

BGM Report from the General Secretary December of 2022 to June of 2023

As we enter into this final stage of the strategic intentional interim period, I am pleased to announce that nearly all of the items on the strategic plan have been completed and most of the remaining items are progressing according to plan. During this period, we have clarified the role of the Office of the General Secretary, transformed the culture of the office, renewed staff morale, and achieved several milestones only made possible by people working together across regional and national boundaries.

On December 23, 2022, President Biden signed the Burma Act Bill into legislation as a part of the National Defense Authorization Act. As I participated in a New Year's Day Service with the leaders of the National Unity Government of Myanmar, the Acting President of Myanmar, Duwa Lashi La, said that this is the greatest gift that one country can give to another country. This accomplishment, along with several other ministry updates are provided below.

Mission Clarification

Establishing the mission priorities sets the parameters for the major tasks of the organization. These priorities consume the majority of the staff time in ABCUSA.

- a. *Gathering the Denomination* – We plan meetings of the Biennial Mission Summit, National Leadership Council, National Executive Council, Engage 2023, and more with input from the entire ABC family.
- b. *Supporting Congregations* - The Office of the General Secretary supports local ABC congregations in a variety of ways both directly and indirectly via the Group Exemption Program, Accounting Office, Travel and Conference Planning, ABC Information System, Regional Ministry, and Clergy Support.
- c. *Creating Space* - 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. Current topics include anti-racism, creation justice, Burma refugees and advocacy, theologians group, and the global pandemic.

Burma

The Burma Act Bill, signed into law, contains the following components:

1. Recognizes the National Unity Government
2. Imposes mandatory sanctions
3. Gives the President authority to sanction Oil and Gas Enterprise (MOGE)
4. Calls for a report within six months on sanctions for Burma's energy sector;
5. Develops a strategy to promote human rights and the restoration of civilian government;
6. Authorizes funding to strengthen federalism among the states

Each of these components were a part of an advocacy campaign by the Burma Advocacy Group, chaired by General Secretary Emeritus Roy Medley, which is a subgroup of the ABC Burma Refugee Commission. Van Lian Kio, a member of the Burma Advocacy Group and the Grassroots Movement for Burma, Rev. Henry Van Ceu Lyan, Secretary of the Peace and Justice Committee, Chin Baptist Churches USA, Zo Tu Hmung, executive director of the Chin Association of Maryland, Rev. Saw Ler Htoo, senior pastor of Calvary Burmese Church in Washington D.C. and general secretary of Karen Baptist Churches USA, and Scott Stearman, International Advocacy Baptist Collaborative, U.N. Representative Baptist World Alliance (ECOSOC)/Cooperative Baptist Fellowship (DGC) all played key volunteer roles in the advocacy efforts. Additionally, the efforts of two ABC staff persons, Leslie Turley, IM's area director for Southeast Asia and Japan, and Florence Li, former ABHMS' national coordinator for Asian Ministries, were critical in surfacing contacts and generating information on the ground in Myanmar and among family members and relatives in the U.S. leading to advocacy efforts in the U.S.

The Burma Refugee Commission orchestrated a second memorial service on January 31 (February 1 in Myanmar) on the anniversary date of the Tatmadaw Military Coup in Myanmar. Due to the joint sponsorship of ABCUSA, MMBB, IM, and REMC, the ABC denomination again served as a sponsor of the influential International Religious Freedom Summit in Washington DC January 31-February 1, 2023.

We have learned that Rev. Dr. Samson and Rev. Sang have been imprisoned by the military in Burma. I participated in a worship service and rally in Washington DC on December 17 along with Robin Stoops, Roy Medley, Florence Li, Joan Friesen and many others calling for the release of all prisoners in Myanmar. The BRC will be staffing a booth at the Biennial and is available to share more stories and answer questions.

I spoke at the United States Institute of Peace on April 13. The following week, the State Department called for the release of Rev. Samson and the British Parliament soon followed with a similar statement.

Anti-Racism Emphasis

Al Brinson, 2021 recipient of the Sparrowk Award, wrote an inspiring piece for MLK Jr. Day reflecting upon his conversations with the MLK Jr. family. The Board of General Ministries has committed to furthering this topic during their meetings in 2023. Katie Choy Wong, 2023 Sparrowk Award Recipient and author of the book, "Building Lasting Bridges," will provide an educational event for the BGM in June of 2023. The book invites the reader "to discover a fresh look toward embracing diversity within faith communities and developing strong, effective, multicultural ministries." The Office of the General Secretary staff will also embrace this critical issue during 2023 as they are led by consultant Dee Riggs. Recently, I found the presentation forwarded to me by Karen Podsiadly on zero sum gain by Heather McGhee very inspiring.

Further, Jemar Tisby, in his book, “The Color of Compromise” details stories of the symbols, structures, systems and people who either actively or complicitly worked to construct and perpetuate racism in America. Without the passing of laws and the attention to symbols, structures, and systems aimed toward anti-racism, these injustices will continue. One of the first steps that someone can take is to educate oneself about the history of racism in America. The Executive Committee of the Board of General Ministries has been reading this and other books to better understand the history of racism in America. I encourage the ABC family to read this and other books on the subject as you educate yourselves on this critical issue. In his book, Jemar Tisby speaks of the ABC’s of racial justice: awareness, relationships, and commitment. I encourage the ABC to practice the ABC’s of racial justice. You may also want to read my Juneteenth article released prior to the board meeting.

New Task Force: Interpreting the Impact of COVID-19 on Congregations

During a phone conversation, chairperson Frank Frischkorn provided an update regarding the work of this task force. The task force, comprised of nine members, received 144 responses to their survey seeking stories about the impact of COVID-19 on ABC congregations. Nearly one-half of the respondents indicated that they are available for follow-up. The 87-page report provides numerous anecdotes and stories of challenges, pain, thriving, and innovation among our congregations and their leaders. The three emerging themes from the data are:

- The importance and power of relationships
- The streamlining of ministry, prioritizing and reprioritizing
- The challenge of change and the permission to try new things

Members of the task force will be writing papers on the emerging themes. Rev. Frischkorn presented task force findings to the recent NLC gathering at Green Lake.

National Leadership Council

The NLC meeting was held at Green Lake May 9-12, 2023 with the theme, “The Best of ABC: Past, Present, and Future.” Members discussed our collective past as American Baptists, applied their problem solving skills to several current issues, surfaced the components of an American Baptist missiology and discussed the future impact of the denomination. Several participants expressed great gratitude for the collaborative spirit and progress on relevant topics. Prior to the gathering, members of the NLC prayer planning team, chaired by Rev. Dr. Gregg Hemmen, led weekly NLC prayer times during the Lenten Season.

National Executive Council

NEC members continue to engage in public and highly symbolic actions of working together. My hope is that these actions will only deepen and become more significant over time.

Members of the NEC produced another Christmas video narrating the book, “The Snowy Day.” The groundbreaking book written by Ezra Jack Keats in 1962 tells the story of Peter, a young boy who embarks upon a snow-filled day. He experiences such wonder, adventure, and delight that he puts a snowball in his pocket so that he can enjoy the snow again the next day. My Christmas message highlighted the video and invited people to “Extend a Moment with Jesus.”

Members of the national boards have been invited to send an observer to the Board of General Ministries beginning with the June BGM meeting. This decision reflects a positive outcome regarding the history of the Special Observer component that was a part of the denominational restructuring decisions in 2013.

NEC members recently discussed implications of the new software CHAT GPT. For the welcome session of the Biennial, they have agreed to send one representative from each respective organization to participate in a game of “Family Feud.”

NEC members also recently addressed an issue of concern regarding invitations being extended to all “Orientation to ABC Life (Now Engage 2023) members. In cooperation with Engage 2023 leaders, Biennial planners, and the NEC, a decision was made to give the participants the option to sign up for the luncheons they want to attend during Biennial registration with count and contact information being given to the national boards.

Upon discussion with the ABCUSA president, Jim Wolfe and I approved two minor changes to the MMBB bylaws: the correction of a scrivener’s error dating back to 2010 and the allowance of an additional term for MMBB’s president. According to MMBB’s bylaws, these changes require prior approval by the General Secretary or an ABCUSA officer prior to a MMBB manager vote.

Engage 2023 (Orientation to American Baptist Life)

The goal of Engage 2023 is to explore what it means to *Connect, Equip and Belong* as American Baptists! Nominations of Engage 2023 participants came in well over 100 and registrations recently passed 60 participants, far exceeding numbers from the two previous events. Leaders Zina Jacque and Judy Fackenthal are in regular contact and negotiation with Kathy Jachowski and Tina Kiernan to design a smooth running process for this event which will include face to face time at the Biennial, video presentations from national boards, mentoring by pastors and executives, and follow up meetings. Robin Stoops produced the ABCUSA video.

Everyday ABC Conversation

On November 29, 2022, Rev. Mindi Welton-Mitchell and Rev. Dr. Marvin McMickle presented an Everyday ABC Conversation on “Advent in a Post-Pandemic World.” This was the highest attended Everyday ABC Conversation thus far and we received several positive comments following the event. The February conversation focused on “Passing the Peace,” a symbolic act of sharing the love of Christ. Driana Jamila-Lesan Arceneaux, college student and member of the Young Adult Women’s Ministries Advisory Team, and Rev. Dr. Gina Jacobs-Strain, executive director of American Baptist Women’s Ministries were the presenters. Biennial workshop leaders and authors Travis Norvell and Greg Mamula presented for the May conversation on “Congregational Innovations.”

Biennial Mission Summit

We are looking forward to an inspiring, educational, and unity building 2023 Biennial Mission Summit designed “For Such A Time As This.” Coordinator Tina Kiernan, working with the Office of Travel and Conference Planning, has worked on a number of issues including registration, local arrangements, sponsorships, etc. Producer Jeremy Fackenthal is working with a worship team and reports great cohesiveness within the team. Several of the workshops are in Spanish and the plenaries will be in Spanish or translated. This event was also preceded by a monthly newsletter, a nice promotional addition.

The Mission Summit Conversations (MSC) will begin this year with a public viewing of the 35-minute film, “Terror and Hope.” This is a story about children and war and about scientists and humanitarians working to provide hope to these children. Themes from the film will be discussed in small groups immediately following the film. MSC Guides have been recruited and trained to assist with the flow of the conversations. Resources from ABCUSA and the national boards that relate to potential issues raised by the film have been posted on the ABCUSA website for perusal before and after the Biennial Mission Summit.

The Mission Table event will take place on Monday, June 26 following the Biennial. Rev. Dr. Perry Hopper, Associate Executive Director of MMBB and Rev. Dr. Chris Roush, Executive Director of the American Baptist Foundation will deliver presentations on the landscapes of ABC and our society. Several rounds of small group conversation will take place, followed by “an act of discernment” to surface and narrow a set of priorities for the ABC.

Regional Ministry

- Rev. Dr. Marvin A. McMickle continues to serve as the Interim Regional Executive Minister for the Cleveland Baptist Association. The search committee is now receiving applications until June 30, 2023.
- Rev. Dr. Greg Mamula continues to serve as the Transitional Regional Executive Minister for ABC of Nebraska. The search committee is in the early stages of the search process.
- The ABC of Greater Indianapolis are in the midst of searching for the successor to Rev. Joan Friesen. They recently conducted an initial round of interviews.
- ABCOPAD has had a number of leadership transitions including the recent retirement of Jeff Johnson. They are in the process of forming a search committee.
- Rev. Dale Edwards will retire from the Executive Minister position of Vermont-New Hampshire in August and the region has not yet formed a search committee.
- Rev. Gilbert Foster was called as the New Executive Minister of Growing Healthy Churches (West Region) and attended his first NLC meeting.
- I received a message from the PBA Executive Minister whom I have worked with for many years on organizational issues. My reply to James McJunkin: This is awesome. Through the years, PBA has embraced adaptive change in the initial years of the concept, supplemented it with content such as with cultural humility, initiated cultural change, and put in place the systems and structures to continue to be an adaptive organization as shown in your document. You are commended for your leadership!
- A new slate of REMC nominees was approved in May.

Other Activities

- I participated in a New Year's Service with leaders of the National Unity Government in Myanmar on January 1.
- I attended the MMBB Colloquium in February, delivering a presentation on the work of ABCUSA and leading a session of worship.
- I participated in the installation service for the new General Secretary of the North American Baptist Fellowship online.
- I led an all-staff training session for ABCUSA on January 19 and a staff recognition day on April 26. Staff appreciated having an opportunity to play a game of Family Feud as a precursor to the Biennial activity.
- I wrote several congratulatory letters for individual and church anniversaries and attended several worship service anniversaries and retirements.
- I presented a session on the work of ABCUSA at the Miami Association of ABC Ohio.
- I attended the 75th Anniversary celebration of the National Council of Churches at the National City Christian Church in Washington DC as well as the NCC Board Meeting on May 15-16.
- I attended the American Baptist Assembly Board Meeting at Green Lake on May 12-13.

Respectfully Submitted
Dr. C. Jeff Woods
General Secretary
American Baptist Churches USA