

AMERICAN BAPTIST CHURCHES USA

*Rev. Dr. Lee B. Spitzer
General Secretary*

Please Note: A version of this letter was presented in Executive Session to the Board of General Ministries' Executive Committee on Thursday morning, March 14, 2019. It is dated March 1, 2019 because that is the first day Dr. Spitzer resumed his ministry as General Secretary.

March 1, 2019

Dear ABCUSA Family,

Greetings in the name of our Lord, Jesus Christ!

I would like to express my deep appreciation to everyone in the ABCUSA family that prayed for my recovery and sent me cards, emails and gifts during my six-month medical leave. The love and concern I received encouraged and strengthened me. Following open heart surgery, I have experienced the healing power of God in many ways. Physically, the emergency repair of my congenital heart defect has given me a fresh start – a new opportunity to live a longer, productive and satisfying life. Spiritually, I feel as close to God as I ever have, and through extensive and deep reflection, prayer and study, I believe I am emerging out of this healing journey with a clear sense of direction and purpose.

Toward the end of the medical leave, while in prayerful conversation with God, I believe that I received specific guidance concerning my post-recovery journey. Accordingly, I would like to share with all of you in the ABCUSA family my intention to retire from administrative and pastoral leadership as ABCUSA General Secretary on December 31, 2019. For some four decades, I have labored as a local church pastor, senior regional pastor (Executive Minister) and General Secretary with joy and, I hope all would say, faithfulness. I love the American Baptist family with all of my heart and soul, and consider it a great privilege and honor to have served this family for all of my adult life.

My decision to retire is based solely on my sense of divine guidance, my understanding of the course of my spiritual journeys, and conversations with my wife and others who are most close to me. It is not based on any dissatisfaction with OGS (the Office of the General Secretary) or the ABCUSA family. There are several factors which have led me to embrace retirement and all of its challenges and joys.

Years ago, while I was still ABCNJ's Executive Minister, I began sharing with the region's ministry team and leadership my life-long dream to retire when I reached 62 years of age, a milestone I will celebrate in April. My goal was to model voluntary "giving up of power" for other clergy. When I embraced the call to serve as General Secretary, I reluctantly accepted that an early retirement might not be possible. However, in light of the medical leave, I believe retiring by the end of this year is not only best for me personally (health-wise), but an appropriate response to the insights I have gained while on medical leave.

One insight is in regard to my family's health, happiness and welfare. Many of you have met Lois, my wife, Joshua, my son, Larisa, my daughter, her husband Travis and my grandson, Restyn. Simply stated, the extensive travel, stress and demands of being General Secretary have taken me away from my family's life more than I deem to be healthy. They have all keenly felt my continuous absence, especially Joshua. As a young man with autism, he is especially close to me and needs my presence more than I can currently give to him. There are many spiritual leaders in American Baptist life, but only one father for Joshua. And now that I am a grandparent, I wish to "be there" for Restyn during these all-important early years of his life.

Vocationally, retirement for me is full of exciting challenges and ways to continue serving God's people. My Holocaust research and writing is a vital part of my legacy to the Baptist family, but it requires far more time and attention than I can currently give it. There are at least four more books to write! I also intend to become more involved in Jewish-Christian relationships, and to provide a strong voice against the rising tide of anti-Semitism, an evil that is re-emerging in both the United States and the world. I enjoy teaching on the seminary and university level, and intend to remain involved in missional movements and organizations, both within and beyond ABC, that seek to share the Gospel with the world in word and deed. Along the way, I hope to spend more time on my photography, which is a source of great personal enjoyment. Life is rich, and I am looking forward to the next stage of my life's journey!

Although the length of my tenure as General Secretary will be short (two and a half years), much has been accomplished and set into motion that will ensure a bright future for OGS and ABCUSA. A clear vision for the Office of the General Secretary, based on the centrality of its pastoral role, has been articulated. Pastoral letters on several key issues, such as racism, violence and immigration, garnered widespread affirmation. Pastoral visits by OGS team members to regions have generated denominational goodwill.

Furthermore, we are hard at work on both the 2019 and 2021 Biennials. New partnerships and initiatives, such as the National Institute for Civil Discourse and Fresh Expressions, have been embraced by several regions and are making an impact. ABCUSA's focus on environmental concerns and creation care have been re-energized, especially due to our partnership with eco-America. We have elevated the importance of Women in Ministry, and the 2020 Celebration planning is well under way. We have engaged national leadership in a conversation on United Mission. ABCUSA's relationship with the Baptist World Alliance has been strengthened, and we remain committed to our international partners, especially in the Philippines and Myanmar (Burma). Ecumenically, our relationship with the National Council of Churches was demonstrated in our deep involvement in the Martin Luther King Jr. anniversary event last April, and in our participation in the newly emerging Hindu and Buddhist dialogues.

I am announcing my retirement 10 months in advance so that I can focus my remaining time and energy on several key projects in 2019. The upcoming Biennial Mission Summit will be a wonderful event, and I am looking forward to being with everyone in Virginia Beach. I am eager to help the OGS ministry team move into their new building, which should be accomplished soon after the Biennial. There are regions and other ministries to visit and encourage with a positive pastoral word. I imagine we will dedicate the building at the November 2019 board meeting. There are key initiatives and ongoing ministries the OGS team is working on that I would like to strengthen. I trust that my announcement will also provide the Executive Committee and the BGM sufficient notice to plan for a positive transition, following the conclusion of my ministry. It will be a busy year, but I am confident that God will guide and lead us.

Thank you for your support. It has been a pleasure to serve the American Baptist family as your General Secretary!

Yours in Christ,



Rev. Dr. Lee B. Spitzer
General Secretary
American Baptist Churches USA