

**AMERICAN BAPTIST POLICY STATEMENT
ON THE
EDUCATIONAL MISSION OF THE CHURCH**

Biblical/Theological Background

From biblical origins to life today, teaching and learning are a part of the Christian journey. The commandments of God and a peculiar way of life of Israel were communicated from generation to generation through the teaching community (Deuteronomy 6:4-9, Psalm 78:1-8). Jesus embraced the term "rabbi," which means "teacher." When Jesus called his followers "to make disciples of all nations," he also called them to teach new disciples (Matthew 28:19-20). His goal was to transform life (Luke 4:16-21) through his person and ministry, death and resurrection. He recognized the God-given potential of all people and challenged them to be his disciples. By his living example he taught and entrusted, authorized and empowered the disciples to do the ministry to which they had been called (Matthew 28:19-20).

The early followers of the Way of Jesus developed communities that formed disciples through direct instruction, ritual, and relationship. The educational mission of the church grows out of the understanding that the community of faith is a place where discipleship is formed and nurtured, with the goal that we become mature, growing into the fullness of Christ and engaging in ministries of transformation in the world. Through worshipping, singing, praying, ritual, and instruction, people come to connect their journeys of faith in the present with the faith stories of the past. Life is transformed, discipleship is nurtured, and witness to Christ is revealed (Psalm 78:1-8).

The public arena is where discipleship is lived out. It is the community of faith that provides the foundation needed to the life of faith and service to God.

Situational Analysis

A. Our History

Throughout our history American Baptists have been committed to education within and by the Church. In many ways and in many settings, we have sought vigorously to fulfill the Great Commission to teach all nations (Matthew 28:20) and to prepare people for service (Ephesians 4:12):

- in our homes through personal and family devotions and Bible study;
- in our churches through worship and preaching; Sunday church schools; fellowship groups for children, youth and adults; vacation Bible schools, and after school programs;
- in our denominational support of Christian education through establishing the Baptist Tract Society in 1824; publishing and distributing Bibles, books, Sunday school helps, and devotional

literature; maintaining camping programs, conferences, and retreats at local church, association, regional and national levels; providing support for Christian education at regional and national levels;

- in our support of higher education through founding and supporting colleges and seminaries and providing financial aid and encouragement for seminarians in our evangelistic and missionary outreach through the colporter ministry of distributing religious literature; chapel cars used for worship and teaching; colleges for newly freed slaves following the Civil War; education for Native Americans; educational enterprises in international ministries; and educational materials published in a variety of languages for use at home and abroad.

This list reminds American Baptists that historically we have a broad and deep commitment to discipleship/education involving vast amounts of energy and resources.

B. Our Current Context

Today we live in a world that influences the traditional ways in which we do ministry. These influences include:

- technological changes impacting societal and cultural values;
- the popularization of narrow, marginal expressions of the faith that pit "Christianity" against science and align the faith with a narrow political agenda;
- threats to our culture from crime, violence, poverty, materialism, sexism, racism, and ageism;
- cultural and value differences among generations and racial-ethnic groups;
- changing family structures;
- the popular media increasingly influencing our self-concepts, values, and behaviors;
- the increase of religious and the virtual silence of mainline Protestant churches on issues of importance.

Changes within American Baptist discipleship/education enterprises reflect some of these trends.

- the decline in the Sunday school's influence on the life and ministry of the church since the early 1960s;
- a reduction of educational resources at local, regional, and national levels;
- the change in the nature of the partnership between American Baptist Churches and American Baptist-related colleges.

Affirmations and Commitments

Reclaiming a faithful church and authentic discipleship demands more than ever that we commit ourselves anew to ministries of discipleship formation and that we envision those ministries in new ways. Renewed commitments, new energy, and new strategies must come forth if we are to form communities that nurture authentic world-changing followers of Jesus who in turn proclaim the transformational message of faith through prophetic living.

Therefore, as American Baptists, we:

- (1) affirm that we are called to teach all persons the Good News of Jesus Christ as revealed in Scripture and understood in history and experience so that persons might be transformed and the community of faith empowered for ministry in a changing world; and commit ourselves to encourage the care and nurture of children, youth, and adults in programs of lifelong discipleship formation;
- (2) affirm that the local congregation is called to be a formational community where God's people are prepared for faithful leadership in the congregation, the wider church, and the community; and commit ourselves to envision congregations as communities that transform individuals and social structures so that the reality of God's redeeming presence might be experienced in the world;
- (3) affirm that congregational leaders are called to be teaching leaders of the congregation, serving as catalysts and models for ministries of disciple-formation; and commit ourselves to recruit and prepare ministerial leaders and laity who are innovative and faithful teaching leaders;
- (4) affirm that American Baptist colleges, universities, and seminaries make a significant contribution to the preparation of Christians for their vocations in the church, the local community, and the global community; and commit ourselves to an ongoing partnership of mutual support with American Baptist institutions of higher education in the training of Christian leaders and to provide support with our resources and prayers;
- (5) affirm that camping, conferences, and continuing education events are integrally related to the discipleship/education ministry of the local church and play an essential role in the formation of faith in persons and in the development of leadership skills and gifts; and commit ourselves to encourage children, youth, and adults to participate in camping, conferences, and continuing education events, and to support them with our resources and prayers;
- (6) affirm that the family itself is the most powerful context for furtherance of discipleship; and commit ourselves to support family life education, so that families may be healthy, empowered entities that equip children for the fullness of life in Christ;
- (7) affirm that we are called to ministries of education/discipleship in a culturally diverse world and commit ourselves to respect the uniqueness of racial-ethnic backgrounds and to support multicultural and intercultural education so that both the uniqueness and unity of life in Christ might be taught and experienced;
- (8) affirm the creative and innovative ways in which American Baptists historically have met ever-new challenges in accomplishing the

educational ministry of the church; and commit ourselves to explore the use of new technologies for learning and new program structures to assist the Church's educational mission;

- (9) affirm the historical role people of faith have played in public education; and commit ourselves to strengthen public institutions of learning through active participation in shaping response to issues that improve the quality and insure fairness in education for all children and support for those who engage in the teaching profession;
- (10) affirm that the renewal of discipleship/education ministries in the church is essential to the renewal of the church; and commit ourselves to support it with resources at national, regional, and local church levels.

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