

General Secretary's Update (June-November 2017)
BGM Board and Executive Committee Meetings
November 15-18, 2017

This has been a very busy summer and fall for ABCUSA/Office of the General Secretary! Our team has made significant progress on several fronts, in response to the mission priority themes outlined in previous General Board meetings: 1) Unify ABC around Core Convictions and Joyful Mission; 2) Strengthen Regions as they Serve Clergy and Churches; 3) Promote the Mission of National Agencies and Partners; 4) Lead into an Era of Church Growth, Evangelism and Creative Service; and 5) Encourage Creative Partnerships.

Organizing the OGS Team for a Missional Future: As its administrative responsibilities for other national partners lessens, and in response to the need to provide a compelling narrative for United Mission growth, OGS must quickly reconfigure itself into a nimble and effective missional team. We have made excellent progress on several fronts in this regard:

- 1) Creating a more healthy and faithful team. We have been working diligently to break down silos within OGS, strengthen friendships, share meals, affirm good work and encourage conversation around creative new ideas. SLACK has been an integral part of our strategy, replacing emails for more user-friendly communication. In just five months, our 37 team members have sent 4,571 messages to one another! These include group as well as individual direct communications.
- 2) Calling two new Associate General Secretaries to promote the mission priorities. The search began with a candidate pool of 36 applicants representing a wide variety of ethnic, cultural, gender and regional backgrounds. Eleven candidates were invited to GotoMeeting interviews on September 11. Finalist interviews were conducted in October, and formal calls were extended during the first week of November, with a ministry start date of January 1, 2018. The two new team members are:
 - a. **Associate General Secretary for Missional Initiatives and Partnerships: Rev. Marsha Scipio.** Marsha currently serves as an Associate Pastor at Berean Baptist Church under the leadership of Rev. Dr. Arlee Griffin, Jr., and is the executive director of the Berean Community and Family Life Center in Brooklyn, N.Y. She brings a commitment to public service and social justice along with twenty years of non-profit management experience. Marsha was born in Trinidad & Tobago and raised in Crown Heights, Brooklyn. She currently serves on the board of the American Baptist Churches of Metro New York. Marsha developed a college and career leadership preparatory program for underserved youth in the South Bronx and East Harlem at the Supportive Children's Advocacy Network (SCAN). At Georgetown University Law Center she represented clients in Georgetown's Institute for Public Representation. As an attorney, she worked at the New York City Administration for Children's Services in their Legal Division and at the United States Department of Justice, Civil Rights Division in the Educational Section. Marsha is a graduate of Yale University with a B.A. in Psychology and African American Studies. She earned an M.A. in Psychology from New York

University, a Juris Doctor from Georgetown University Law Center, and a Master of Divinity from Princeton Theological Seminary.

- b. **Associate General Secretary for Congregational and Pastoral Effectiveness: Rev. Dr. Kevin Walden.** Kevin comes to ABCUSA after serving as a local church pastor for 25 years in the Midwest and most recently for seven years on the regional executive staff of the American Baptist Churches of Pennsylvania and Delaware (ABCOPAD). He served ABCOPAD with the staff designation of Regional Pastor with Pastoral Leaders. There he helped develop educational and retreat/conference opportunities, leadership learning communities and other ministries which aimed to build healthy partnerships as well as encourage and equip the personal and professional growth of pastoral leaders. He was the lead Ethics teacher and taught Pastoral Leadership in ABCOPAD's Lay Ministry School. Along with the other executive staff, he worked to encourage pastoral leaders and their families and their congregations. He also coordinated the region's interim ministries and collaborated with ABCUSA in that effort. As a pastor, Kevin was honored to serve many ministries that grew and flourished. His last congregation grew into the most ethnically diverse ABC congregation in Omaha, Nebraska with members from many nations serving the Lord effectively together. Dr. Walden served the ABC Nebraska region in numerous capacities. Kevin has been married to Pastor Melody Walden for over 30 years, who serves an ABC congregation in ABCOPAD and is a current Fuller Theological Seminary M.Div. student. In addition to being active together in ministry on both local and regional levels, the Waldens' extended family has served the Lord in ABC for generations as pastors and missionaries. Kevin is a discipleship product of First Baptist Church of Omaha, Nebraska, where his family still attends; and a graduate of two American Baptist schools, Ottawa University (BA) and Central Baptist Theological Seminary (M.Div.). He also completed work at Fuller Theological Seminary (D.Min.) with a focus on Covenants and Ethics Education.
- 3) **Promoting Staff:** In addition to adding Marsha and Kevin to the team, in 2018 three internal promotions are planned. Rev. Patricia Hernandez, who has been serving as National Director for Women in Ministry and Transition Ministries, will be promoted to Associate General Secretary status for these ministries. Bridget Lipin, will serve as Team Leader for the missional communications team, and Tina Turner will serve as United Mission Coordinator.
- 4) **Five-Star - Reorganizing the OGS Team:** With the demise of the Computer Center in mid-2018, it is critical that ABCUSA/OGS upgrade its IT, website, social media and communications capabilities. We propose combining communications, ABCIS, MRD and two employees we hope to retain from the CC into a new ABCUSA missional communications team. We have held a retreat and follow-up meetings to work on a new CORE database to enhance our communication with all ABC clergy and churches.
- 5) **Transitions:** Marilyn Tyson and Cindy Martin will retire at the end of 2017.

Revitalizing United Mission for Growth: Since the Mission Summit, OGS has focused on creating a strategy and new materials in support of United Mission. We believe it is possible to

reverse the decades-long decline through creative communication about compelling ministries that are “powered by United Mission.”

- 1) Bridget, Tina and I have assessed the Mission as a Vehicle materials, and created improvements to make UM promotion more effective, useful and modern. The key consideration is how to create attractive and effective letters, bulletin inserts, email blasts and web articles that include regions as genuine partners in the UM promotion effort and that can be sustained operationally (in terms of production schedule and costs). The ABCUSA website needs a major refresh to support the new missional emphasis we plan to project. We will also produce materials for table displays for meetings and conventions.
- 2) Who is responsible for United Mission promotion? In addition to Tina’s work as United Mission Coordinator, the ministry responsibilities of the General Secretary, the 4 Associate General Secretaries should expect to devote approximately 25% of their time to UM promotion, through story collection, collaboration with partners, and communications with churches and pastors.
- 3) In most non-profit organizations, board members are expected to both donate and fundraise. It would be very beneficial if board members would be willing to join our corps of reporters who help generate articles and stories in support of United Mission. Three paragraphs and one or two good digital photos are all we need!

Our Missional Future Requires Stronger ABC Relationships: ABCUSA is a movement of ministries and regions connected by voluntary covenant, a heritage of core convictions and mission cooperation. In an age of divisiveness, our ties need to be strengthened and nurtured.

- 1) The National Executive Council (NEC) has met twice this summer, and has meetings planned for December (at Eastern University/Palmer Seminary) and January 2018 (at Yale University/Andover Newton). After vulnerable and honest conversations, we have agreed to work together to make national leadership gatherings (NEC/NLC) more intentionally focused on producing practical, valuable and tangible outcomes for participants. Conversations need to focus on strategic issues that qualitatively and quantitatively advance all of our ministries, make us better leaders and provide useful take-away wisdom and insights. We need to invite the best experts from varied fields to teach and guide us into a more missional future.
- 2) OGS is in conversation with REMC leaders about how OGS and REMC can work cooperatively. I participated in a very fruitful video conversation with REMC leaders in October and plan to participate in a similar dialogue with the whole REMC in December.
- 3) Jeff Woods continues to provide helpful and effective guidance to several regions involved in Executive Minister searches. Connecticut, Evergreen and West Virginia have recently completed their searches for a new executive minister, and Jeff is commencing work with several other regions, including New Jersey and Mid-America.
- 4) Regions across the country continue to contact us for speaking events, annual sessions and conversations. It is vital that the General Secretary and the Associate General Secretaries be present in a pastoral way in regions – every region, every year. This autumn, I have paid pastoral visits and participated in significant events in New Jersey,

ABC Northwest, Great Rivers Region, Central Region, West Virginia, ABCOFLASH and Metro Chicago. Many regions have scheduled me for pastoral visits in 2018.

- 5) ABCUSA/OGS Board Representation: I have begun my service on the American Baptist Foundation Board, and in January 2018, I will commence my service on the Green Lake Conference Center's Board. I participated in the MMBB Board meeting on October 31.

Our Biennials Need to Be Reworked to Enhance Our Missional Future: The 2017 Mission Summit in Portland was a success in many respects, but the attendance reflects a “hard truth” – biennials continue to be less popular, as measured by attendance of non-staff participants. We can no longer ignore the trends we are experiencing, but must instead re-envision and re-birth biennials to make them a compelling event that American Baptists will support with their enthusiastic participation. The NEC made this point quite clearly at its August 28 meeting.

- 1) After extensive research and negotiations, OGS recommends to the Executive Committee and the Board of General Ministries that the 2019 Biennial Mission Summit be held on June 21-23, 2019 in Virginia Beach, Virginia and hosted by the American Baptist Churches of the South, who will be celebrating their 50th anniversary. This site embodies all of the expectations the Executive Committee expressed in its September 2017 meeting, including an Eastern location, a site attractive to families and vacationers, and a venue that is an appropriate size for our gathering.
- 2) Furthermore, OGS recommends that the 2021 Biennial Mission Summit be held in San Juan, Puerto Rico and hosted by the Puerto Rican Baptist Convention. This will bring the family together to express solidarity with a region that has been devastated by hurricane Maria, and to celebrate its recovery, restoration and reinvigoration. The 2023 Biennial Mission Summit would be located in the mid-West, and we are already conducting preliminary research on a suitable host city.
- 3) OGS also recommends that Green Lake host the 40th Anniversary Celebration of Women in Ministry, the most important national meeting anticipated for 2020, at the Green Lake Conference Center.
- 4) The 2019 Biennial Mission Summit Planning Team held a productive meeting on November 13-14. In support of the Virginia Beach site, we are inviting all of the American Baptist family to an exciting “Summit by the Sea.” In addition to our traditional offerings, OTABL and the Mission Summit conversations, we hope to offer CEU quality continuing education tracks for clergy and lay leaders, as well as special programming for youth and children. Regions should be invited to participate and contribute in a meaningful way, on a par with national partners. Traditional business should be kept to a minimum, and divisive issues saved for conversations in other forums. The Team will meet again in March 2018 to continue its work.

Our Missional Future Depends on Existing and New Partnerships: ABCUSA is strengthened by positive ecumenical and mission-based affinity organizational relationships. In my first six months of service, I have been in communication with the full range of our traditional ministry partners – Baptist World Alliance, North American Baptist Fellowship, National Council of Churches and World Council of Churches, as well Christian Churches Together, Churches for Middle East Peace, and the Christian Community Credit Union. Additionally, I have spent a day

with John Upton, Executive Director of the Virginia Baptist General Association and the former President of BWA) and with Scott Ridout, President of Converge (formerly Swedish Baptist Convention). In September 2017, ABCUSA was well represented at the Baptist New Covenant meeting.

Going forward, we are proposing that ABCUSA enter into working partnerships with two major non-partisan non-profit organizations:

- 1) **The National Institute for Civil Discourse (NICD)** is looking for ABCUSA to join other national organizations to be partners in the Initiative to Revive Civility. Cooperative Baptists are considering becoming partners. The Initiative builds upon Standards of Conduct that provide a framework through which leaders, citizens and the media may model and revive a spirit of civility. These Standards ask us all to be respectful of others in speech and behavior, listen fully and seek to understand, take responsibility for personal behavior and actions, act with integrity, practice non-violence and promote civility in political discourse. See <http://nicd.arizona.edu>.
- 2) **ecoAmerica** has been in conversation with the BGM's Creation Justice Network, and is eager to partner with ABCUSA so that we can encourage our congregations to integrate faith with environmental responsibility. See <https://ecoamerica.org> as well as the religious movement called Blessed Tomorrow: <https://ecoamerica.org/faith/>. The Creation Justice network has endorsed this relationship.

Also looking to the future, we are developing two new collaborative relationships as resources for our regions, clergy and churches:

- 1) The **United States Holocaust Memorial Museum (USHMM)** is our country's official memorial to the Holocaust. The USHMM provides for the documentation, study, and interpretation of Holocaust history. It is dedicated to helping leaders and citizens of the world confront hatred, prevent genocide, promote human dignity, and strengthen democracy. USHMM has offered to provide free specialized training to ABCUSA clergy who wish to help their congregations understand the Holocaust, foster positive ecumenical relations, oppose prejudice (such as anti-Semitism and Islamophobia), and fight for human rights. The proposal involves 2-3 days of workshops for groups of 20-24 clergy and leaders. The DC Baptist Convention has offered to co-host an additional day for ministry discussions in light of their unique setting. We hope to hold the first "retreat" in October/November 2018. See <https://www.ushmm.org>.
- 2) **Fresh Expressions** is an innovative church planting and ministry creation international movement which originated in the United Kingdom's Church of England. See <http://freshexpressions.org.uk>. In the United States, the Virginia Baptist General Association, hosts the national office (<http://freshexpressionsus.org>). Nine ABC regions have expressed interest in partnering with Fresh Expressions and have received a Palmer grant to work with OGS on this initiative.

Topics for Additional Discussion:

- 1) Transformed by the Spirit: Funds for this initiative have not kept up with expenditures. OGS has agreed in 2018 to continue the Rhythms of the Spirit spirituality conferences, in association with Brad Berglund.
- 2) The Mission Center Move: An update on this issue will be provided by the Executive Committee.
- 3) World Relief Committee, OGHS and Disaster Relief: It has come to my attention that policies for this committee need to be reviewed and approved.
- 4) Puerto Rico: As part of the denomination's response to the unprecedented damage suffered by the churches, institutions and members in this region, ABCUSA/OGS will be taking the lead in organizing a sister churches relationship. I plan to pay a pastoral visit to the region at the end of January 2018, to encourage regional leadership, pastors and lay leaders.

Faithfully submitted,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Lee B. Spitzer", with a stylized flourish at the end.

Rev. Dr. Lee B. Spitzer, ABCUSA General Secretary
November 14, 2017