

**AMERICAN BAPTIST  
POLICY STATEMENT ON DENOMINATIONAL INCLUSIVENESS**

**Preamble**

American Baptists stress our unity in Christ by both commitment and experience while recognizing that we are a diverse denomination. We have addressed aspects of our diversity and inclusiveness in policy statements, resolutions, and statements of concern as well as in reports of various commissions.<sup>1</sup> The purpose of this policy statement is to speak directly and more comprehensively to inclusiveness within our denominational family.

The concept of inclusiveness as used in this policy statement is defined as the sharing of power, responsibility, accountability, respect, and love among all persons. The specific focus of this document concerns ethnicity, culture, gender and theological understandings so that all of us will be enabled and encouraged to appreciate and be enriched by other perspectives. Stated simply, we believe we are all one in our Lord Jesus Christ.

Together we acknowledge that whatever separates us from God and from one another is sin. Racism, sexism and other forms of prejudice that devalue the person are all forms of sin separating us from one another and from God. "Those who say, 'I love God,' and hate their brothers and sisters, are liars; for those who do not love a brother or sister whom they have seen, cannot love God whom they have not seen" (1 John 4:20).<sup>2</sup> It is our conviction that the commandment of Jesus to love God and neighbor is accompanied by the empowerment of the Holy Spirit for overcoming the forces of division operating within our denominational family and our society at large. It is time to reaffirm our commitment to inclusiveness; time to move toward maturity in unity. These are essential steps forward if we are to be effective in our witness and mission.

Inclusiveness is a genuine model of Christian community, and reflects our very understanding of God. The church's commitment to inclusiveness is portrayed vividly in the concept of "the Household of God" where we are no longer strangers, but citizens (Ephesians 2:14-20).

**Biblical-Theological Basis and Vision**

Inclusiveness, with reference to the people of God, is a ringing theme throughout the Bible. This theme is especially important at crucial points in the biblical narratives about God and God's people. Inclusiveness resounds in Creation; in the ministry of Jesus; throughout the "new creation" theology of Paul; and in the Consummation.

The creation account makes it clear that both men and women were made in God's image and that both were given, without distinction, the mandate to replenish and care for God's creation (Genesis 1:26-28).

The ministry of Jesus was characterized by its inclusiveness as Jesus preached the Reign of God and called persons to repentance, commitment and discipleship. Although each of the four Gospels shows the inclusiveness of Jesus' ministry, none does it more clearly than the Gospel of Luke. Here Jesus is presented, through his teachings and actions, as the one who reaches out to "marginalized" persons, offers God's forgiveness and calls those who respond to discipleship. These individuals include sinners, tax collectors, the poor, the maimed, the disabled, women, children, Samaritans, and Gentiles

(e.g., Luke 4:16-19; 5:29-32; 7:22; 8:1-3; 10:29-42; 14:13, 21; 15:1-2; 18:9-17; 19:1-10). The inclusive nature of Jesus' ministry was continued in the earliest church in the Samaritan mission, the Ethiopian mission, and the outreach to the Gentiles (Acts 8-11).

One of the focal points of Paul's theology was his concept of the "new creation" in Christ (Galatians 6:15; 2 Corinthians 5:17). The new creation means for Paul a new inclusiveness, especially for Jews and Gentiles (Galatians 5:6; 6:15; Romans 1:16; Colossians 3:11; Ephesians 2:11-22). This inclusiveness was understood even more broadly by Paul, as expressed in the well-known affirmation ". . . for in Christ Jesus you are all children of God through faith. . . . There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus" (Galatians 3:26-28). For Paul, inclusiveness and the unity in Christ were crucial for the life of the church: ". . . bearing with one another in love, making every effort to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace. There is one body and one Spirit, just as you were called to the one hope of your calling, one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all. . ." (Ephesians 4:1-6). The powerful presentation of the consummation of God's people in Revelation is striking for its inclusiveness. Those redeemed by the Lamb, Jesus Christ, are ". . . saints from every tribe and language and people and nation. . ." who have been ". . . made. . . to be a kingdom and priests serving our God" (Revelation 5:9-10; Isaiah 40:5).

Diversity in unity also is promoted and presented in the Bible as important for God's people. Paul especially affirms diversity, particularly in terms of the variety of spiritual gifts, and makes it clear that to be diverse is not to be divisive or factious. To be diverse is to contribute to the growth, maturity and unity of the whole Body of Christ (e.g., 1 Corinthians 12-14; Ephesians 4:7-16).

The main point of Paul's famous body image in 1 Corinthians 12:12-31 is not to stress unity--for that is assumed--but to highlight diversity within the Body of Christ. The different members need one another; the acceptance and affirmation of diversity overcomes dissension and division. This point is also emphasized in Ephesians 4:7-16. Diversity means that ". . . as each part is working properly, [it] promotes the body's growth in building itself up in love" (Ephesians 4:16).

Paul welcomed diversity in other ways as well. In discussing differing theological perspectives related to faith and life (1 Corinthians 8:1-13; Romans 14:1-15:6), he urged acceptance of diversity with mutual respect and sensitivity.

In addition, Paul was strongly committed to diversity and respect for differences in his strategy for mission and evangelism (1 Corinthians 9:19-23). It was from this context he declared: "I have become all things to all people, that I might by all means save some" (1 Corinthians 9:22).

One of the earliest conflicts in the early church arose out of the failure to accept ethnic and cultural diversity (Acts 6:1-6). Greek-speaking widows were being neglected in Jerusalem, where most people spoke Aramaic. Church leaders responded by appointing additional leaders who spoke Greek and were more sensitive ethnically and culturally to the needs within the whole church.

The Bible makes it clear that the church is meant to be a people who celebrate diversity and practice inclusiveness within the love and unity that is to characterize the Body of Christ.

### **Historical Perspectives**

American Baptist and other Christian communities often have fallen short of the Gospel's standard of inclusiveness. The pain caused by prejudice and

exclusion has been a reality in our denominational history. On the other hand, American Baptists have tried to uphold the ideal of inclusiveness, and our history reveals many attempts to live out that commitment.

In the early years of Baptist work in North America, patterns of mission revealed a desire for inclusiveness. The Massachusetts Missionary Society supported ministry efforts of Indians. In particular, Evan Jones helped the Cherokee nation to procure a printing press so that the Bible could be printed in their own language at a time when most converts were being required to learn and use only English. Likewise, American Baptist overseas missionaries respected the power of people's languages to affirm and preserve culture even as they used those languages to convey the Good News that challenges and transforms culture. The appointment of African American missionaries such as Lott Carey and Colin Teague in the earliest years of the Foreign Mission Society's existence was yet another response to the inclusive nature of the Gospel.

In the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, various American Baptist State Conventions and Mission Societies, acting in partnership with African Americans, Indians, Hispanics and various European immigrant groups, established educational institutions and departments, mission activities and churches with the intent of empowering these diverse groups. Partnership in mission on a global scale is a continuing commitment of the Board of International Ministries. That is, relationships between national Baptist organizations in other countries and the Board of International Ministries respect the self-determination of each other, and yet share a common dedication to the whole Gospel.

The pursuit of Biblical inclusiveness extended into the arena of theology as well. Theological diversity has been prevalent in our history and nature as Baptists. The adjectives with which we Baptists have through the years identified ourselves have often indicated our varied theological understandings. (i.e., General, Particular, Six-Principle, Seventh Day, Free will, Regular, Separate, Landmark, Primitive and Missionary.) While theological diversity has often separated Baptists from one another, American Baptists have sought an inclusive fellowship based on a common allegiance to Jesus Christ as Savior and Lord.

During the theological turmoil in the United States in the 1940's, American Baptists resisted a move toward adopting a binding confession of faith. Instead a statement that highlighted the center around which denominational commitment and theological discussion could creatively revolve was adopted: "Be it resolved: That we reaffirm our faith in the New Testament as a divinely inspired record and therefore a trustworthy, authoritative and all-sufficient rule of our faith and practice. We rededicate ourselves to Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior and call our entire denomination to the common task of sharing the whole Gospel with the whole world." (By vote of the Annual Meeting of the Northern Baptist Convention, May 23, 1946). This emphasis helped us keep our evangelical, mission and ecumenical witness fresh. Our understanding of the historic Baptist stance of freedom of persons and for the liberty of religious groups allowed us then and permits us now to encourage various theological perspectives and individual interpretations to come into creative encounter.

Another arena of our growing inclusiveness is illustrated by the history of women within our denomination: a record of service and an account of struggle to gain the right of full participation. The Woman's Home Mission Society and the Woman's Foreign Mission Society were founded to sponsor single women on the mission field and to meet the specific needs of women and children. When the woman's mission societies merged with their counterparts (the American Baptist Home Mission Society and the American Baptist Foreign Mission Society) in 1955, women's struggles for opportunities for leadership and service

intensified. Efforts to include women in every facet of denominational life and leadership have spawned a host of resolutions, commissions, task forces and studies to address the need for the full partnership of women.

Although American Baptists had become the most racially inclusive mainline denomination in the United States, the 1972 Study Commission on Denominational Structures (SCODS) recognized that our rich diversity was not present adequately in leadership and decision-making-groups. The work of SCODS led to denominational re-structuring that, among other things, ensured proportional representation of women, men, African Americans, Hispanics, Asians, Caucasians, and Native Americans on the American Baptist General Board, national program boards and committees. Policies and goals were established to create inclusive national staffs with respect to gender and race. In June 1992 the Board of International Ministries voted to apply its affirmative action goals to the appointment of overseas missionary staff. Aware of the power of words to shape perspectives and actions, the General Board adopted a policy committing itself to the use of inclusive language in 1981.

The Commission on Denominational Identity in 1987 highlighted our identity as "... an inclusive people who, gifted by a plurality of backgrounds, find unity in diversity and diversity in unity, who embrace a pluralism of race, ethnicity, gender and theology, who represent individual differences of conviction, and who bring the free church tradition to cooperative and ecumenical Christianity."<sup>3</sup> Delegates to the 1991 America Baptist Biennial in Charleston, West Virginia, affirmed the importance of the Commission's work, urging all American Baptists to study the Commission's report.

### **Situational Analysis**

The diversity of American Baptists brings many gifts to our denominational family. We have made much progress but have not yet achieved the goal of true inclusiveness. The diversity we experience as a national body is most often absent in our local churches. We do not create sufficient opportunities to listen to one another, to grow in understanding, to share in one another's lives. To a large extent, our churches still are largely separated racially and ethnically, sometimes due to community patterns. While more and more churches are seeking to work together across racial and cultural lines, we must continue to find new ways to bridge our separations.

There is a lack of knowledge about one another: our diverse histories; our different ways of working; our distinct cultural values; our special needs, fears, and concerns. In addition, our lack of knowledge about the dual alignment of some of our congregations leads to tension and misunderstanding. We do not always take advantage of the opportunities to participate and share our diversity in association and regional experiences, and we have not always been open to changes that might enable greater participation. When we do not take the initiative to participate and share with one another we diminish our ability to understand the diversity that exists, not only among groups but within groups. We then tend to stereotype one another on the basis of gender, race, ethnicity, or theological position, while at the same time feeling that we ourselves are not adequately understood. Such perceptions of not being understood or heard lead us to view one another as competing persons or groups and engenders a "we versus they" mentality.

Some of us feel excluded when special efforts are made to include others in leadership and decision-making-groups. On the other hand, some of us who have come into positions of leadership more recently feel that our presence may be a source of resentment, and that we are not valued for the skill and gifts we bring.

This tension exists in part because we have not yet experienced diversity adequately in the roles of leadership and ministry that feed into our denominational structures. While national executive and support staff are increasingly representative, we are less inclusive in our regional leadership

an in our career international missionary staff.

In global relationships we have been better at sending missionaries from North America to minister in other cultures than in knowing how to receive missionaries from other nations and empower them to minister to and with us. Our society is torn apart by racial strife, by fear and resistance of multi-cultural experiences, and by tensions in the relationships between women and men. Racism and sexism have been built into the structures of our society. Therefore, discipleship requires each of us to do some painful self-sacrifice and soul searching to make room for others.

In so far as we reflect our society, the injustices, prejudices and separations that abound there are also present in our churches and in our denominational structures. None of us is completely free of the sins of the society within which we continue to struggle and grow.

We believe that inclusiveness is not the same as assimilation; that is, the integrity of those being included must be maintained. Likewise our belief in freedom of conscience and non-coerciveness leads us not merely to tolerate theological differences in our midst but to welcome them as a means through which God helps us to grow. Our goal is the unity in Christ which is enriched by Godgiven diversity, rather than a unity which depends upon uniformity or homogeneity. We realize that this vision of the church is at cross-purposes with some theological interpretations that encourage Christians to seek out only those who are most like themselves for inclusion in the local church. Nevertheless, we believe that the Spirit of Christ enables us to transform the society around us by first empowering us to live together as the diverse, inclusive people of God. As the Statement of Purpose of American Baptist Churches aptly puts it: "In every area of our common life American Baptists, acknowledging the importance of creative diversity, seek such a balance of freedom and order as will keep all parts of the American Baptist Churches open to the guidance of the Holy Spirit and at the same time enable them to work responsibly to carry out the common task of mission and ministry in our time."

#### **Call to Thanksgiving, Repentance and Commitment**

It is with grateful hearts that we acknowledge the leading of God to this point in our history. We realize that achieving genuine inclusiveness throughout our denomination and witnessing to that value in the larger society will require our commitment. Inclusiveness must mean more than a numerical balancing of racial minorities and women on the staff, committees, and boards of the American Baptist Churches and its affiliated structures. It must reflect a change of heart, mind, and action in individuals and groups, and by grace move us toward a fuller healing of the spirit.

Confession and repentance are crucial to the process of change. The act of repentance facilitates the process of change, and allow a new openness, honesty, and spirit of cooperation to emerge.

Our efforts to achieve true inclusiveness will not be without difficulty, since they involve changes in attitudes, values, and practices. It also is likely that such effort will be fraught with mistakes and disappointments as well as victories. But inclusiveness also holds the promised blessings of discipleship and the joy that can be experienced in diversity as we overcome our separateness and become one people in Christ Jesus.

Therefore, we call upon all American Baptists, American Baptist churches, and American Baptist organizations to examine ourselves and to affirm our commitment to our unity in Christ through diversity:

- We commit ourselves as part of local, regional, and national American Baptist associations to become witnesses to the value of honoring diversity through our worship, structures, and congregational life;

- We commit ourselves to be intentional in discovering and using the diverse gifts God has given all of us for ministry;
- We commit ourselves to be inclusive of male and female persons, and of those of various racial, ethnic, cultural, and theological backgrounds;
- We commit ourselves to use our resources to work together for the empowerment of all persons in our communities and institutional structures, especially those who are excluded from full participation in our current life together;
- We commit ourselves to use inclusive language and language that respects the worth of all persons and cultures;
- We commit ourselves to use our denomination's diversity and inclusiveness as a model for our nation and the world as we and they struggle increasingly with tensions caused by racial, ethnic, class and gender differences; and
- We commit ourselves to efforts to understand and appreciate differences of culture, as well as to understand our bondage to our own cultures.

Having made these promises, we face the future with confidence, knowing ". . . that the one who began a good work among [us] will bring it to completion by the day of Jesus Christ" (Philippians 1:6).

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 134 For, 18 Against, 5 Abstentions  
 Modified by the Executive Committee of the General Board - September 1995  
 Modified by the Executive Committee of the General Board - September 2000  
 Modified by the Executive Committee of the General Board - September 2005

#### Notes

1. See the *Appendix* for a listing of these ABC/USA documents below.
2. All biblical quotations are from the New Revised Standard Version.
3. See the brief history of ABC/USA inclusiveness in "American Baptists: A Unifying Vision," *American Baptist Quarterly* 6 (1987), pp. 84-86 and the *Appendix* to this policy statement listing reference documents within the ABC/USA that deal with various aspects of inclusiveness.
4. "The People Called American Baptists," *American Baptist Quarterly* 6 (1987), p. 63.

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#### APPENDIX

##### REVIEW OF POLICY STATEMENTS AND RESOLUTIONS

#### I. POLICY STATEMENTS AND RESOLUTIONS

- A. POLICY STATEMENT ON CHRISTIAN UNITY
  - a. Resolution on Purpose of the Church
- B. POLICY STATEMENT ON HUMAN RIGHTS
  - a. Resolution in Support of Affirmative Action
  - b. Resolution on Civil Rights
  - c. Resolution on Cutback in Employment of Minorities and Women
  - d. Resolution on the Empowerment of Women in the American Baptist Churches
  - e. Resolution on Fragmented Society
  - f. Resolution on the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People

- g. Resolution on Older Americans
- h. Resolution on the Status of Women
- i. Resolution on the A.I.D.S. Crisis
- j. Resolution on the Church and Persons with Disabilities
- k. Resolution on Freedom of Conscience and Worship

C. POLICY STATEMENT ON IMMIGRATION AND REFUGEE POLICY

D. POLICY STATEMENT ON METROPOLITAN MINISTRIES

E. POLICY STATEMENT ON MILITARY AND FOREIGN POLICY  
a. Resolution on Creating World Community

F. POLICY STATEMENT ON NATIVE AMERICANS  
a. Resolution in Support of Federal Recognition of Unrecognized Indian Nations  
b. Resolution in Support of American Indian Religious Freedom

G. POLICY STATEMENT ON RACIAL JUSTICE  
a. Resolution on Racial Segregation and Nonviolent Direct Action

H. POLICY STATEMENT ON WOMEN AND MEN AS PARTNERS IN CHURCH AND SOCIETY  
a. Resolution on the Ecumenical Decade for Churches in Solidarity with Women

II. STATEMENT OF PURPOSE OF AMERICAN BAPTIST CHURCHES IN THE USA AND RESOLUTIONS

- A. STATEMENT OF PURPOSE
  - a. Resolution on the Gospel and Social Issues
  - b. Resolution on Transformation, Reconciliation and Renewal