

Orientation to American Baptist Life 2017 Progress Report for the Board of General Ministries

By Holly Vincent Bean, Orientation Logistics Coordinator

Background

The Orientation to American Baptist Life (OTABL) welcomes and orients seminarians and ministers new to ABC. In January of 2016, a press release from the ABCUSA announced that the next OTABL will not be held as a stand-alone conference as in the past but be integrated into the 2017 Mission Summit in Portland, Oregon. This OTABL will be an experimental effort to welcome and educate seminarians and ministers new to the ABC by having them engage with and learn from attending the Biennial Mission Summit (BMS). For this OTABL to succeed, all the ABC entities who have previously participated in OTABL conferences will adapt their BMS plans to include ways to educate the OTABL attendees in the context of meal events, the Hall of Ministries, plenary sessions and other gatherings.

Members of the 2017 BMS planning team and members of the OTABL planning team agreed at a November 2015 planning meeting to join the two events together. The National Executive Council (NEC), made up of the ABC General Secretary and Executive Directors of American Baptist Home Mission Societies, American Baptist International Ministries, American Baptist Women's Ministries, and MMBB Financial Services, requested the move because of a shortage of available funds to hold OTABL as a stand-alone conference in 2016.

The National Executive Council has created the position of Orientation Logistics Coordinator to manage the details of this experiment. I was asked to serve in this role and have been doing so since the beginning of 2016. The OTABL planning team has not disbanded, but serves primarily in an advisory role since much of the OTABL planning must coordinate closely with BMS planning.

The Orientation Experience

At its November 2015 meeting, the OTABL planning team affirmed the following purpose for the OTABL experience:

- To build affinity between ABC and "seminarians and ministers new to ABC"
- For "seminarians and ministers new to ABC" to feel like ABC is home
- To resource "seminarians and ministers new to ABC" for their ministries
- To tell the story of ABC (identity, history, mission, etc.)

The team also identified certain principles and outcomes to guide the planning for this OTABL:

- Relationship building
- Discipleship

- A feeling of being honored and appreciated as seminarians and ministers new to ABC
- Mentoring
- The engagement of region executive ministers and staff in more meaningful ways than has been their experience during a typical OTABL conference
- Participatory learning
- The opportunity for seminarians and ministers new to ABC to meet and interact with the (human) resources that can make a difference in their ministries

Finally, the team made concrete suggestions including the following:

- A welcome reception for the seminarians and ministers new to ABC on Thursday evening (6/29).
- Provide a session on Friday morning (6/30) to further orient the seminarians and new ministers to the OTABL experience.
- Assign all OTABL attendees to small groups, each with a mentor to answer questions and guide their experience during the BMS.
- Identify OTABL attendees clearly through distinctive name badges, etc.
- Use the Board luncheon events for educational purposes; ask for complimentary tickets.
- Provide a narrative ABC budget for greater clarity.
- Reframe the BMS experience for educational value, regularly asking, “why we do what we do?” Use the Hall of Ministries and other areas as teaching tools.
- Gather information from attendees before the BMS to insure that mentor groups are compatible.
- Prepare special packets for seminarians and ministers new to ABC that include reflection questions about what they’re experiencing and general tips for taking advantage of learning opportunities available at the BMS.

Preliminary plans at this point assume approximately 100 seminarians and 100 new ministers will attend the 2017 OTABL. Their learning at the BMS will take place in two ways. First, they will be organized in groups of 6-8 and each group will have a mentor. The mentor groups will meet at a time and in a manner that works best for them to share reflections and questions on their OTABL experiences. It is assumed that they will meet once on each of the three BMS days. Second, a directed learning experience will be designed for all OTABL participants. They will be asked to attend certain crucial BMS sessions, such as the BMS conversations and evening plenaries. Other aspects of the BMS will be optional for them and free time will be built in, as well. The OTABL attendees will be given a program book designed specifically for them, to help focus their inquiries and observations and give them each a place to record questions, reflections and ideas.

OTABL attendees will meet as a separate group only as the BMS gets under way. A welcome reception is planned for Thursday night, June 29; the reception will offer a warm welcome to the attendees and introduce them to each other and to ABC

leaders in a time of fellowship. The following morning, Friday, June 30, there will be a session with the attendees and their mentors to review in detail what has been planned for them and what is expected of them. At this point, we do not plan to bring the whole group together in a separate venue after Friday morning.

Funding OTABL

Expenses for the 2017 OTABL experience need to be shared and efforts are already underway to reach out to ABC partners for contributions. United Mission and MMBB will provide substantial funds; the REMC will contribute \$2,000. Current planning assumes that all lodging (double occupancy) and meals for the OTABL attendees in Portland will be covered by the OTABL budget. The seminarians and new ministers will be asked to pay for their own travel costs. Adding in the costs for the OTABL administrative infrastructure, even modest projections indicate that much more revenue is needed.

By September 1, I plan to have developed a balanced OTABL budget, which will be separate from the BMS budget.

What has been done so far?

Since my appointment to the role of Orientation Logistic Coordinator, the following steps have been taken:

- A press release about the 2017 OTABL has been written and circulated.
- Initial OTABL budget discussions with various ABC entities have occurred. More are planned.
- All regional executives have been asked to serve as mentors, along with any of their regional staff who might be attending the BMS. (Six individuals have already volunteered.)
- All regional executives have been asked in writing for names of new ministers to invite to OTABL. (I have one list already.)
- I have begun to work with ABHMS on the process for inviting seminarians.
- I plan to send the first round of invitations for both seminarians and new ministers in September 2016.
- I have attended the BMS Planning meeting in Portland, Oregon in March and attended Staff Advisory Group meetings.

This OTABL offers a great opportunity to expand the range of learning experiences about ABC for a new generation of leaders. Its success depends on the participation and collaboration of all ABC entities, especially in planning and support.