

Looking Toward the Future, Considering Current Challenges *A Ministry Report for March – June 2019*

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ABCUSA General Secretary

At the March 2019 Executive Committee meetings in Orlando, I shared my intention to retire as ABCUSA General Secretary, effective December 31, 2019. I have been most gratified by the manifold number of communications I have received in response to the retirement letter that was shared with the ABC family, and since March have been working diligently to complete my tenure in a faithful and effective manner. The ten-month period until my retirement hopefully shall provide the Board of General Ministries with sufficient time to prepare for transition into the interim period, and begin the search process for my successor, in a suitably deliberative manner and pace.

I have met at least once with every member of the OGS ministry and office staff, in order to get a sense of how the team weathered the six-month disability period. In general, the team sought to maintain their work and adapt as best they could; obviously, some departments were more impacted by the absence of the General Secretary than others. In particular, I am grateful for the willingness of Jeff Woods to serve as Acting General Secretary.

In order to look to the future of the mission and health of OGS, we must face a set of pressing contemporary and future challenges. The bulk of my report will consist of identifying and addressing these issues for the Board's consideration.



Pastoral Vision and
Ministries of the Office
of the General Secretary

Serving as the hands and feet of Christ to:

Unify our American Baptist Family

Celebrate our American Baptist identity and promote the mission of our national agencies and partners.



The National Leadership Council of American Baptist Churches USA



Installation Service for Rev. Joseph L. Saxon, Executive Minister of Mid-American Baptist Churches

Strengthen our Regions

Make resources and support available through staff contact with regions as they serve our churches and clergy.

Resource Churches and Pastors

Provide opportunities for new church growth, evangelism, and connections to creative partnerships and initiatives.



Participants at the Michigan Summit Conversations

Powered by United Mission

Lifting up ministries and resources made available through your church's support of United Mission, including your local region, the Office of the General Secretary, and more.

www.abc-usa.org

Envisioning the Future: OGS' Ministry Focus and Priorities

Two years ago, the BGM requested that OGS work on a new vision statement and case for support.

One of the most pleasant surprises I could have received upon returning to service was the staff's reworking of the original OGS Vision, consolidating the original 5-point statement to three areas.

The essence of the vision articulates the *unique identity* of OGS as a vital part of the ABCUSA denominational family. We are the national expression of the *pastoral* nature of the communities of faith we shepherd.

Only OGS is empowered in our polity to play this role nationally, in partnership with the regions, on behalf of the churches and pastors we serve.



The OGS pastoral vision leads to **3 ministry priorities**.

“As the hands and feet of Christ” (respecting past statements of our mission), we serve to *unify* our ABC family, *strengthen* our regions, and *resource* churches and pastors. The picture to the right portrays two such ministries being organized by Associate General Secretary Kevin Walden – OTABL (with 101 participants from 30 regions) and The Puerto Rico Sister Church initiative.

Associate General Secretary Jeff Woods continues to demonstrate OGS’ commitment to the regions through his Executive Minister search

consultations. One-quarter of the regional executives have served for less than 2 years.

I have resumed my pastoral visitation to regions, with separate trips this spring to Indianapolis and Indiana/Kentucky. Both Executive Ministers did a terrific job in utilizing my time effectively. Through preaching in church services, speaking at associational visits where conversation was spontaneous and unscripted, board meetings, staff interactions, etc., the message and mission of ABCUSA was communicated.



In 2019, I sought to speak to issues prophetically and these pastoral letters received much positive feedback. In April, I responded to the fire at Notre Dame Cathedral in an Easter message. Later that month, I addressed the issue of anti-Semitism and religiously focused violence in “Hate and Violence Cannot Defeat Love and Faith.” In May, I spoke approvingly of the United Nations General Assembly vote to establish August 22 as the International Day Commemorating the Victims of Acts of Violence Based on Religion or Belief.

On June 1, I responded in writing to the tragedy Virginia Beach experienced. It is not coincidental that we were led eighteen months ago to hold our Biennial in this city. The Holy Spirit has led us here, to be a witness for healing and caring. As I complete this report, our team is working hard on negotiating the publication costs for a special letter to the city, which will be published twice during our stay. Over 40 ABC leaders have signed the letter.



Resourcing the ABC family takes on many dimensions. Associate General Secretary Marsha Scipio has been spearheading our reinvigoration of the denomination’s environmental justice witness, and we are excited that a beautiful and professionally produced video by ecoAmerica will be unveiled at the Biennial. Associate General Secretary Pat Hernandez has convened a denominational-wide team in anticipation of the 40th Anniversary Celebration of Women in Ministry, scheduled for June 2020.

This three-fold concise depiction of our work is clear, compelling and necessary for the ongoing health, effectiveness and faithfulness of our denominational family.

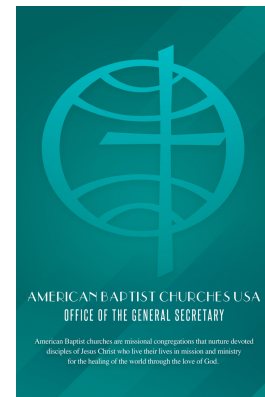


In order to share our message, in 2018 we created a new table display based on the pastoral vision. Previously, OGS had little visibility in vendor and ministry display areas.

In its first year, it has been taken to 21 region annual meetings and 9 national events. OGS team members and BGM board members provide a human touch to the display. For example, Associate General Secretary Pat Hernandez and others staffed our display table at ABC of the South annual meeting.

The OGS team, led by Bridget Lipin and Tina Turner, is working diligently on a new 20-page booklet that describes the ministries of OGS in detailed form. It will be easily updatable and will be ready for its initial preview at the 2019 Biennial Mission Summit.

Along with the vision statement, this booklet will make the ministry of OGS clear and understandable. It is my sincere hope that the vision work we have accomplished during the past two years will provide a solid and positive foundation for the future effectiveness and expansion of the ministry of the Office of the General Secretary.



Funding the Future: United Mission and Direct Appeals for Support

There were 215 churches that contributed to United Mission in 2018 which did not contribute to UM in 2017! Their giving ranged from \$9,000 to \$4.09. However, from among over 5,000 ABCUSA churches, only 280 gave to United Mission and all four national offerings (AFC, OGHS, WMO, MMBB).

In the first quarter of 2019, UM giving increased in 12 regions, was stable in 3 more and decreased in 18 regions. Overall, UM was down \$77,000 (4.7%) from 2018. This trend is now 20 years old.

At the same time, Specifics are up \$29,000 (2.4%) and Targeted Giving is up \$128,000 (10.7%). Recently, ABHMS introduced its Passionary Fund, which represents the trend among all ABC partners to create ongoing fund-raising efforts where 100% of the donations go to one organization (like region and missionary-specific offerings). Whether intended or not, we must recognize that such competition undercuts support of United Mission. With overall ABMS giving down 2.8%, it is clear that churches continue to shift their denominational giving to non-United Mission lines. There are five major reasons why this shift is occurring:

1. Our culture has shifted from donations based on organizational loyalty to supporting causes, specific missions and missionaries who enjoy a personal relationship with the giver(s). United Mission philosophically is culturally out of synch with the times.
2. United Mission is no longer promoted by our denominational partners. We lost the World Mission Support department in 2004; these staff leaders were the primary national fundraisers for UM. IM, ABHMS, MMBB and other partners who receive funds have not encouraged their

network of supporters to give to UM. Most regions do support UM, but also emphasize region offerings that provide their mission with 100% of the funds raised, as opposed to 65% with UM. IM has over 100 missionaries passionately asking our churches for targeted support throughout the year; ABHMS now has the Passionary Fund that does the same for their ministries. Neither organization promotes UM in any real way.

3. Past and continuing denominational, theological and cultural controversies, with the most divisive being over differing understandings of sexuality, have caused some churches to cease supporting UM (as well as other offerings).
4. That leaves OGS to promote UM, but we are understaffed in this regard. The Development Department, undergirded by UM, does not promote UM as its number 1 priority. Instead, it has sought (with a measure of success) offerings/donations for special projects.
5. UM as an offering lacks clarity and a compelling identity. It is no longer, and has not been for many years, the core offering that funds the totality of our mission partnerships. In reality, it is the national offering for regions and OGS, but it is not marketed that way.

In the past two years, OGS has spearheaded discussions with the NLC to gauge support for UM and to find new ways to grow it. The task force produced a good tagline, “United in Christ, Together in Mission.”

Unlike our partners, OGS does not possess an organized specific or targeted offering for our ministries. Accordingly, I would recommend to the BGM four specific proposals for consideration.

- 1) The Board should adopt a policy that ABC related ministries that receive UM funding must promote UM in their publications, activities, website, and other venues. For example, ABHMS receives over \$300,000 in UM funding for American Baptist Personnel Services. Isn't it reasonable that ABHMS should promote UM?
- 2) Future adjustments to UM distribution should impact all budget lines, and not disproportionately hurt OGS.
- 3) UM should be considered primarily a joint mission offering for regions and OGS, and marketed accordingly.
- 4) I recommend that the BGM endorse the tagline, “United in Christ, Together in Mission.”

Moving into the Future: Robert A. Roblee Building



Several OGS team members visited the Robert A. Roblee Building, the future home of ABCUSA/OGS, the American Baptist Historical Society, and potentially other ministries.

We have been granted building permits and **construction has begun**; previously, the interior has been cleaned out in preparation for the construction to commence. It is exciting to walk through the building and see where each of our new offices will be. In contrast to the proposed downsizing of our office space if we had moved into the ABHMS building, the space suits the current needs of the OGS team in a wonderful way!

In discussions with two leaders from American Baptist Men, we have learned that they desire to have a space in Valley Forge for their occasional use. Accordingly, I have invited ABMen to join us in our building.

There has been discussion with IM about the potential negative impact on their ministries due to our accessing Roblee funds for the building purchase. Although OGS is under no obligation to do so, we may seek to mitigate the impact by either replenishing the Roblee fund from the proceeds of the sale of the Mission Center (which would permanently lessen the amount of income for OGS future ministries), or temporarily set aside a portion of the 588 sale income for supporting IM. In either case, I would recommend that OGS encourage IM to commit to supporting UM in some real way, as a symbol of mutuality in ministry, and to seek ways to educate them about the impact that continuous missionary fund-raising has on UM.

Communicating Our Future: Website, IT and ABC-Core



The first major refresh of our denominational website, abc-usa.org, was unveiled this past month. The effort, which involved nearly a year's worth of effort and planning, was spearheaded by Bridget Lipin. Please take some time to peruse its many offerings.

The OGS IT team continues to work diligently to update ABCIS (including the charting of the many new languages spoken in our churches), and assist regions and other partners in accessing important data about their constituents.

After over 18 months of development, ABC-Core, a web-based extension of ABCIS, will soon be ready for “alpha testing” by selected Executive Ministers and other key users. Charlie Dunn has spearheaded this innovative project. The bringing together of the 2 ABCIS and 2 Computer Center employees to form the new ABCUSA/OGS Information Technologies Team has been a major achievement of the past two years. Each team member has a very distinct and specific skill set that is necessary for our ministry to flourish. It is vital that ABCUSA invest in technology as a means of communicating denominational identity and vision.



Living Together for a Brighter Future: Ecumenical Relationships



During my term as General Secretary, OGS has been active in supporting National Council of Churches ecumenical and inter-faith projects.

On May 21, 2019, I represented ABCUSA at this year's Christian-Jewish Conversation in Philadelphia (left). It was very well attended

and the presentation by the American Jewish Committee was quite insightful in regards to the problem of anti-Semitism. We have continued the Baptist-Muslim Dialogues, and we sent an ABCUSA representative to the initial Christian-Buddhist and Christian-Hindu Dialogues held in Los Angeles in 2018.

Journeying into the Future

The next 6 months will be filled with memorable experiences for us all. May God bless ABCUSA as we gather for this year's Summit by the Sea! Hopefully by September, our team will move into its new home and in November, when the Board meets again, I anticipate we will dedicate the building in a special worship service.

For me personally, I am looking forward to several scheduled pastoral visits in regions across the country, as well as speaking at special events such as the 75th anniversary of Green Lake Conference Center in August. My ministry as General Secretary will come to its conclusion on December 31, 2019 – but not before we launch the inaugural annual “Hopevale Commemoration” in partnership with the Convention of Philippine Baptist Churches. What is this, you ask? Stay tuned!

Yours in Christ,

Rev. Dr. Lee B. Spitzer, ABCUSA General Secretary