

CELEBRATING WHAT GOD HAS DONE: 400 YEARS TOGETHER

In 2009 the global Baptist family celebrates with great joy what God has done as we salute our 400th anniversary! The ministry that Baptists have offered across these four centuries is interwoven with the stories of individuals and communities of faith from every corner of the world. This year we re-tell our family stories to our congregations, to our children, and to our children's children once again. We remember the best of Baptist life together and link the generations each to each in this marvellous heritage of faith. Who were the first Baptists? And how did we become such a family? For our earliest Baptist brothers and sisters, the 17th century was a time of beginnings: first church, earliest declarations of faith, initial denominational structures, and the witness of suffering that forged the concept of religious liberty for all people.

Baptist Beginnings, 1609

As the 17th century dawned, England was an explosive country. Citizens were legally required to be members and adhere to the teachings of the state church. Refusing to do so resulted in fines, whippings, and imprisonments. Religious and political forces clashed violently with a new and growing conviction among many Christians that a truer expression of God's Church should be characterized by faith in Jesus Christ and separated from restrictions of a state church system. Many dozens of Christian brothers and sisters acted courageously in 1607 when, despite threats to life, home, and property, they fled their homeland and sailed to Amsterdam, Holland, a self-proclaimed City of Refuge. More than anything else, they desired the religious freedom to search the Scriptures and worship according to the pattern they found in its pages.

These believers were offered shelter and employment in the bake-house of Jan Munter, a Waterlander Mennonite, whose business lay close to the Amstel River near the present-day Rembrandtsplein section of the city. Here the English refugees, led by John Smyth and Thomas Helwys, worked, worshiped, and hashed out their theological convictions across cleared supper tables lit by guttering candlelight. In just two years' time they had rejected infant baptism and founded a new church.

In its first believer's baptismal service, Smyth first baptized himself and then the rest of the small congregation. Each person baptized was an adult who had confessed belief in Jesus Christ. Following the service, the tiny group formed a church whose voluntary membership was based upon a personal confession of faith in Jesus Christ and the baptism of professed believers only. This radical decision in 1609 marked the moment when these religious dissenters became the first Baptists. But theirs was not an easy road and challenges confronted each step. As they wrestled with how best to relate to other communities of faith, Helwys returned home to England in 1611 with about ten members and settled at Spitalfield, just outside the northwest city wall of London. There they planted the first Baptist church on English soil. Helwys quickly published the first defense for religious liberty in the English language - *A Short Declaration of the Mystery of Iniquity* (1612). He proclaimed that the English King had no power to control the religious beliefs or practices of his subjects; instead, regardless of religious belief, each individual must have the freedom to respond to the Creator and to read and interpret

Scripture. Persecution followed. Helwys was taken to Newgate prison, where he died. Yet within a generation, more than fifty-four Baptist churches thrived.

Baptists Today

Four hundred years later, our Baptist family story is still the result of God's calling, gifts, and empowering. Baptists still uphold a New Testament Church model, preach the Good News of Jesus Christ, follow in believer's baptism, and practice inter-church cooperation and brotherly union. Baptists at their best have continued to affirm and defend the freedoms for all people embraced by our earliest brothers and sisters. Overarching all has been God's sustaining grace.

Shoulder to shoulder around the globe, the Baptist family stands as grateful communities of faith, families, and individual believers. We bow our heads acknowledging our dependence on God, confess our need for reconciliation and healing, and pledge our renewed proclamation of Christ. We look into each other's eyes declaring our encouragement for the work God is doing in His various ministries. We commit to one another our prayerful and financial support for the work among us. We solemnly seek the Father for continued direction, enabling, and empowerment as His work goes forth to accomplish His purposes. We seek courage in the living of these days.

Every day this year we remember . . . and as we remember, we praise the Promiser who keeps His Promises. In Him alone rests secure our Baptist hope and future. Thank you for coming home to place to celebrate our heritage!