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December 7, 2011

GWU Instructor Participates in Exploratory Conversations between Baptists and Orthodox

BOILING SPRINGS, N.C.— Teams representing the Baptist World Alliance (BWA) and the Ecumenical Patriarchate of Constantinople recently held exploratory talks on the island of Crete that could lead to formal international dialogue between Baptist and Orthodox Christians. Dr. Steven Harmon, adjunct instructor of Christian theology at Gardner-Webb, was part of the three-person BWA delegation.

The two teams reviewed earlier discussions between the BWA and the Orthodox Church and proposed that any international dialogue should strive to increase mutual understanding and knowledge of one another, to explore a common Christian witness between the churches, and to encourage cooperative action on ethical and moral issues.

The Ecumenical Patriarchate enjoys the status of “first among equals” among Eastern Orthodox prelates, and is widely regarded as the representative and spiritual leader of the world’s 300 million Orthodox Christians. In addition to the Ecumenical Patriarchate, the global Orthodox Church is composed of 15 self-headed Churches, each with its own Patriarchate. If full formal conversations are to continue, each of the Churches must agree to send delegates to the eventual conversations.

According to Harmon, the Baptist delegation drafted a concise statement of Baptist identity, including essential theological beliefs and a brief narrative of Baptist history, to be included in an official recommendation by the Ecumenical Patriarchate to the Orthodox Churches to participate in formal dialogue.

“The aim of the Baptist-Orthodox dialogue is to respond to the Lord’s prayer to his Father for his disciples ‘that they may all be one...that the world may believe’ (John 17:21),” said BWA General Secretary Neville Callam, who led the BWA delegation. “Facing this challenge today, we believe that we should continue to explore our common ground in biblical teaching, apostolic faith and tradition as well as practical Christian witness, together with our remaining differences.”

Harmon added, “As is the case with any ecumenical conversation, we hope to identify convergences between our churches, and possibly identify some ways we could work together in missions, evangelization, or addressing certain social issues with a common voice. For

example, the current Ecumenical Patriarch, Bartholomew I, is a passionate advocate for ecological justice. Perhaps that's an area in which Baptists and Orthodox can work together to bring that issue to the forefront of the world's attention."

Ultimately, participants left the meeting with the understanding that the Ecumenical Patriarch would examine the proposal developed by the Crete meeting and determine whether to remit it to the Orthodox Churches with a view to securing their participation in the proposed Baptist/Orthodox international dialogue.

"These were just preliminary conversations, for now," said Harmon. "They were exploratory in nature. But the representatives of the Ecumenical Patriarchate seemed very eager for these conversations to go forward."

A decision on whether formal dialogue will take place is expected as early as March 2012.

[Click here for more from Dr. Harmon about the value of ecumenical conversations for the global Christian Church](#)