

“Can These Dry Bones Live?” and United Mission

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

What binds us together as American Baptist Christians? It is not genetics or ethnicity, not a common language or culture, not gender or age, not a common creed. When we are at our best, it is through the power and the working of the Spirit of God.

In Ezekiel 37, Elijah described his experience when the Spirit of God set him down in the middle of a valley full of bones. The beginning of the vision is told in verses 1 and 2:

*The hand of the Lord came upon me, and he brought me out by the **spirit** of the Lord and set me down in the middle of a valley; it was full of bones. He led me all around them; there were very many lying in the valley, and they were very dry.*

God called the prophet’s attention to a three-line lament circulating among the people in verse 11:

Our bones are dried up,
And our hope is lost;
We are cut off completely.

Things were not good. In Exile, the people had lost hope. Then, in verse 3, God posed a question to the prophet: “Mortal, **can these bones live?**” (The people viewed Israel as a dying, national religion.)

The corresponding question for us as American Baptists is this: Are we a dying, national religion, **or** is the Spirit of God working through us as individuals, as congregations and associations, as regions, national and international mission agencies?

Ezekiel’s vision of the Valley of Dry Bones is pertinent today as we consider this question. God said to the people, “I will put my spirit within you, and you shall live.” The process begins as bones approach each other, bone to its appropriate bone to constitute skeletons. They are stitched together by sinews, flesh comes upon them, and they are covered with skin!

Then, most miraculous of all, the breath or wind (the Spirit of God) enters the corpses and they come alive. Even more, they stand up on their feet.

Nobel Laureate and Holocaust survivor Elie Wiesel observed that Ezekiel's vision of the valley of dried bones bears no date because *every generation* needs to hear *in its own time* that these bones can live again. Like the exiles of old, we too can at times feel as good (rather, bad) as dead. We are null and void inside. But if we look through God's eyes, we can see broader realities, bases for hope. God can sustain us and fill our barren experiences with lively hope. Is it possible? "Absolutely not," "disbelievers aver. But look again with God's vision, and watch it happen! As American Baptists in this generation, we can live again—transformed by the Spirit.

Henri Nouwen offered insights on suffering that can become birth pains. "...what seems a hindrance becomes a way; what seems like an obstacle becomes a door; what seems a misfit becomes a cornerstone. Jesus changes our history from a series of sad incidents and accidents into a constant opportunity for a change of heart." (See *The Lord Is Near* by Nouwen.)

International Ministries' *On Location* (Special Edition, Spring 2012) summed up the importance of United Mission: "American Baptist congregations provide financial support for mission everywhere—regional, national and international—through United Mission (UM). This type of giving is often provided through a church's mission budget so that those who "hear the call" to serve can answer. The more churches give to UM, the more all of American Baptist Mission grows."

Can these bones live?" I say, "Yes."

Help all ABC ministries in the United States and around the globe be **transformed by the Spirit** and come alive with your support of United Mission.

THANK YOU for your support of American Baptist United Mission!

Ron

Note: My next "new" column for American Baptist United Mission will appear on the ABC/USA website at the beginning of September. The July and August columns will be specially selected "reruns."