



by Rich Schramm, Consulting Editor



American Baptist Churches Mission Center in Valley Forge, Pennsylvania

From some Christian perspectives, we are living in a post-denominational world: an age when burdensome administrative structures and broad relationships necessarily have been replaced by smaller, homogenous and more centralized units of ministry and mission.

For many, however, now more than ever the denominational model not only holds up well, but uniquely addresses the myriad opportunities and pressing challenges of 21st century life. They argue that if we live in a time structured by worldwide networking and instant communication — where relationships are formed and needs are identified with unprecedented speed and urgency — how can the churches of the Word not seek to respond together for the greater good.

Each Christian denomination will have a somewhat different rationale for its existence, but for American Baptists the Scriptural injunctions for embracing both covenantal relationships and the spirit, rather than the letter, of the law have been fundamental.

Both are at the core of the covenant each American Baptist church makes when it becomes part of the denomination. There is an expectation, rather than a mandate, for those churches to provide a fair share of financial support and to participate to an appreciable degree in denominational programs and emphases. It is a covenant built on trust, and on the acknowledgement of the autonomy of each church.

And issuing from that autonomy is the presumption that interdependence — cooperative ministry and fellowship with Baptists and other Christians — will be a manifestation of the spirit of the law by responding both to the Great Commission and to the prayer of Jesus recorded in John 17 “that they may become completely one.”

Through interdependence and cooperative ministry at the local level arises an understanding that today being witnesses in

“Jerusalem, Judea, Samaria and the ends of the earth” demands a ministry much more expansive than any one church or group of churches can accomplish.

For some, there is a certain audacity in the long-held claim that American Baptists who are joined together as a denomination can successfully be both evangelical and ecumenical. For many American Baptists, however, that commitment — to dimensions of Christian practice that are often separated — is a Scriptural imperative and one that can only succeed at its fullest at the denominational level. At that level we connect with other Christian groups around the world to meet profound societal needs and to show the face of Christ through service and witness. Local churches and their members take part in that global ministry as covenanting partners with the larger body.

As Christians our challenges today confront us from many directions; we live in a world with unprecedented want and oppression and within a secular society often hostile to the tenets of Christian faith. Can our history as a denomination over 108 years serve to inform us about the importance of

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Rev. Dr. Roy Medley leads a prayer for former ABC Officers Ruth Clark, Jim Ratliff and Frank Christine.

denominational life and how it can be a transformative presence today and in the future?

As a denomination we have, indeed, impacted and responded to challenges of the day. In the footsteps of Roger Williams and many bold leaders since, American Baptists long have advocated tirelessly for religious freedom and justice. Your denomination was in the frontlines of the Civil Rights marches here in the U.S.; it served on site to officially witness the dismantling of apartheid in South Africa; it continues to encourage and support the enfranchisement of Burmese Christians and other oppressed believers around the world. Such is the work done for and with the churches that comprise a denomination.

Through denominational initiatives have come dynamic, church-strengthening priorities such as the partnership of women and men in ministry, clergy health, and enabling congregational

vitality, to name but a few.

Over the decades American Baptist churches and individuals have reaped the blessings of multi-year programs and emphases promoting evangelistic lifestyles, Christ-centered renewal, and church growth. Currently, such endeavors as ***Transformed by the Spirit*** seek to resource and encourage individual churches as they effectively prepare to engage their communities. These, too, are manifestations of the work only a denomination, as a partnership of churches and other organizations, can do.

A denomination can be judged not only by what it does in the name of Christ, but also who it is as an expression of God's inclusive family. From that perspective, American Baptist Churches USA draws from its 5,200 covenanting churches a uniquely broad spectrum of races, cultures and traditions that testify to the boundary-less offer of salvation and fellowship from a Savior who lived and died for all.

As the third Christian millennium continues, the value of denominations as effective communions representing the Gospel will continue to be debated. The core questions for American Baptists and others remain: Should the church to which Jesus Christ gave birth be only the accumulated ministries of individual houses of worship, whose spiritual endeavors take place largely within and slightly beyond their own walls? Or is the church birthed and blessed by Christ a bold and necessary partnership of faith communities, individually and autonomously organized, who choose to work together to share, serve and fellowship as a vibrant expression of the Gospel? ■

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1 Corinthians 3:9

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Thanks to all for a successful gathering in Overland Park, Kansas.

See you in Portland, Oregon,
June 30 - July 2, 2017!



What's New?

Want to know
the latest?
Visit:

www.abc-usa.org/transformed-by-the-spirit/

This webpage will be updated regularly in the coming months with new resources and stories, telling what is going on throughout the denomination! Churches are taking hold and getting excited about how they can be *Transformed by the Spirit*. Are you ready to join them?

Groups related to *Transformed by the Spirit* are meeting across the country and are working on a number of challenges related to mission and ministry in today's world. Through meeting together in teams, pastors, staff members and lay people are having tough conversations about important issues. View an Adaptive Challenge Team Workbook online or contact your region for start-up or coaching assistance and consultation.

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Upcoming Events

- September 7 Labor Day
- September 13 Hispanic Heritage Week begins
- September 15 International Day of Prayer for Peace
- September 20 AB Women's Sunday
- September 27 Christian Education Sunday