

## **BGM Report from the General Secretary June of 2023 to November of 2023**

As we enter the final stage of the strategic intentional interim period, I am pleased to announce that nearly all the items on the strategic plan have been 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. One of the major accomplishments during this period is the clarification of the mission priorities of ABCCUSA. These priorities, as shown below, are supported by national and regional organizations. Other significant tasks accomplished by our staff include:

- Adopted new personnel guidelines.
- Clarified of the values that drive how our office functions.
- Created a healthy and enjoyable office environment.
- The migration of 25 years of ABCIS data into a reliable NetSuite platform.
- Initiation of Everyday ABC Conversations.
- Expanded opportunities for input regarding the Biennial, National Leadership Council, Engage and other key events.
- Defined the role of BGM committees, commissions, and task forces.
- Provided staff development training in several areas including personality preferences, narratives, harassment, diversity, equity, and inclusion, and more.
- Developed and implemented staff appraisals.
- Strengthened relationships with national and regional leaders.
- Produced NEC children's videos.
- Hosted the first ever virtual Biennial and the first online Christmas concert.

### **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, 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.

### **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, we provided an ABCUSA Ministry Update. 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
- Palmer 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 with 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 coordinating the 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 contracted with Bruce Whitaker, a professional meeting planner with many years of experience, to provide options for the BGMEC to determine an appropriate location for the 2025 Biennial. The 2025 Biennial will take place in Omaha, Nebraska July 4-6.

### **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, American Baptist 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. I am pleased to witness these priorities being emphasized among regional and national organizations and in local churches.

#### **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 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 out of the pandemic.

- The 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 (BRC) did a great job staffing the BRC booth. I appreciate Florence Li chairing this booth activity. The Burma Advocacy Group, operating under the umbrella of ABCUSA, 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. In addition, the BAG is exploring the possibility of working with an NGO in order to distribute humanitarian aid to the Chin area of Burma, where it is difficult for funds to reach this part of the country. From Sept 28 to Oct 6, BAG delegates will be in Malaysia and Thailand visiting with refugee communities, UNHCR, US Embassies and other key groups and leaders. Those participating are Ler Htoo, Van Kio, Ah Le, La Seng Labya, Tu Lum Lamung, Peter Ngaidam, Henry Chan, Mehm Tun Than, Roland Van Bik and Roy Medley.

### **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 our 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 also embraced this critical issue in September as they were led by author, coach, and consultant Deidra Riggs. Staff shared some very powerful stories as they were invited to share early memories of becoming aware of diversity in the world. We were all challenged to embrace the world around us with compassion and curiosity.

### **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 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 REMC officers and NEC met to plan the agenda for the next meeting of the NLC which 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.” Also in June, I heard many positive comments regarding the all board dinner that took place Biennial week. 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. The NEC had good meetings in the fall, and they are working on another children’s Christmas video for 2023.

### **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 pastors and Executive Ministers. 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 offered a presentation on AI at the October 3, 2023 Everyday ABC Conversation. Rev. Stacy Emerson and Rev. Campbell Singleton will lead the next Everyday ABC Conversation on December 5, 2023 on the subject of Post-pandemic Impact on Ministry & Stewardship. Join us for this one-hour learning event.

### **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. We held a Leadership Team retreat in September focusing on a healthy transition for the staff in 2024 with new leadership. Some of the staff activities since the Biennial include:

- The launch of a new “Tool Kit” for United Mission
- Preaching at several American Baptist congregations including Brewster Baptist, the church of Board Member Doug Scalise
- Continued updates of NetSuite reports for regions
- Network maintenance on the computer system
- Supervisors 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 is narrowing toward a final candidate.
- Rev. Dr. Greg Mamula has been elected to serve as the next Regional Executive Minister for ABC of Nebraska.
- 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. They have gathered input via listening sessions and an online survey and are preparing a posting.
- 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 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 thank 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.
- I met with the Green Lake Board of Directors on October 26-28, 2023.
- I look forward to speaking at the Philadelphia Baptist Association Mission Banquet on November 11, 2023.
- I look forward to attending the American Baptist Foundation meeting November 27-29 in Philadelphia.
- I signed a letter with Dr. Louis Barbarin encouraging people to give to the 2023 RMMO offering and I encourage our board members to give to this important offering based upon the theme, "Good will come" from Psalm 112:5.
- I attended the Christian Unity Gathering and Board meeting of the National Council of Churches.

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