the NCC?" he said. "I do think that this will bring the Alliance into greater prominence in the ecumenical world. I will obviously present myself as an Alliance Baptist. You all better pray that I don't screw up!"

While in Chicago, Shanta has been active in two interfaith councils, has been a leader

on issues of economic justice and immigrant rights; and was the vice-president of the Chicago-based Metropolitan Alliance of Congregations, which currently has a membership of about 100 congregations.

From 1995-98, Shanta chaired the Alliance's standing committee on Interfaith Relations and was instrumental in helping the Alliance adopt an historic "Statement on Jewish-Christian Relations." He has also been instrumental in helping the Alliance form a partnership with Baptists in Sri Lanka.

Among the honors he has earned, the

Academy of Parish Clergy, a national organization of Christian clergy, named him 1998 Parish Pastor of the Year.

Shanta was born in Colombo, Sri Lanka, and received his seminary education in Sri Lanka and India. He did graduate work at Northwestern University, Evanston, IL, earning a master's degree in Comparative Religion: Buddhism and Christianity, and a doctoral degree in Phenomenology of Religions, with a specialty in Hinduism and Christianity.



Bob Edgar, General Secretary of the NCCCC and Shanta D. Premawardhana, General Secretary for Interfaith Relations for the NCCCC.

He is married to Dhilanthi Fernando, a musician and piano teacher, and has three children, Charith, Devaka and Amali.

The National Council of Churches is the leading ecumenical organization in the United States. Its 36 Protestant, Orthodox and Anglican member communions (denominations) comprise 50 million adherents in 140,000 local congregations nationwide.

Along with interfaith relations, Council programs include education and leadership ministries, Bible translation, environmental justice, faith and order, church renewal, public policy research and advocacy, research and communication, and work to reduce poverty.

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Individuals are invited to become members of the Alliance at any time. Annual membership dues are \$40, individuals; \$60, families; \$125, sustaining; and \$20, students/low income. You may use the enclosed envelope to send in your dues. Just be sure to indicate that the funds are for annual dues.

... we commit ourselves to: *The larger body of Jesus Christ, expressed in various Christian traditions, and to a cooperation with believers everywhere in giving full expression to the Gospel. (Alliance Covenant)*

The AOB and the NCCC

My atlas shows that the distance between Silver Spring, MD, where I live, and Jackson, MS, where I traveled in November, is about 1,000 miles. So I traveled 1,000 miles and met a Silver Spring neighbor for the first time at a breakfast during the General Assembly of the National Council of Churches of Christ in the U.S.A. This is a good metaphor for this ecumenical journey – discovering intersections and connections at unexpected times and places.

As the newest of the 36 communions that comprise the National Council, those of us representing the Alliance often feel like we have a steep learning curve to understand the what, how and who of this nation's primary ecumenical body. The official Alliance representatives at this gathering were David Waugh of New York City, Willard Bass from Winton-Salem and me. But the Alliance was also represented within the staff of the NCC and among delegates representing the American Baptist Churches as well.

It was with great pride that we witnessed Shanta Premawardhana's introduction to the Council as the new Associate General Secretary for Interfaith Relations. Shanta is one of our own and has provided leadership to the Alliance's ecumenical and interfaith activities.

The General Assembly of the National Council of Churches provides a good mix of worship from various traditions, fellowship, reports from the staff, committees and councils of the NCC and Church World Service, the development and emergency response agency. In addition, the General Assembly exercises financial oversight and reviews and adopts policy statements for the Council.

This year's Assembly adopted statements on the following issues: endorsing national boycotts against Taco Bell and the Mt. Olive Pickle Company (a protest against the treatment of agricultural workers by those companies); preserving U.S. pharmaceutical sales to Canada; the churches and public schools; and a resolution on the conflict in the Middle East. The texts of these statements can be found on the Council's web site: nccusa.org. There is also a link to the NCCC

through the Alliance's web site.

It is impossible to detail in this space the remarkable scope of resources and connections available to us through the NCC and Church World Service: educational resources, mechanisms for responding to natural disasters, hunger relief, HIV/AIDS ministry, mission projects like CROP walks and Tools of Hope, and worship resources – to name only a few broad categories.

In the November issue of *The Baptist Studies Bulletin* published on-line by The Center for Baptist Studies at Mercer University, Pat Pattillo, Associate General Secretary for Communications at the NCC and an Alliance member, writes:

"Baptists have powerful ideas to contribute on congregational vitality, church-state separation, personal pietism; a genius for organization and goal orientation.... And we have something to gain: a broader context for our culture, history, worship, public advocacy—and perhaps a helpful dose of denominational humility in the face of so many wonderful "others" whose faith is no less passionate, no less Christ-centered than our own, though expressed in so many different ways."

Well said, Pat. I experienced that again when I traveled 1,000 miles to meet my neighbor – a Presbyterian woman I might never have met at home.

Note: For anyone interested in the resources available from the National Council of Churches and Church World Services, I recommend the two web sites (www.nccusa.org and www.churchworldservice.org) and the newsletter, *EcuLink*.

perspectives



By Jeanette Holt
Associate
Director



David Waugh, pastor of Metro Baptist Church in New York City and Willard Bass of Winston-Salem, NC, represented the Alliance of Baptists at the National Council of Churches of Christ meeting.

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Latino project in D.C. just one of 28 groups depending on offering

As 2003 comes to an end, once again we are calling on members and friends of the Alliance to help us reach our Mission Offering goal of \$111,000. Twenty-eight organizations are recipients of the funds, including the **LATINO MISSION PROJECT** of Calvary Baptist Church in Washington, DC.

The project, which works with the large Latino population in the Washington metro area, will receive a total of \$3,000 if our goal is reached.

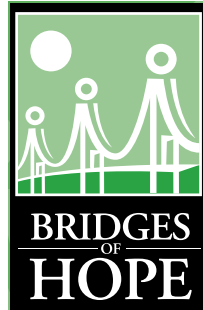
Alliance funds are being used to support a ministry to about 50 Latinos. A program for adults includes Bible studies, parenting classes, work with abused women, visitation at hospitals, and tutoring, all in Spanish.

Some of the other US recipients of this year's offering are:

JOURNEYPARTNERS is an interfaith organization whose mission is to connect individuals and groups with one another

for mutual understanding, relationship, growth and service. \$3,000.

OAKHURST RECOVERY PROGRAM in Atlanta, GA, helps male substance abusers recover from their addictions by providing them a safe and supportive living environment. \$3,000.



RAUSCHENBUSCH METRO MINISTRIES serves low-income residents of the Hell's Kitchen Community of New York City. Our funding helps provide after-school and evening literacy programs for children and youth. \$1,000.

SABBATH HOUSE is a spiritual retreat center for individuals and small groups in the mountains near Bryson City, NC. \$500.

RECONCILIATION, INC., based in Nashville, is a ministry for families of

prisoners in middle Tennessee. Programs include housing, education and support services, as well as a summer youth camp. \$1,500.

STRIVE is a ministry of Ellis Avenue Church in Chicago that provides educational and recreational opportunities for children on the city's poor South side, thereby enabling them to get into Chicago's better high schools and have a chance to go to college. \$3,000.

SYNERGEO INC., in Richmond, VA, seeks to create partnerships between college students and struggling communities. This year's grant is for the "Just Housing" project in behalf of elderly rental residents in Richmond's Oregon Hill neighborhood. \$3,000.

For a full listing of the recipients of the offering, visit our website, www.allianceofbaptists.org.

2004 CONVOCAATION • APRIL 16-18

DAYTON, OHIO

SITE: **First Baptist Church** • HOST CHURCH: **CROSS CREEK COMMUNITY CHURCH**
7 P.M. FRIDAY, APRIL 16, THROUGH WORSHIP ON SUNDAY, APRIL 18

