



AMERICAN BAPTIST CHURCHES USA

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“A Higher Way: American Baptists and Our Neighbors”
A Pastoral Letter from Rev. Dr. Lee B. Spitzer, ABCUSA General Secretary
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*“Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength and with all your mind” and, “Love your **neighbor** as yourself.” (Luke 10:27)*

Dear ABCUSA sisters and brothers, greetings in the name of Jesus Christ, our Lord! As I write to you today, we all would acknowledge that recently our country has experienced a great deal of turmoil, pain and stress.

What are we witnessing? A lack of civility in both discourse and behavior cuts across all strata of our society, and extends even to the Presidency itself. Prejudice and xenophobia threaten to become policy, in ways that are not only unjust, but destructive of basic American core values. Immigrants are seen as a threat and not a blessing. Racism, rightly considered “America’s original sin,” has reared its ugly head in too many disturbing ways. The January 2018 shut-down of our federal government symbolizes the polarization and dysfunction of our political institutions. Schools suffer violence, and innocent children are murdered. Politicians, celebrities, newscasters, sports stars, doctors, and yes, even clergy, have been guilty of sexual harassment and abuse. Months after hurricanes devastated Puerto Rico, much of the island has no electrical power, while traffic lights, thousands of homes and many church buildings still require repair.

As representatives of the Kingdom of God envisioned by Jesus (see Matthew 5-7), we must not remain silent as our American society falters in upholding cherished principles, and this is why I am writing to our ABCUSA family. Although my remarks are my own, I have asked our Regional Executive Ministers and the Board of General Ministries’ Executive Committee to speak into this letter. Many have shared advice and counsel, and have also expressed support for the letter. I would like to thank them all for their insights and encouragement.

Each one of the issues raised above deserves thoughtful consideration and prophetic response, but in this letter, I wish to address an underlying theme that may provide our leaders and churches with a perspective by which to faithfully address all of them.

In brief, our culture suffers from a form of spiritual amnesia. Having forgotten or ignored the Baptist and biblical core conviction of *the infinite worth of every human being because we are all made in God’s image*, many movements and individuals no longer act as if loving one’s neighbor is a fundamental and necessary manifestation of a just and healthy society. We are so quick to judge, denigrate, criticize, attack, and assume to be superior to those with whom we differ. There is precious little grace, courtesy and mutual respect remaining in American discourse and life. We must recapture these virtues which can resupply society with much needed social capital. This failing applies to both the President and Congress, to political and social conservatives and liberals alike, to Republicans and to Democrats, as well as to those of us who are part of religious communities.

If we believe that all people are precious to God and equal to one another, we must reject prejudice, hatred, racism, anti-Semitism, Islamophobia, and other forms of bigotry. If we believe that political democracy best expresses the civic equality that is demanded by our Baptist belief in soul freedom, then we must abandon “the politics of personal destruction” which in contemporary culture demonizes all who disagree with us, preventing healthy discourse, problem-solving and thoughtful compromise.

If we believe in the equality of all human beings, we can celebrate religious, ethnic, cultural and linguistic diversity as a gift that enriches us all. We can defend the right of others to be safe and free, even if we do not see eye to eye on political matters (Baptists have held this position since colonial times). We will befriend the stranger and immigrant and protect the powerless. We will treat others with caring, respect and generosity. We will re-discover the art of speaking the “truth in love” and not in anger (Ephesians 4:15). In other words, we will embrace Jesus’ call to “love our neighbor as ourselves.”

In the Bible, loving one’s neighbor is a manifestation of godly wisdom. Imagine what kind of a society we could experience if we applied this wisdom to our political discourse: “A person who lacks judgment derides one’s **neighbor**, but a person of understanding holds their tongue” (Proverbs 11:12; my paraphrase). Consider what policymaking would look like if we applied this admonition: “Do not plot harm against your **neighbor**, who lives trustfully near you” (Proverbs 3:29; see also Zechariah 8:16-17). Immigrants, for example, are our neighbors, not our enemies.

How might we as a Christian movement, made up of local churches and individual disciples of Christ, live out Jesus’ command to love our neighbors?

In regard to our witness concerning **racism**, I encourage all American Baptists to travel to Washington DC for a potentially historic religious service and demonstration on April 4, 2018, in commemoration of the 50th anniversary of the death of Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. Denominations and organizations from across the theological spectrum are coming together to affirm that we believe in an America that exemplifies racial justice and harmony. I will be there, and I hope American Baptists will support this ecumenical affirmation that all Americans are our neighbors. For more information, see <http://rally2endracism.org>.

In response to the status of undocumented **immigrants**, I would remind us that many are members of American Baptist churches all across the country. They are our sisters and brothers. Seek them out, love them, express solidarity with them, demonstrate compassion and care. Although legitimate differences of opinion exist amongst us regarding immigration policy, I would encourage us to support the continuation of the legal visa status of Haitian, Central American and other temporary legal immigrants. We can encourage Congress and the President to extend a pathway to legal status and eventual citizenship to children who came to the United States with their parents, and who may now face either deportation or separation from their parents. If our neighbors are loved by God, we must embrace them regardless of their legal status, remembering that Abraham’s offspring were immigrants in Egypt, and that Jesus himself was an immigrant whose family had to flee persecution.¹

Surely, we all agree that all forms of **violence**,² including **sexual harassment** and **human trafficking**, are anathema to our understanding of the Kingdom of God. If we believe that men and women are equal in God's eyes, we cannot excuse sexual abuse and harassment. In the near future, the Office of the General Secretary, in cooperation with other ABCUSA ministries, hopes to launch a creative new initiative as a resource for churches who are already addressing these concerns, or may wish to start doing so.

American Baptists are committed to journeying alongside our 114 **Puerto Rican Baptist churches**, and we are well on our way to raising one million dollars in One Great Hour of Sharing Disaster Relief funds for the island. Working with the Iglesias Bautistas de Puerto Rico region, American Baptist Home Mission Societies is doing a great job in coordinating our rebuilding efforts. Send a work team! Furthermore, we invite your church to enter into a three year sister church relationship with one of our Puerto Rican congregations, culminating in face to face visits to celebrate the faith of our Puerto Rican friends at the 2021 Biennial Mission Summit in San Juan. You will soon receive details on how to become a Sister Church. As a matter of justice and compassion, let us share with our elected representatives that we believe our government must do more to restore the island's economy and infrastructure.

I welcome feedback from you. Would you please share with me what nationalities and cultures are represented in your congregation? I believe we are a far more diverse spiritual family than we realize. Is your church reaching out to immigrants, both documented and undocumented, in loving and creative ways? Send me your stories! Are you willing to stand up against racism? Come to Washington DC on April 4! Is your church willing to befriend a sister church in Puerto Rico? We are all blessed by spiritual companionship and support.³

In closing, I would encourage us all to ponder James' admonition: "If you really keep the royal law found in Scripture, 'Love your **neighbor** as yourself,' you are doing right!" (James 2:8).

Yours in Christ,



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¹ For ABCUSA produced resources, see <http://www.abc-usa.org/2017/03/22/abc-immigration-taskforce-resource-available-in-english-and-spanish/> (2015) and my recent article on immigrants (2017) <http://www.abc-usa.org/2017/01/31/immigration-and-equality-a-pastoral-response/>.

² Please see my previous pastoral letter on violence: <http://www.abc-usa.org/2017/11/06/responding-to-violence-in-our-society-american-baptists-express-love-and-not-fear/>, and <http://www.abc-usa.org/2016/07/15/taskforce-on-race-and-race-based-violence-issues-a-letter-for-action/>.

³ See <http://www.abc-usa.org/2018/01/30/american-baptists-visit-puerto-rico-on-pastoral-and-mission-fact-finding-trip/>.