

# CONNECTIONS

ABCUSA CONNECTIONS is a ministry of ABCUSA. Email the editor at: [bridget.holmstrom@abc-usa.org](mailto:bridget.holmstrom@abc-usa.org)

Spring 2013



## ABCUSA Joining Forces to Protect Rights of Stateless People

On the opening day of the World Council of Churches' international consultation on the growing number of stateless people across the world, these words rang out during the call to worship:

*"Our God is a God who is encountered in the poor, the needy and the foreigner! Let us worship the God who calls us into fellowship with each other and with the weak, vulnerable and marginalized of the world."*

For the more than 50 participants attending the three-day consultation, the call to worship became a summons to action.

The Feb. 27–March 1 consultation, titled "Towards an Ecumenical Advocacy on the Rights of Stateless People," was hosted by American Baptist Churches USA (ABCUSA) at Calvary Baptist Church in Washington, D.C. During the event, participants from various countries and organizations explored ways to influence policies on statelessness "at the



PHOTOS/MAYRA RODRIGUEZ CASTRO

global, regional and national levels by projecting a Christian perspective rooted in ethical responses and evolving ecumenical advocacy strategies." Participants urged protection of the rights of the 12 million people who are without nationality or citizenship, those who have been called "citizens of nowhere."

"The concerns of stateless people worldwide must be addressed in a comprehensive and compassionate manner," urged a communiqué issued at the end of the consultation. "The states must confer citizenship to prevent and reduce statelessness and protect the basic human rights of citizens and stateless people alike," it read. "Faith communities, civil societies, NGO's and stateless persons will work together to advocate for the remedy and prevention of future statelessness."

Rev. Dr. A. Roy Medley, general secretary of ABCUSA, called the consultation a "breakthrough for partnership" among the churches, the Office of the United Nations High Commission for Refugees, and the U.S. State Department.

"The illustrations and the facts and figures related to the



PHOTOS: MAYRA RODRIGUEZ CASTRO

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number and conditions of stateless persons that the governmental and civil society groups brought to the table were eye opening,” Medley said. “At the same time, they were surprised to learn of the churches’ work with many of these groups.”

Medley noted that the statelessness issue is related to ABC’s work in the Dominican Republic and the Bahamas with persons of Haitian descent, and with the Roma in Europe. ABC is also known for its long history of commitment to the resettlement of refugees around the world, and has a deep concern for the increasing number of people who are being displaced and who are becoming stateless.

“This consultation was a first and important step in lifting the awareness of the churches to the issue and beginning to sort out ways we can work together and with governmental and non-governmental organizations to address the issues involved,” he added.

The World Council of Churches’ Commission for the Churches on International Affairs began focusing on statelessness two years ago and plans to issue a public statement on the human rights of stateless people at the WCC’s 10th Assembly in Busan, Republic of Korea, this fall.

### Who are stateless people?

According to the United Nations High Commission for Refugees, stateless people can be found everywhere, on every continent and in just about every country. People become stateless for various reasons, the commission noted, including when countries cease to exist, such as the breakup of the Soviet Union, the former Yugoslavia and Czechoslovakia in the 1990s; when political changes result in how citizenship laws are applied; and when ethnic, racial, religious and linguistic minorities are discriminated against.

“In some cases a stateless person might find herself being bounced around from country to country due to successive deportations; no country will allow her to stay,” said the Rev. Aundrea Alexander, who also attended the event. Alexander is the national coordinator for Immigration and

Refugee Resettlement with the American Baptist Home Mission Societies.

“A woman or man may be relegated to extended stays in detention centers for not having legal status in a given country,” she continued. “The barrage of problems that come with being stateless often results in deep depression.”

Millions of children are born or become stateless through no fault of their own. In its communiqué, the international consultation offered this compelling example of the lack of value placed on the life of a stateless girl:

*“In September 2012, Berlina Celsa, a nine-year-old child in the Dominican Republic, was raped and murdered. The man charged with the crime was ordered to pay a small fee to secure release from jail. When Berlina’s lawyer protested the miniscule bond amount, the judge said it was appropriate because Berlina did not exist – that she did not exist legally because she was stateless. At the time she was born, Berlina was a legal citizen; however, in 2010 the government amended its nationality law and applied it retroactively, denationalizing thousands of people born to parents who were not legally residing in the state at the time of the birth.”*

### Growing awareness of statelessness

Statelessness is an issue that is beginning to gain greater attention and urgency as governmental agencies and non-government organizations, civil society groups and faith communities see the numbers of stateless people and human rights concerns increasing.

In two years since the WCC’s Commission for the Churches on International Affairs began focusing on the rights of stateless people, they have discussed the subject in meetings in Bangladesh and the People’s Republic of China. However, the CCIA’s director said it has been difficult generating interest in WCC churches because of the lack of awareness of the stateless people who often remain hidden to society.

ABCUSA’s Medley welcomes the partnerships that will develop out of the international consultation and the opportunity to do more together than any one organization could do alone.





*Myra Dahgaypaw was born and grew up as a displaced person and refugee in conflict-ridden Burma, which was ruled by a military regime for 50 years. She came to the United States as an adult and is now a human rights activist with the U.S. Campaign for Burma, a grassroots advocacy group devoted to human rights, freedom and democracy in Burma.*

*Dahgaypaw's voice cracked as she talked about the murders, abuse, rapes, looting and burning of homes, properties and villages that have been directed against the Rohingya people, an ethnic minority residing mostly in northwestern Burma near the Bangladesh border. A 1982 citizenship law restricts the Rohingyas' ability to marry and have a family, travel, acquire an education, and make decent wages.*

*"Because of this law, hundreds of thousands of people who have lived in Burma for generations, particularly Rohingya people, are still not recognized as the citizens of Burma," Dahgaypaw said. "No one should be stateless in the country they were born in."*

## Proud to be an American Baptist



Ruth Clark  
ABCUSA President

*As I look at the changing demographics of our country, I am proud that American Baptists have been on the cutting edge of inclusivity! We are the most diverse denomination in the United States. We have the opportunity to lead the way in showing how God intends the Church to be as we move beyond the differences and become the community that accepts all our best, choosing to look at one another through loving eyes and continuing to make deliberate efforts toward inclusion.*



Rev. Don Ng  
ABCUSA Vice President

*I grew up an American Baptist because the FBC of Boston helped my father sponsor my mother to America after World War II. My father was drafted into the U.S. Army and completed an honorable service as a corporal. After being granted citizenship under the Displaced Persons Act, my father unified our family with the help of FBC. I am proud to be an American Baptist because we have welcomed the stranger and in doing so, we are continuing to welcome Jesus Christ in our lives and in the world.*



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**T**hank you for your commitment to United Mission, America for Christ, One Great Hour of Sharing, the Retired Ministers and Missionaries Offering, World Mission Offering, and Love Gift. Want to give? Go to [www.abc-usa.org](http://www.abc-usa.org) and click **GIVE ONLINE** at the upper right of the web page. Then you will be able to fill out your information and designate your gift.

You may also do so by mailing a check to **ABCUSA, P.O. Box 851, Valley Forge PA 19482-0851** with the designation noted on the memo line of your check.

*Thank you.*

# Upcoming Events

CONNECTIONS

American Baptist Churches USA  
P. O. Box 851  
Valley Forge, PA 19482-0851

April 28	American Baptist Camps and Conferences Sunday
May 5	Baptist World Alliance Day
May 5	Peace Sunday
May 12	Mother's Day
May 19	Baptist Heritage Day
May 19	Pentecost
May 27	Memorial Day
June 16	Father's Day
June 21-23	Mission Summit/Biennial, Overland Park, KS



**June 21-23, 2013**  
**Kansas City/Overland Park,**  
**Kansas**

Go to  
[www.americanbaptists2013.com](http://www.americanbaptists2013.com)

to register yourself and/or  
your church today.

## New at the American Baptist Biennial: Mission Summit Conversations!

Interested in reaching the changing members of your community? This is just one of the many topics that will be looked at during the Mission Summit Conversations, an open opportunity for Mission Summit/Biennial attendees to engage in meaningful dialogue about topics of interest.

The Mission Summit Conversations are the heart of the Mission Summit. The overall goal is to create the space for meaningful conversation among the Mission Summit participants in order to advance the mission and ministry of American Baptist Churches.

Attendees should take away from the Mission Summit Conversations:

1. an understanding that they and their local congregations are not alone in the challenges that they face in mission and ministry;
2. contact information and helpful insights from others who are facing similar challenges; and
3. an experience to inspire discernment and excitement about possible experiments for their local church setting.