

**AMERICAN BAPTIST UNITED MISSION  
THE TREASURE IN EARTHEN VESSELS  
Rev. Dr. Ron Vallet, Ambassador for United Mission from ABC/NYS  
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**When we are united in God's mission,  
our United Mission will grow.**

***“But we have this treasure in earthen vessels....”  
--2 Corinthians 4:7***

Greetings from your Ambassador for United Mission in these days of Lent 2010!

“The number of Americans who call themselves Christians has dropped dramatically over the past two decades.... according to a major study of U.S. religion.” So began a 2009 article “More in U.S. Losing Religion” by Michelle Boorstein. Results of the survey of more than 54,000 people showed that the percentage of Americans identifying themselves as Christians dropped to 76 percent of the population, down from 86 percent in 1990.

People calling themselves mainline Protestants dropped from 19 percent to 13 percent during the same time period. The only group that grew in every U.S. state during that same period was people who said they had “no” religion. The survey said that this group is now 15 percent of the population.

Such numbers in and of themselves are not the most important factor in determining the vitality and faithfulness of the Christian faith in the United States. Nevertheless this survey does indicate a major shift in religion in the United States, especially in the Christian faith, and even more especially among mainline Protestants, which includes American Baptists. The number (15 percent) who said they had “no” religion outnumbering the 13 percent who identified themselves as mainline Protestants is startling.

**Earthen Vessels**

Do the findings of this study reflect a full-blown crisis for the Christian faith in the United States? Or, do the numbers perhaps offer a wakeup call and an opportunity? Is the gospel of Jesus Christ itself falling short, or is it the way in which the gospel is understood, packaged, and presented? The reflections of Daniel Aleshire are helpful in looking at this question. In the introduction to *Earthen Vessels* (Eerdmans, 2008), Aleshire recalled his experience as a first-year assistant professor as he prepared to preach a seminary chapel service for the first time. Preaching to other members of the

faculty seemed intimidating to him, more so than preaching to the students who would also be present. He scoured texts and settled on 2 Corinthians [4:7] where Paul defended his ministry from attack: “But we have this treasure in earthen vessels....”

## **The Treasure**

What does it mean to have this treasure in earthen vessels? For me, the treasure is the gospel of Jesus Christ. The vessels are the instruments that God uses not only to “contain” the treasure but also to interact with the gospel and the surrounding environment or culture to carry out God’s mission. Foremost among the vessels that God has “called out” is the *ekklesia* (the church). The church exists in many forms throughout the earth. Its primary form is in congregations, bands of individual Christians who have been captured by God’s call in Jesus Christ. Likewise, many congregations work with one another to carry out God’s mission. These groupings of congregations sometimes bear the name of “denomination” and are also vessels of the treasure of the gospel. One of these earthen vessels that we know as denominations is American Baptist Churches. It is my privilege to have been part of this family since my ordination 55 years ago this month by Highland Park Baptist Church in Los Angeles, California.

The authors of *StormFront* (Brownson et al., Eerdmans, 2003, p. 34) described the glowing sweep and scope of the message of the gospel:

In the final analysis, the biblical understanding of salvation is not merely that our lives will be set right again at last. The biblical understanding of salvation is that our lives become swept up into something larger and greater than ourselves, into God’s purposes for the world. In other words, the receiving of salvation and the call to mission are not to be conceived sequentially, as if one followed the other (first salvation, then grateful obedience in mission). Rather, to receive salvation *is* to be called into something larger and greater than we are, to be invited to participate in God’s saving purpose and plan for the world. That is why the gospel is primarily about God, and only secondarily about us.

To be an earthen vessel (what I often call being a steward) of the gospel is to so thirst for and respond to God’s purposes that we become servants of Jesus Messiah in fulfillment of the gospel that integrates the gospel of the Kingdom with the gospel of the cross, according to the Scriptures.

The good news is for all of God’s creation, not just for “me.” The denomination/vessel known as American Baptist Churches is united in mission through our United Mission giving. 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 • 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*