

ROLE OF THE OFFICE OF THE GENERAL SECRETARY VERSION TWO

Our Legacy and Our Future

American Baptist Churches are missional congregations that nurture devoted disciples of Jesus Christ who live their lives in mission and ministry for the healing of the world through the love of God. The Office of the General Secretary is an institution that creates spaces and hosts meetings for people to build upon the rich legacy of previous generations of American Baptists. While providing ministry support throughout the denomination, the office maintains an infrastructure for American Baptists to network and do ministry with one another. We believe that our greatest days are ahead of us because we are “United in Christ and Together in Ministry,” and possess an adventurous history.

The Office of the General Secretary carries out three important functions for the American Baptist Churches USA: gathering the denomination, supporting congregations and regions, and creating space for local and global issues. Each of these functions are described in greater detail below.

Gathering the Denomination

We gather leaders, worshipers, and denominational staff from across the ABC. While the Office of the General Secretary hosts and facilitates the planning for these meetings, planning is conducted with input from the entire ABC family. Below are a few samples of the events hosted by the Office of the General Secretary.

Biennial Mission Summits. In June of 2021, the Office of the General Secretary hosted the first-ever virtual Biennial Mission Summit. Feedback from the event has been overwhelmingly positive with the event receiving the highest rating of any Biennial in the last ten years.

National Leadership Council. The Office of the General Secretary hosts the only meeting inclusive of all of the regional and national executives. Leaders spend four days every spring talking shop, building relationships, worshiping, networking, implementing denominational priorities, and enhancing the mission of the ABC. At its most recent meeting, leaders voted to expand their gatherings through virtual meetings that will include discussion, prayer, and biblical reflection.

National Executive Council. The executives of five national boards - American Baptist Home Mission Societies (ABHMS), American Baptist Women’s Ministries (ABWM), American Baptist International Ministries (IM), MMBB Financial Services (MMBB), and the Office of the General Secretary - meet regularly to identify common challenges, share wisdom, and promote the interests of the denomination. These meetings are convened and facilitated by the General Secretary.

Orientation to American Baptist Life. Every two years, ABC seminarians and pastors new to the ABC are invited to an ABC orientation. Zina Jacque and Judy Fackenthal served as co-chairs for the 2021 Orientation to American Baptist Life event. Their planning committee, that includes national and regional staff, provided excellent support in working with six organizations to help prepare them for online orientation events leading up to the Biennial.

Caucuses. The Office of the General Secretary provides funding and support for 8 American Baptist caucuses. While the original intent of the caucuses was to create pools of qualified candidates for leadership, this intent has been expanded in recent years to include gatherings, programs, and advocacy.

Supporting Congregations and Regions

The Office of the General Secretary supports local ABC congregations in a variety of ways both directly and indirectly. Listed below are a few of the ways that the Office of the General Secretary supports congregations and regions.

Managing American Baptist Churches Group Exemption. The majority of ABC congregations maintain their 501c3 status through the Office of the General Secretary. Without such recognition, contributions to local churches would not be tax exempt. The Office of the General Secretary annually requests this government documentation and regularly responds to requests from these tax-exempt ABC congregations.

ABCIS. The Office of the General Secretary maintains a database of every ABC congregation, regional and national organizations, and the many members who have served them. This includes clergypersons as well as many laypersons, both actively serving and those who are retired, have left ABC, or are now deceased. This database is called ABCIS – American Baptist Churches Information Systems. This is the same database that houses the giving information for both individuals and congregations as well as membership information. Every week, the Office of the General Secretary receives requests for reports, data files and counts from regional and national partners and companies that produce religious statistical publications. Over 1,200,000 records are contained in the ABCIS database; the earliest records go as far back as 1982 when the first computer systems came online. We are now in the process of transferring all of this data to a state of the art enterprise software platform called NetSuite to make it easier to enter and pull data from the system as well as to enhance the security of the system.

Regional Ministry. While every region has an autonomous board of directors, the Office of the General Secretary walks alongside regions to support the entire process of calling an Executive Minister, orienting these persons to their new roles, providing forums and resources for problem solving and sharing best practices, assessing performance, and celebrating accomplishments. In addition, Regional Ministries regularly provides regional board training, leadership development retreats, and pastor conferences and seminars.

Accounting. The Office of the General Secretary maintains an effective and efficient accounting staff to ensure that the intent behind every gift to any partner in the ABC is fully realized. The accounting department has a strong record of performance as evidenced by year after year of clean audits.

Mission Resource Development. Cutting-edge stewardship resources are available to every ABC congregation through the “Generosity Project” sponsored by the Office of the General Secretary. In addition, Mission Resource Development provides resources and information to promote the four major denominational offerings as well as United Mission.

Clergy Support. The Professional Ministries Team is a group that includes staff persons from across the denomination who provide support for clergy. This team, facilitated by the Office of the General Secretary, provides recommended procedures for ordination to the regions, promotes fair clergy compensation, and provides guidelines for the leadership registry that includes both ordained clergy and lay leaders. Additionally, the Office of the General Secretary provides staff and resources for “American Baptist Women in Ministry” and responds to requests for interim pastors through “Transition Ministries.”

Creating Space for Local and Global Issues

Throughout its history, the Office of the General Secretary has carved out space for the gathering and disseminating of information on local and global issues with denominational impact. This is done through table discussions and ad hoc groups. Occasionally, the Office of the General Secretary also launches task forces and commissions to address a timely topic that has implications for the entire ABC family. Some of the topics currently addressed are included below.

Anti-Racism Task Force. In 2020, the Office of the General Secretary designed an anti-racism “Call to Prayer” event that included over 145 online participants. The commitment of the panelists was evident as one panelist led in prayer from a hospital bed and another prayed from a neighbor’s workroom, the only place discovered to have power following a local tornado the day prior. This call to prayer launched and shaped the work of an anti-racism task force who has met regularly to identify and share anti-racism resources for persons at various starting points.

Burma Refugee Commission. On February 1, 2021, the military took control of the government of Myanmar, imprisoning several democratically elected leaders. Since then, the Burma Refugee Commission has gathered “on the ground” information from Myanmar and used that information to advocate for ways to bring peace to this country. These advocacy efforts include recognizing a new National Unity Government, calling for targeted sanctions, and advocating for humanitarian aid. They have led to many meetings with White House staff, US Representatives and Senators, and UN Representatives. Recently advocacy efforts on the part of many groups resulted in the earmarking of \$50,000,000 for humanitarian aid by the US Government for the country of Myanmar.

Responding to the Global Pandemic. The General Secretary accepted an invitation from Vice President Harris in 2021 to serve on the *Community Corps* to share ideas, resources, and encouragement for COVID-19 vaccinations. The Corps has received online briefings and zoom calls with Dr. Fauci and Dr. Murthy. In addition, the Office of the General Secretary has distributed and shared the results of two surveys assessing the impact of Covid-19 on congregations and pastors and has recently accepted an invitation to participate in the *Exploring the Pandemic Impact on Congregations (EPIC)* study sponsored by Faith Communities Today (FACT) that includes a five million dollar budget sourced by the Lilly Endowment.

Creation Justice Network. This network celebrates all of the ways that our faith calls us to serve as the hands and feet of Christ for the care of God’s creation. Additionally, the Network recently launched a “Creation Justice Congregations” program, designed to encourage and support congregations as they discern what the embodiment of creation care ministry looks like in their unique context.

World Relief Committee. The Office of the General Secretary convenes and provides staffing for the World Relief Committee that distributes funds collected through “One Great Hour of Sharing.” These funds are distributed for ongoing relief efforts as well as emergencies brought about by natural disasters.

Ecumenical and Interfaith Issues. The Office of the General Secretary appoints several persons annually to a variety of ecumenical and interfaith committees and commissions. Just as many local churches demonstrate their unity in Christ through local projects and councils of churches, the Office of the General Secretary does this work on behalf of the denomination.

It Takes All of Us

While the Office of the General Secretary provides the bowl that holds together the ministries of ABC through its services of gathering, supporting, and creating space, every movement needs institutional modalities and sodalities to carry out its mission. The Office of the General Secretary is extremely indebted to the national boards who provide ministry programs and resources for local churches. The Office of the General Secretary provides a place for the activity of the whole so that each part can carry out their God-given mission to the glory of God.

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