

BGMEC Report from the General Secretary June of 2023 to September of 2023

As we enter into this 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 or nearly completed. During this time frame, 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.

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 advocacy, theologians group, and the global pandemic.

Biennial Mission Summit

The 2023 Biennial received high marks with 53% rating the Biennial as “excellent” and an additional 36% rating the Biennial as “good.” We had 1357 registrants that included 171 local arrangements volunteers and 45 band and liturgical members. The local volunteers added greatly to the Biennial experience. I spoke to many persons who were excited about their experience and wanted me to know that they were happy to be American Baptist. The speakers were inspiring and the workshops were informative. For the first time at a Biennial plenary session, I provided an ABCUSA Ministry Update along with staff. During the Biennial and the pre-meetings, I met with over 20 different groups offering remarks and engaging in conversation. The groups included:

- Regional Executive Ministers Council
- Theologians Commission
- Engage 2023
- AB Chaplains and Pastoral Counselors
- Black Caucus
- MMBB Luncheon
- Asian Alliance
- Native American Caucus
- Committee on Christian Unity and Interfaith Relations

- Central Baptist Theological Seminary
- Past ABC Officers
- Young Adult Social
- American Baptist Women in Ministry Social
- American Baptist Home Mission Societies Luncheon
- International Ministries Luncheon
- Meet and Greet the ABCUSA Officers

In addition to numerous hallway conversations, I also worked in the exhibit booth, hosted several conversations in my suite including a breakfast for the plenary speakers, and attended a breakfast for ABCUSA staff. Kathy Jachowski was extremely helpful in helping to coordinate General Secretary invitations and commitments. We appreciate the input received from our national partners and constituents and the opportunity to plan the American Baptist Biennial Mission Summit as the largest gathering of American Baptists.

ABCUSA has contracted with Bruce Whitaker, a professional meeting planner with many years of experience to provide information that will help the BGMEC to determine an appropriate location for the 2025 Biennial.

American Baptist Mission Table

Seventy-Six (76) invitees participated in the ABC Mission Table event that included representation from regions, national boards, national Associated Ministry Organizations, local churches, AB Caucuses, and American Baptist Seminaries and Colleges. Working together to produce priorities that fit the criteria listed below, the Mission Table was able to surface a set of priorities for consideration by all of the represented groups at the Table.

Criteria:

- a. Unifying effect – A topic that every ABC congregation would like to engage in.
- b. Urgency – A topic that needs to be addressed now.
- c. Passionate engagement – something that we all can really get excited about.
- d. Uniqueness – A topic that will show our ABC distinctiveness
- e. Witness – A topic that will demonstrate our commitment to Christ

In addition to receiving presentations on the American Baptist and U.S. landscapes from the Rev. Dr. Chris Roush and the Rev. Dr. Perry Hopper, ideas that surfaced from the Mission Summit Conversations during the Biennial provided potential topics for consideration. The resulting priorities are named below.

Priorities

- Empowering Young Adults and Youth
- Peacemaking in a Culture of Violence
- Mental Health
- Creation Care

- Building the Beloved Community through Collaboration
- Discipleship and Disciple Making
- Claim, Distinguish, and Proclaim the Markers of American Baptists

While every American Baptist local church, regional office, and national office is autonomous, this is an opportunity to demonstrate that our interdependence overshadows our independence by engaging in common mission priorities.

Mission Summit Conversations

As a new element to the ABC Mission Summit Conversations, participants began their MSC experience at the Biennial by viewing the film, “Terror and Hope.” The film tells the story of resilience regarding children and war in Syria. It depicts a past defined by terror and a future defined by hope. The short documentary surfaced several issues of current and future interest for American Baptists. Following the viewing of the film, participants transferred to a room set up for small group Mission Summit Conversations that included conversations in English, Spanish and Burmese.

Some of the insights from these conversations included:

- We need to build a fabric of relationships that support people experiencing mental health issues.
- Tools are needed to help youth with the issues that they are facing coming out of the pandemic.
- Holy Spirit is our changing agent for resilience practices and resources across generations
- Race based trauma is occurring next door in our neighborhoods
- What does it mean to root out violence?
- How do we keep community with so much individuality
- Let’s nurture resilience in one another and community

Myanmar

The Burma Refugee Commission did a great job staffing the BRC booth. I appreciate Florence Li chairing this booth activity. The Burma Advocacy Group continues to advocate for full funding of the Burma Act Bill, signed into law in 2022. The National Unity Government, now recognized by the U.S. Government, has requested ½ billion from Congress to implement the provisions of the bill.

Anti-Racism Emphasis

Rev. Katie Choy-Wong, 2023 recipient of the Sparrowk Award provided an excellent training session for the Board of General Ministries at their June meeting. I have worked with Rev. Choy-Wong several times and I always find her engaging, insightful, and able to move a group forward on Diversity and Inclusion issues. We purchased and distributed copies of Katie Choy-Wong’s book, “Building Lasting Bridges,” to each board member. 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 in September as they are led by consultant Deidra Riggs.

Interpreting the Impact of COVID-19 on Congregations Task Force

Frank Frischkorn has shared learnings of the “Interpreting the Impact of COVID-19 on Congregations task force with several groups, including the National Leadership Council and the Theologians Commission. They are continuing to gather qualitative data from interviews with pastors.

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.” As a follow-up to this meeting, I have drafted a set of “Common Talking Points” that can be adapted by NLC members when sharing about our ABC history with constituents. I also have been compiling small group table notes into a document entitled, “Toward an American Baptist Missiology,” for further review and work by the NLC. The next meeting of the NLC will take place March 11-14, 2024.

National Executive Council

NEC members have been sharing training tools and sessions with one another. In June, I offered a presentation on “Leading Practices of Nonprofit Boards.” I heard many positive comments regarding the all board dinner that took place in June. Board members appreciated the opportunity to get to know one another better, share updates from their various boards, and celebrate the common ministries of American Baptists.

Engage 2023 (Orientation to American Baptist Life)

Seventy-Seven (77) persons participated in Engage 2023 to explore what it means to *Connect, Equip and Belong* as American Baptists! Leaders Zina Jacque and Judy Fackenthal did a tremendous job of recruitment to bolster the attendance at this ABCUSA led event. Participants attended Biennial plenary sessions, luncheons and workshops alongside their own Engage meetings with American Baptist leaders. Pre-recorded videos were produced by the National Boards to add to the information available to the participants. We are grateful for the significant contribution from MMBB that makes this event possible.

Everyday ABC Conversation

Two Biennial Workshop leaders, Rev. Dr. Greg Mamula and Rev. Dr. Travis Norvell led a June Everyday ABC Conversation on “Innovative Practices for Local Congregations.” The presentations were well-received and led to some inspiring conversations from the online participants. Meriah Tigner and Joshua King have agreed to present during our next Everyday ABC Conversation on the topic of AI. This online event is scheduled for October 3, 2023 at 3:00 pm EST.

ABCUSA Staff

The annual staff picnic was held in July with BBQ catering, bingo, a cornhole tournament and the renown ABC style wiffle-ball game. The “Skinny Pops” defeated the “Goofies” by a score of 11-9. For a complete list of innovative wiffle ball rules that coincide with our staff values, ask for a copy from the General Secretary. We will hold a Leadership Team retreat in September focusing on a healthy transition for the staff in 2024 with new leadership. An all staff gathering will be held with DEI consultant Deidra Riggs on September 12. Some of the staff activities since the Biennial include:

- The launch of a new “Tool Kit” for United Mission
- I preached at several American Baptist congregations including Brewster Baptist, the church of Board Member Doug Scalise.
- Continued updates of NetSuite reports
- Network maintenance on the computer system
- Supervisors are in the process of conducting staff performance evaluations

Regional Ministry

- Rev. Dr. Marvin A. McMickle continues to serve as the Interim Regional Executive Minister for the Cleveland Baptist Association. The search committee that I am working with recently conducted preliminary interviews with potential candidates.
- Rev. Dr. Greg Mamula continues to serve as the Transitional Regional Executive Minister for ABC of Nebraska. The search committee is in the process of reviewing applications.
- The ABC of Greater Indianapolis called Rev. Dr. Michael Friday to serve as their next Executive Minister following the retirement of Rev. Joan Friesen.
- The ABCOPAD Search Committee is meeting bi-weekly with Rev. Soozi Ford.
- Rev. Dale Edwards retired from the Executive Minister position of Vermont-New Hampshire in August and the region is in the early stages of a search.
- I designed and analyzed regional search committee surveys for Nebraska and ABCOPAD.
- I consulted with Brian Johnson regarding bylaw revisions for ABC of Michigan.
- We received another letter of interest from a region desiring to host a future Biennial.

Other Activities

- I sent several thanks you’s to persons who helped make the 2023 Biennial a success.
- I conducted several phone conversations with persons who indicated at the Biennial that they would like to become more involved in American Baptist ministry.
- The staff greatly appreciated the visit of president Jim Wolfe to thank the staff for the work in planning and staffing the Biennial and for the NetSuite migration.

Respectfully Submitted
 September 2023
 Dr. C. Jeff Woods
 General Secretary
 American Baptist Churches USA