



American Baptist Churches USA Hosts Consultation on Stateless People

VALLEY FORGE, PA (ABNS 2/28/13)—American Baptist Churches USA (ABCUSA), long an advocate in working with displaced refugees, is co-hosting an international consultation in Washington, D.C., to address concerns involving more than 12 million stateless people from around the world. The consultation is being held over three days, Feb. 26- March 1, at Calvary Baptist Church, the site of the founding of ABCUSA.

More than 50 international participants are gathered for the event, called “Towards an Ecumenical Advocacy on the Rights of Stateless People.” The consultation is organized by the World Council of Churches and its Commission of the Churches in International Affairs. It seeks to develop ecumenical advocacy initiatives for protecting the rights of stateless people – those who are not considered a national by any state.

Rev. Dr. A. Roy Medley, general secretary of ABCUSA, led the opening worship service Wednesday and brought greetings from ABCUSA. He said that in this century there has been an exponential growth in human migration and statelessness because of political, ecological, military and religious conditions. Throughout the world, more and more people are living without the benefits of nationality or citizenship.

“Our hope as American Baptists is that through this gathering of the body of Christ we might bring the resources of our faith and our commitment to compassion and justice to bear on the suffering of millions of stateless persons,” Medley said. “Our prayer is that those who suffer may experience (Christ’s) love through all that we accomplish here.”

Dr. Mathews George Chunakara, director of the Commission of the Churches in International Affairs, said the CCIA has been concentrating on the issue of stateless people since its meeting in Albania in 2010. This consultation is part of the preparation for a public statement on the rights of the stateless people that will be discussed at an upcoming World Council of Churches Assembly in Busan, Republic of Korea.

“The state of being stateless is a most miserable situation a person can face in his or her life,” Chunakara said. “To be stateless is to be without nationality or citizenship.”

At this week’s consultation, participants will examine the causes of statelessness and analyze solutions to issues that affect the human rights and dignity of millions of people. They will hear testimonies from

stateless persons, listen to experts, and engage in working groups. Participants include representatives from religious organizations, universities, government, and justice and human rights agencies.

Participants also will discuss case studies involving people of Haitian descent in the Caribbean, the Rohingyas in Myanmar and Bangladesh, and people in Europe, South Sudan, and the Middle East.

“This is the first consultation that the World Council of Churches and American Baptist Churches have held on this topic,” Medley said. “It is occasioned by the fact that the numbers are increasing across the world.”

Along with Medley, American Baptist Churches is represented by Rev. Aundreia Alexander, who delivered a presentation on “Women and Statelessness.” Alexander is the national coordinator for immigration and refugee resettlement with the American Baptist Home Mission Societies.

She noted that stateless women and children have a higher likelihood of being victims of violence and being sexually exploited through human trafficking, domestic violence and unreported rape. “Because they lack legal citizenship reporting crimes could lead to more victimization so they are often without protection of the law,” said Alexander.

Urging a layered and comprehensive call to action for churches, Alexander said that the faith community should serve as a liberating presence and sanctuary for stateless people.

Other Baptist entities involved in the consultation include the Baptist World Alliance, Calvary Burmese Church, Myanmar Baptist Convention, the Progressive National Baptist Convention Inc., and the American University Baptist Ministry. Among other faith groups represented were Presbyterian, Pentecostal, Greek Orthodox, Episcopal, Church of the Brethren and United Methodist.

“With other faith communities, we will deal with the root causes” of statelessness, as we address issues of compassion and justice, Medley said.

This week’s consultation on stateless people is the second organized by the World Council of Churches. The first was held in Dhaka, Bangladesh in December 2011 and a study on statelessness was presented at the 51st meeting of the CCIA in the People’s Republic of China in June 2012, according to organizers

The millions of people who live without a country and without any legal protection face uncertain futures, said organizers. They do not have access to decent health care, education or sources of income and their numbers are growing in countries all over the world, including the United States.

“ABCUSA has a long history of commitment to the resettlement of refugees from around the world, even though it is a relatively small denomination,” Medley said. “While the issues regarding refugees and stateless people are not exactly the same, the response from churches can be. Our congregations have shown great compassion around refugees, and I think that will continue.”

American Baptist Churches is one of the most diverse Christian denominations today, with over 5,200 local congregations comprised of 1.3 million members, across the United States and Puerto Rico, all engaged in God’s mission around the world.