

AMERICAN BAPTIST UNITED MISSION
“Grateful Congregations and United Mission”

Rev. Dr. Ron Vallet, Ambassador for United Mission from ABC/NYS
October 2010

**When we are united in God’s mission,
our United Mission will grow.**

On the way to Jerusalem Jesus was going through the region between Samaria and Galilee. As he entered a village, ten lepers approached him. Keeping their distance, they called out, saying, “Jesus, Master, have mercy on us!” When he saw them, he said to them, “Go and show yourselves to the priests.” And as they went, they were made clean. Then one of them, when he saw that he was healed, turned back, praising God with a loud voice. He prostrated himself at Jesus’ feet and thanked him. And he was a Samaritan. Then Jesus asked, “Were not ten made clean? But the other nine, where are they? Was none of them found to return and give praise to God except this foreigner?” Then he said to him, “Get up and go on your way; your faith has made you well.” (Luke 17:11-19, NRSV)

We do not have to wait until November to speak or write about expressing thanksgiving to God! Every day should be a time of thanksgiving to God. In Luke 17, it is interesting to note that only one of the 10 lepers whom Jesus healed came back to praise God and thank Jesus. And the one who did come back was a Samaritan—a foreigner, and a despised one at that. Jesus asked about the whereabouts of the other nine, but we don’t know what tone he used. Was he sad, angry, flabbergasted? We do know that the Samaritan—a double outcast—was embraced by God’s grace.

Karl Barth said that the basic humans response to God is gratitude—not fear and trembling, not guilt and dread, but thanksgiving. “What else can we say to what God gives than to stammer praise?” (*Church Dogmatics*).

Most of us have heard of Father Damien (1840-89), who was a Roman Catholic priest from Belgium. He ministered to people with leprosy (also known as Hansen's disease), who had been placed under a government-sanctioned medical quarantine on the island of Molokai in the Kingdom of Hawaii. After 16 years of caring for the physical, spiritual, and emotional needs of those in the leper colony, he eventually contracted and died of the disease. In December 1884 while preparing to bathe, Damien put his foot into scalding water, causing his skin to blister. He felt nothing. He had contracted leprosy. It is said that the next time he addressed the members of the colony, he began by saying, “Fellow lepers....”

At the time, leprosy was thought to be highly contagious and incurable. We now know that 95% of the general population has immunity.

The general belief of Damien's time still prevailed in the 1970s, when my wife, Rose Marie, and I took part in a round-the-world visit to many American Baptist places of mission. One of those places was a leper colony in India. We saw firsthand the physical effects of leprosy and other skin diseases that were loosely classified as leprosy. We saw the wondrous ministries and dedicated caring of American Baptist missionaries and indigenous workers. In that part of the world then, as well as in biblical times and places, lepers were considered "unclean."

This month will mark my 81st birthday. I am grateful to God for years of life and ministry in the name of Jesus Christ. Despite two heart attacks, prostate cancer et al., I know that God has been gracious to me.

God's grace extends to "aliens" and "strangers"—to "clean" and "unclean." In the sight of God, we are all sinners, "unclean." We are all "fellow lepers." Yet God's grace through Jesus Christ has healed us and given us access to God. From disgrace to amazing grace!

To practice gratitude changes an individual's life. **To practice gratitude also changes the character of a congregation.**

This fall as most congregations build budgets for 2011, it is a good time to remember gratitude as a congregation. God will measure us not so much by our survival, but more by our thankful and gracious participation in God's mission. As American Baptists, I believe that our greatest expression of thanksgiving and participation in God's mission is to budget and give generously to **United Mission**. Here are specific ways that our contributions help:

- Your church's United Mission giving supports your local region, which makes it possible for the region to provide more effective support for your church and others. In fact, most of the income for each of our regions comes from **gifts to United Mission**. Our giving to UM pays the major parts of the salaries of our region's staff who provide:
 - staff service for search committees;
 - assistance resolving church conflicts;
 - area ministers to maintain contact with individual pastors and with associations and small groups of churches;
 - camping ministry;
 - resources to assist your church in growth and spiritual health; and
 - education and training of pastors, youth, and lay leaders in congregational empowerment.
- UM giving also supports:
 - The Office of the General Secretary
 - American Baptist Men
 - American Baptist Women's Ministries (through the Love Gift)
 - ABC Information Services
 - National Ministries (now American Baptist Home Mission Societies)
 - International Ministries
 - Colleges, Seminaries, Homes Hospitals, etc.
 - Career Centers
 - Mission Resource Development
 - American Baptist Historical Society
 - American Baptist Personnel Services
 - Orientation to ABC

Life Reminder: If you need a remittance form with your church's name, address, and PIN number, please contact your regional office.

THANK YOU for your support of American Baptist United Mission!

Ron