

## Report of the General Secretary to the Executive Committee of ABCUSA

First, let me begin by noting how much my family and I appreciated all that you did to honor me at the 2015 Biennial Mission Summit. It was a wonderful experience for all of us. Thank you so much. I shall cherish the Luke Mowbray Ecumenical Award as a very high honor afforded me by my church family.

Those who planned the biennial are to be congratulated. All-in-all it was well produced and received. We have had some negative feedback based on some platform remarks about the ruling of the Supreme Court on marriage equality. But there were also many people who cheered the statement. That is life in the ABCUSA at this point. The strongest negative feedback came from Central Region churches and has created an uproar in that region with which the executive minister has had to deal. Both Don and I have responded to a letter from John Williams alerting us to the situation.

While ABCUSA sponsors the whole event, we also sponsored several special events as well in the Summit. This was the third meeting of ABC Theologians/Pastors and the attendance continued to be strong. Dr. Jennifer Davidson of ABSW and her team planned another outstanding gathering of ABC scholars. In addition we sponsored three Sunday encounters: one for those interested in forming a network of spiritual directors, one for those interested in forming the ABC Creation Justice Network, and a third on issues related to immigration. As a result of the workshop on ABC Creation Justice Network, the Rev's Ian Mevorach and Tom Carr, have created a proposal which is being sponsored under the auspices of the General Secretary for a two-year grant from the Mission Initiative Fund to assist them in developing in ABC life a commitment to creation justice/creation care as an expression of our mandate for good stewardship of creation.

In addition, we announced at the biennial the intent to form an ABC Taskforce on Racism and Race-based Violence. The Rev. Jacquelyn A. Thompson of Allen Temple Baptist Church in Oakland and the Rev. Dr. Larry Waltz, Executive Minister of ABC/Metro Chicago have since agreed to co-chair the taskforce. We have had one conference call and are working to come up with a list of taskforce members. They have a goal of reporting to the Board of General Ministries in June, 2016, but even before then will be working to help American Baptists address the issue of race in America today.

The Baptist World Alliance meeting in Durban, July 21-28 was the first Congress to be held in Africa. It was wonderful to see the response of the African churches in attendance. We acknowledged with gratitude the leadership of John Upton as president and welcomed the new president for the next quinquennium, the Rev. Paul Msiza who is the former Gen Secretary of the Baptist Convention of South Africa and a pastor in the Johannesburg area.

We will have quite a number of American Baptists serving through the BWA in this next quinquennium. And we will be suggesting yet more names for commissions for the BWA Executive Committee to consider in March. The BWA has created a new Commission on Interfaith Relations to which I was elected to serve as chair. I look forward to that ministry for the next 5 years.

Transformed by the Spirit – the table conversations at the biennial were again extremely energizing and helpful. Jeff Woods and the ABC Computer Center have created electronic boards for follow-up to those conversations and plans are well underway for the November Mission Table. One specific fruit of a table begun at the 2013 biennial will be a gathering of those involved in or interested in new church planting. This is a purely organic result of the conversations. It will be held Oct 15-17 in Rochester. It is completely grassroots led which has been one of the hopes of Transformed by the Spirit. The third

Rhythms of the Spirit conference was held in Rhode Island in August at Camp Canonicus. It was one of the best attended, and the team that Brad has brought together of Betty Wright-Riggins, Rene Colson-Hudson, and Jeff Savage was excellent. David and Joyce Reed, IM missionaries to Baja California, were in attendance as our guests. They are wishing to introduce a Rhythms type experience into their ministry. They were effusive in their appreciation for Brad Berglund and the team. I am convinced that God is at work in some interesting ways to renew the people of God for God's greater glory. The grant that we received from the Mission Advance Fund of the denomination ends this year. Because of the essential nature of Rhythms we have incorporated it into the 2016 budget under Transformed by the Spirit. We cannot afford to stop our emphasis on spiritual renewal.

Last week, we met at the Mission Center with representatives of the Kachin Baptist Convention of Burma and pastors and leaders of the small (2,000) Kachin refugee community in the US. Conflict continues even as the government and the armed ethnic organizations seek to move towards a National Ceasefire Agreement. We discussed as well the huge drug issue that is afflicting the Kachins, Shans and others. It remains my profound hope that IM will heed our recommendation from our February, 2015, visit and provide assistance to KBC as it matures in its response to this crisis. We also learned that the investigation into the murder of the two Kachin women who were volunteer literacy teachers in the Shan State is compromised. At the recent meeting of ISNA, I spoke with Dr. David Saperstein who is the new US Ambassador for International Religious Freedom about this situation and the need for the US to continue to put pressure on President Thein Sein of Burma for a full investigation into their murder. He has promised to contact our Embassy in Burma to see what has been done.

As a result of the visit, we shall be receiving a request from the Kachin Baptist Churches in America to become an AMO of ABCUSA. They would very much like to see this happen in November. The Rev. Saw Ler Htoo believes there are at least three more emerging Baptist families among the refugees that will also seek such status.

ABCUSA was also able to arrange a meeting of Chin State representatives with the Rev. Rothang Chhange, the staff person for BWAid, to discuss both the horrible damage suffered by the Chin State in recent flooding and an effort in early childhood education they are seeking to initiate. The Chin State is the poorest state in Burma with some of its most remote and inaccessible areas.

Over the Labor Day weekend, I attended the annual meeting of the Islamic Society of North America where I was presented with their Interfaith Award. In my acceptance remarks, I stated that they were honoring not only me, but the American Baptist Churches who had instilled within me my passion for religious liberty and peacemaking.

In both June and August I have been involved in continuing off-the-record dialogues first in Lausanne and then in New York City with Iranian clerics and political leaders. Given the critical moment in which we stand in our two nation's relationships and the relationship of the Shia community and the Christian community, these conversations have been held to keep doors of dialogue open. It has been a privilege to be included in these efforts as an expression of our concern in ABC life for peace and justice.

I wish to draw your attention to the issue of the future of the ABC Ministers Conference. Here is some background:

During the early years of my tenure, I was concerned with how ABC provided events that could reinforce the ABC Identity and glue among the professional leadership of our churches. This was a time of growing stress and separation in the family.

I approached Kate Harvey, then Executive Director of the Minister's Council about the possibility of ABCUSA (OGS) and the Ministers Council co-sponsoring an ABC Ministers Conference in the non-Biennial years. She liked the idea and the NEC endorsed such an effort.

We then began a series of conferences which began in 2004 with "Strong in the Lord." The conference was well attended. Through the American Baptist Foundation a donor was identified and Kate and I drew up a proposal for such a conference to be a regular part of ABC life. Our visit with the donor proved fruitful and the donor made a gift to support a national conference for ministers (document attached.)

The conference has continued with the exception of the year of the New Baptist Covenant Gathering which we promoted and at which we held an ABC breakfast. But the growing controversy about human sexuality in the denomination meant that "Strong in the Lord" offered was the largest in terms of participation.

Likewise, as financial constraints grew in the denomination that affected both the Orientation to ABC Life and the Ministers Conference, the NEC agreed to combine the two events with shared plenaries and separate workshop tracks for OTABL and the Ministers Conference. This allowed a sharing of costs and an intermixing of seasoned ABC pastors with seminarians and ministers new to ABC life.

However, we are now at a point where ABCUSA and the Ministers Council need to appoint a joint team to evaluate the future of the Ministers Conference.

There are two main reasons:

The first is related to the joint OTABL/Ministers Conference configuration. While successful in format, the financial constraints particularly on MMBB have seen a significant decrease in funds available. As MMBB was heavily impacted by the decline of the market and other factors, they announced a reduction in their financial support for OTABL. Their contribution and UM are the two significant sources of income for OTABL. A negligible registration fee was charged for OTABL participants, therefore, it was not a significant source of support. And the 2014 event used up the remaining reserves which were held for OTABL. That has prompted the NEC to attempt a new model for OTABL that ties it to the Biennial Mission Summit. (Letter of rationale attached)

The second is that in 2014 ABCUSA footed the expenses for the Ministers Conference when the Ministers Council unilaterally denied the use of the restricted Palmer gift for the 2014 conference though the participated programmatically in the conference. There is now no 2016 conference being planned.

Questions (among others) the review needs to address are:

- 1) Is a Ministers Conference a viable resource to ABC ministers that reinforces ABC identity while providing training and respite for pastors?
- 2) If not, is there another model that might fit the goals of ABCUSA and the Ministers Council and meet the terms of the restricted Palmer gift?

- 3) If the conference is a viable model, is it financially sustainable as a stand-alone event every other year? If not, is there a partner event? Or should it be held every fourth year?

Proposed action by BGM Executive Committee:

That BGM invites the Ministers Conference to form a taskforce of six people (3 BGM/3 MC) to review the continuation of the Ministers Conference to report back by June 2016.

As we approach my retirement, we have asked Deborah Van Broekhoven to meet with us to discuss how we archive the records from my tenure. This will also be helpful to us as we proceed with preparations for relocating from 588 N. Gulph Rd.

In October, with our president's encouragement, I shall be the BWA's fraternal delegate to the 14<sup>th</sup> Ordinary Meeting of the Synod of Bishops of the Roman Catholic Church as they discuss Roman Catholic understanding of "The Vocation and Mission of the Family in the Church and the Contemporary World." I shall leave October 2 and return October 21. I have also asked James Kelsey former IM missionary in Italy for contacts with Baptist leaders in Rome and the surrounding area.

I have also arranged time with Dr. Jeff Haggray, the incoming executive director of ABHMS to brief him as he begins his tenure.

These last 4 months will include as well:

Visiting ABC missionaries Chuck and Ramona Shawver in Mexico (postponed from January)

Development Advisory Team meeting

Preaching in NYS in two churches

Travel to DC to greet the Pope at the White House

Meeting with BWA General Secretary

Meeting of Transformed by the Spirit Journey Team

Preaching in DC at Calvary Baptist

Meetings in Southern CA and attending dinner to honor Aidsand Wright-Riggins

Mission Table

BGM

NCC Governing Board

Preaching at Prairie Baptist, KC

NCC meetings in Atlanta and interview with Johnny Pierce of "Baptists Today" magazine

Sorting/Packing/Cleaning out the office