



# CONNECTIONS

ABC  
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ABCUSA CONNECTIONS is a ministry of ABCUSA. Email the editor at: [bridget.holmstrom@abc-usa.org](mailto:bridget.holmstrom@abc-usa.org)

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## The Mission Table: An ABC First!

By Bridget Holmstrom, Editor



The first ever ABCUSA Mission Table was held November 11-13, 2013, at the Green Lake Conference Center in Green Lake, Wisconsin. The Mission Table is a new ministry focus created in the ABCUSA reorganization adopted at the 2011 ABC Biennial in San Juan, Puerto Rico.

The Mission Table brought together representatives from American Baptist regions, affiliated ministry organizations, national staff, executives and officers, to join in conversation to discern, listen and learn from one another. Participants (92 in all) included persons from every region, seminary, and national organization. The ultimate goal of the Mission Table was that participants would make connections, hold valuable conversations, be enthused and advocate for some course of action regarding a topic that is relevant and urgent to their respective situation.

The 32 topics focused on at the Mission Table were originally discussed at Mission Summit 2013: An American Baptist Biennial Gathering, held in June 2013 in Overland Park, Kansas. The Mission Summit topics originally surfaced from work done through the *Transformed by the Spirit* (TbyS) initiative, which included a

national survey as well as topics already being discussed by existing TbyS teams. In short, the topics at the Mission Table represent issues that American Baptists find both critical to their future work, but also challenging.

"The difference between the two is that, at the Mission Table, there are concrete things that will come out of it," explained General Secretary Rev. Dr. A. Roy Medley. "A number of groups have made action plans and will be creating resources with tangible outcomes."

"For me, the biggest change as a result of *Transformed by the Spirit* is the sense of hope that is now prevalent in the denomination. We are moving into the future! Whatever the future is that God has for us, we are going to move into it with faith and hope and joy," said Medley.



"It remains to be seen how and if this rhythm/process by regions and ABC program boards will enhance the work of local congregations seeking to address their unique adaptive challenges for ministry in these times," states Dr. Mike Williams, executive minister of American Baptist Churches of Michigan.

He further notes, "I agree with my colleague, Dr. Dwight Stinnett, Great Rivers Region executive minister, who states, 'It is easier to identify adaptive challenges than to respond to them. This is complicated by our own history and culture, which has become so saturated with a distorted sense of autonomy that we have forgotten interdependence.

In our history as American Baptists, we have not always been effective at partnering together to address needs of congregations.' But I am hopeful because this process has established a focus on congregations and the challenges they face unlike anything I have seen in my 15 years as executive minister [of ABC of Michigan]."



Roy Medley and Marie Onwubuariri continue their discussion as did most of the participants even after the workshops were over at the Mission Table



Mission Summit Conversations at the Mission Summit 2013 brought together a diverse group of all ages from all over the country interested in discussing and praying about important issues to ABCUSA.

During the final session of the Mission Table, groups reported on future plans, with some looking to make helpful resources available, while others planned to continue the conversation in online groups on Yammer, a social networking tool set up by event managers to aid in communication following the Mission Table.

### How can I learn more?

Summaries from the learnings at the Mission Table and Mission Summit Conversations are now posted online at [www.abc-usa.org/missiontable](http://www.abc-usa.org/missiontable). The summaries are arranged by topic so that those interested in specific ministry challenges can easily find and learn from the conversations which took place at both the Mission Summit and Mission Table. Visitors can now go to the ABCUSA website and click on a link to any of the 32 topics discussed at the Mission Summit and Mission Table events to see the progression of conversations associated with that topic.

"Whatever topic you are interested in, whether it is the next generation of leaders, identity, small congregations, adaptive leadership, or any of the other 32 topics discussed at the Mission Summit, just visit the site to see the entire history of that conversation," said Rev. Dr. C. Jeff Woods, associate general secretary for Regional Ministries, ABCUSA. "It is our hope that people will explore the insights, challenges and proposed projects that are taking place and learn from the ideas and discernments raised by other American Baptists."

In addition to visiting [www.abc-usa.org/missiontable](http://www.abc-usa.org/missiontable), a webpage was set up in June 2013 to share learnings during the Mission Summit Conversations, to allow for an even deeper look into the conversations that have already taken place. Mission Table learnings have also been posted to the page. Visit the site at [www.missionsummitconversations.com](http://www.missionsummitconversations.com).



## Reflections from Ruth Clark, the ABCUSA Past President whose term as President ended on December 31, 2013.

My major joy from my time as president is seeing a new day in ABC life. The momentum generated from the Mission Summit and the enthusiastic response from the regions as they begin the experiments started by *Transformed by the Spirit* have breathed new life into our churches, and for this, I am extremely grateful. Another gift has been the wonderful people it has been my privilege to meet and work with over the past several years. We are blessed with creative, passionate leaders from the pew to regional and national leadership. It has been a tremendous honor to serve.

Sorting out major experiences is not as easy as it might seem. Perhaps the highlights would be:

**Mission Summit 2013.** Standing on the platform in my home region to welcome our ABC family to Overland Park was an exceptional experience. Hearing the Chin and Karen choirs reminded us of the fruit of the work the Judsons began in Burma (Myanmar) 200 years ago and the wonderful blessing these recent immigrants have been to our churches.

**Sharing in the Israel-Palestine trip** with the Church of the Brethren during December 2012 was a statement of our continuing passion for peace and justice in a world that lacks both. Realizing the inappropriateness of singing "O Little Town of Bethlehem" that Advent Sunday as we passed through the checkpoint in the wall erected to separate Israel and Palestine remains a powerful reminder of the work we still must do.

**The Bicentennial Sailing Celebration** in Salem, MA in February 2012 as we recalled the Judsons' departure for what they thought would be India was amazing, as was the Bicentennial Celebration in Myanmar in December 2013. We rejoiced in the fruit of their mission ventures with 35,000+ ! To present to the Myanmar Baptist Convention the brass plaque we had commissioned for them along with Dr. Medley, Don Ng, and Reid Trulson was a very special moment. To go to the stage to receive the plaque they had prepared to thank ABC for sending the Judsons was an unexpected pleasure. What a way to close out my presidency!



## Challenges Highlighted by National Leaders

In discussions held at the Mission Table, which were very similar to the Mission Summit Conversations in June, the participants took the 32 topics identified through the *Transformed by the Spirit* initiative and narrowed that list down to ten challenges of broad, national concern. Those ten challenges (in no particular order), along with a brief description are:

■ **Discipleship:** Discipleship as the commitment and practice of mature and faithful followers of Jesus Christ is increasingly difficult to achieve. How can and will we address this challenge in the 21st Century in forming authentic Christian disciples?

■ **Next Generation of Leaders:** What must be done to help our churches be able to intentionally pass on our traditions and the responsibilities for church leadership in cultivating future leaders?

■ **Pastoral Attrition:** There is an increasing pattern of pastoral attrition—people leaving the ministry—especially after the first five years of ministry. How can we curb this trend?

■ **Women in Ministry:** Women in ordained ministry continue to be under-represented in ABC ministry in terms of the proportion of ordained women who are available to serve, especially in significant leadership roles. How can these barriers be overcome?

■ **Church Planting:** How do we prayerfully discover and be in community with the people that God misses so greatly? Where is God working? Can we discover new and innovative forms of church planting that are effective in light of today's multi-cultural and post-Christian realities?

■ **Evangelism and Missional Outreach:** How can we overcome the dual challenge of the culture's low view of the church and the church's low view of its mission? What should ministry look like in the local contexts of churches that are seeking to respond to the changing needs of their community in order to communicate the Gospel of Jesus Christ?

■ **Violence:** What voice should be given to violence in our communities and what ministry activities should occur to help us understand, respond to, and reduce violence?

■ **Alternative Models of Pastoral Leadership:** Many small congregations are unable to employ full-time, seminary-trained pastors. How can we recruit, form, place and support leaders who are able to fill the ministry need? What different pastoral "mode" is required?

■ **Living Out Our Cultural Reality:** ABC is already a multi-ethnic organization, and the U.S. is fast moving to be so. What does that mean for our ministry as we move into the future?



## Top Focus in ABC Life:

*Transformed by the Spirit!*

*Transformed by the Spirit* continues to move forward. An initiative of American Baptist Churches USA, the goal of *Transformed by the Spirit* is engaging local congregations across the denomination in a journey of identifying the significant challenges that face our churches, our regions and our national bodies in today's culture, and wrestling with the changes that will be required of all American Baptists if we are to seize opportunities to serve as the hands and feet of Christ.

The question we are asking in this initiative is: "What challenges are we facing, for which we do not presently have an answer, but which must be addressed if we are to live into the future God has for us?" We will look at these challenges and seek to learn from one another to find the answers.

The Mission Summit/Biennial, in Overland Park, Kansas, in June 2013, was integral to our efforts to expand awareness of and participation in this initiative more broadly among our churches. Our first two-year phase, which ended with this Mission Summit/Biennial gathering, represented a "controlled experiment" whose goal was to launch a much broader effort among our churches.

The whole Mission Summit 2013 event and its three key celebrations (Friday night—the 150th Anniversary of the Emancipation Proclamation; Saturday night—the 200th Anniversary of the Judsons' arrival in Burma; and Sunday night—the 375th Anniversary of the First Baptist Church in America) were framed as exemplary of the adaptive challenges that American Baptists

*One participant shared the following quote:*  
**"One of the amazing things I took away from the Summit is that some of the things God seems to be doing in Rapid City are popping up in other churches too. And these other churches are filled with people I've never met before. I think God must be up to something and it's exciting!"**



# Upcoming Events



American Baptist Churches USA  
P. O. Box 851  
Valley Forge, PA 19482-0851

Nonprofit Org.  
US Postage  
**PAID**  
Permit 167  
Southeastern, PA

February 1	Black History Month begins
February 9	Church Vocations Sunday
February 16	Christian Legacy Sunday
February 22	AB Men's Prayer Breakfast
February 23	Single Adult Awareness Sunday Green Lake Sunday
March 1	Women's History Month begins
March 2	America for Christ Offering New Church Planting Sunday
March 9	ABC Seminary Sunday
March 16	Women in Ministry Sunday
April 13	Palm Sunday
April 20	Easter Sunday

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had successfully faced.

Each of those three evenings went very well as we introduced the concept of adaptive change to the 2,500 participants present. In each evening session, we not only heard of a historic challenge that was faced, but we were also presented with a contemporary challenge before the churches in North America.

In addition to framing the event around the past adaptive challenges we faced, we set aside significant portions of time on Saturday and Sunday for the engagement of as many as possible in a conversation around the major adaptive challenges we had earlier identified through *Transformed by the Spirit*. We would have been pleased with 400 participants. Instead, over 1,000 delegates and visitors participated in these conversations.

The results were remarkable. These groups were filled with energy and vision. General Secretary Medley reported that, as he passed by one group as

it was concluding, a man approached him with tears streaming down his face. "These are tears of joy," he said. "This conversation was one of the most hopeful and helpful I have been involved in as a church leader."

The third element is that prior to Mission Summit 2013, we began intensive planning efforts as to how we nurture these thousand seeds of ideas that have now spread across the country. The efforts of the past two years to establish capacity within our regions to support and engage these congregations in sustained efforts of renewal will be in the forefront.

The next two-year phase of *Transformed by the Spirit* has now begun. The national role of ABCUSA continues to be one to support the regions with resources, coaches, training events and gatherings for sharing. The Mission Summit Conversations and Mission Table have reignited interest by the regions in holding such a conversation at their own annual or biennial meetings.

## More on *Transformed by the Spirit*

In June, Mission Summit 2013 participants were involved in the Mission Summit Conversations, which focused on issues brought to light by the *Transformed by the Spirit* initiative.

American Baptist churches are in the midst of a significant change. Demographic shifts, declining revenues, newly arriving immigrant communities, and proliferating communications have impacted mission and ministry. God's spirit is at work among us in the midst of these changes. *Transformed by the Spirit* invites American Baptists to identify and address challenges in changing environments. We need to make "adaptive changes" in response to a changed environment, changes that unleash our Baptist DNA for innovation. We must make changes that embrace the transformative work of the Spirit in the life of the church.