

2019 Orientation to American Baptist Life (OTABL) Summary

Authored by:

Rev. Dr. Kevin Walden, Associate General Secretary for Congregational and Pastoral Effectiveness

Rev. Rebecca Driscoll, Women in Ministry Intern in the Office of the General Secretary

The 2019 Orientation to American Baptist Life (OTABL) cohort completed their programming after gathering together at the 2019 ABCUSA Biennial Mission Summit in Virginia Beach, Virginia. The 2019 cohort was comprised of 107 participants: seminarians (19) and new ministers (76) and their guests (12), who represented 29 of our 33 American Baptist regions. The OTABL program included three pre-Biennial Mission Summit webinars and attendance at the 2019 ABCUSA Biennial Mission Summit.

The three ninety minute webinars, held in March, April, and May, provided the participants an opportunity to learn from, interact with, and ask questions about the denominational family's mission and ministry partners. The webinars featured presentations by: the ABCUSA Office of the General Secretary, the American Baptist Home Mission Societies, American Baptist International Ministries, American Baptist Men USA, American Baptist Women's Ministries, the ABCUSA Ministers Council, Ministers and Missionaries Benefit Board Financial Services, and the Regional Executive Ministers.

At the 2019 Biennial Mission Summit, the OTABL cohort participated in mentor groups led by regional executive staff members. These mentor groups met four times and focused on sharing some simple ideas for exploring their faith and encouraging healthy and effective ministry. In addition, the Biennial portion of OTABL included a Sunday morning breakfast presentation by ABCUSA General Secretary Dr. Lee B. Spitzer; and opportunities for participants to attend Biennial programming such as workshops, plenary sessions, and worship services.

This is the second time that OTABL programming has been incorporated into the ABCUSA Biennial Mission Summit events.

A special thank you to this year's OTABL mission sponsors for making our programming, travel, and accommodations possible through their generous support: Ministers and Missionaries Benefit Board Financial Services, United Mission, the American Baptist Home Mission Societies and Judson Press, and International Ministries.

2019 OTABL Attendance and Satisfaction Survey Results

At the conclusion of the 2019 OTABL programming an attendance and satisfaction survey was distributed to the cohort participants asking for their comments and feedback. Sixty percent of OTABL cohort participants responded to the survey. The feedback was both positive and affirming, and also offered suggestions for future OTABL events and gatherings.

This Attendance and Satisfaction Summary details the results of that survey through eighteen questions and eleven graphs divided into six categories: webinars, Biennial, registration, interaction with Travel Leaders, shuttle service, and overall advice for the next OTABL program.

In response to the pre-Biennial webinars, OTABL participants wrote that the webinars helped them get to know national staff members, gave them clarity on the structure of the denomination, and prepared them for the Biennial. They were grateful that the webinars were recorded so that they could be watched again or at a later time. In some instances, they felt that the webinars were too long, not interactive enough, and included material that had already been taught in a polity class or was repeated at the Biennial. They felt that at the conclusion of the series of webinars, they still did not have a good sense of how to interact/engage with the denominational entities and that there was still a lack of clarity around the history and structure of the denomination. It was also mentioned that the technological issues that occurred during the webinars were distracting.

The OTABL cohort wrote that they enjoyed attending the Biennial especially the presentation by Dr. Spitzer and the opportunity the Biennial created for them to network with the movers and shakers of the denomination. However, they expressed that the schedule and details/location of OTABL events were unclear at times and they often felt over scheduled with very little time to get to know each other/the mentors or to rest. There was also overlap in the schedule which prevented them from attending Biennial events. It was difficult for them to hear and engage with the presenters in the gathering space. It felt a bit like youth group camp. Some felt that when important questions were raised, they were not addressed nor acknowledged adequately.

Many OTABL participants experienced the registration process for Biennial to be easy and streamlined, and found the staff kind, patient, and helpful. Others found the registration process more difficult having to register twice for one event, experiencing confusion about what costs were covered, and having trouble locating confirmation numbers.

The surveys reflect that interactions between OTABL participants and Travel Leaders was an easy process and that the staff were helpful. The surveys also reflect the desire for more than one staff member, more support during travel emergencies, and more clarity around specific dates and times.

The shuttle service was also reviewed as part of the OTABL cohort survey. The responses included that the drivers were professional, ready, and helpful. The shuttle service from the airport to the hotel was great. However, many responded that the shuttle service was not on time, which resulted in the loss of free time and missed meals/worship. It was also unclear if reservations were required for the shuttle service.

The final category asked the question “what advice would you give the program administrators to improve on the experience?” Suggestions included more time for networking, better meeting spaces, more signage and clearer communication, as well as more variety in meal options/gluten free communion, and more time for new ministers to get to know the mentors. They also suggested beginning OTABL programming on Thursday evening which might allow for less stressful travel and a more relaxed event schedule, creating more opportunities to attend Biennial sessions and to practice self-care. OTABL participants also requested more sessions on maintaining healthy churches, financial stability, clergy credentials, and minister matching opportunities. The last comment recommended a stronger focus on hospitality, space for conversation, time for ice-breakers and get-to-know-you moments, and recognition that OTABL participants are not too young and inexperienced, but that they bring rich ministerial gifts.

The remainder of this survey summary contains more detailed information on the demographics of the OTABL cohort as well as results of the survey expressed in eleven graphs and original comments from the 2019 OTABL participants.

- - -

OTABL Advisory Team:

Rev. Dr. Kevin Walden (Coordinator), OGS
Rev. Dr. Robert Cochran, DC Baptist Convention
Rev. Dr. Mary Miller, The American Baptist Churches of Massachusetts
Rev. Dr. Harry Riggs, The American Baptist Churches of Connecticut

Regional Mentors:

Rev. Soozie Ford, ABC Indiana/Kentucky
Rev. Marlene Gil, TABCOM
Rev. Dr. Jeffrey Johnson, ABCOPAD

Rev. Dr. Isaac Castaneda, ABC Metro New York
Rev. Doug Hubbard, ABCOFLASH
Rev. Dr. Andre Towner, DC Baptist Convention