

## **American Baptist Resolution on Interreligious Prejudice**

### **Situational Analysis:**

Following the events of September 11, 2001, the General Board of the American Baptists Churches USA passed a Declaration on an Issue of Importance regarding Anti-Islam, Anti-Muslim and Anti-Arab Prejudice in the United States of America, so that we would have a guideline for response to encourage our churches and our staff in our changed world. But as time has passed since the horrific events of that day, we find that we have many deep and long-term challenges before us stemming from threats and perceived threats to our national security. It is our intention not to allow legitimate concerns for our national security to become a foil behind which prejudice, discrimination and xenophobia are allowed to thrive.

Currently in the United States:

- Muslims and mosques all over the country report an increased rate of assault and vandalism.
- Many people from Muslim nations are being refused entry visas for pursuit of legitimate and meritorious endeavors in the U.S. Similarly, many foreign Muslims are being detained in this country for technical visa violations that are not being uniformly enforced.
- Persons of Middle Eastern descent and those belonging to other faith traditions, e.g. Sikhs, are mistaken for Muslims and subject to increased incidences of prejudice and discrimination.
- An increased number of Muslim women, whose dress makes them easily recognizable as belonging to a non-majority faith, are fearful of venturing outside their homes even for simple errands or to attend worship services for fear of the prejudice they encounter outside their doors.
- Strident voices make increasingly inflammatory public statements.

Increased religious diversity in the communities in which we live and minister is no longer an avoidable subject for our churches. For many of our congregations, interreligious and intercultural relations are an integral part of community and family life. Many church members have children, parents, sisters and brothers, spouses or other relatives who belong to another religious tradition. People of other faiths confront, as do many Christians, discrimination in access to housing, job opportunities, or political and social position. In their efforts to address community problems, provide hope for a better society, and work for justice, Christians find themselves working side-by-side with men and women who practice religious traditions other than their own.

Events in the United States and across the world have made us more aware of the significance of the world's religions and their influence on politics, economics, and cultures. At home and abroad, the world of building Christian unity and our efforts for

peace and human development are increasingly intertwined with questions regarding our relationships with those religious traditions outside the churches among whom we have traditionally participated in dialogue.

### **Biblical and Theological Foundations for Action:**

Because in Christ we are graciously accepted and given new life and freedom in discipleship, so we seek to defend the liberty and freedom of others, for the sake of Christ who first loved us. “As you have sent me into the world, so I have sent them into the world” (John 17:18). As disciples, we seek to testify to the love of God in Jesus Christ our Lord, to embody that love in the world, and to respond to the leading of God’s Holy Spirit. We seek God’s grace in our common effort to understand ever more fully how to love as disciples in this religiously plural and culturally diverse time and place.

Scripture teaches us that our responsibility extends not only to a brother or sister, but also to the sojourner in our midst. Hebrew Scriptures celebrate the wider community to which humanity is called in the stories of Melchizedek, Jethro, Rahab and Ruth, and the Hittites who offered hospitality to Abraham. In the Torah God enjoins the Jewish people to treat the sojourner as part of their own community. Throughout the Bible, hospitality to the stranger is an essential virtue. We recall both the words of the Epistle to the Hebrews (13:2), “Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers, for by doing that some have entertained angels without knowing it,” and the example Jesus gives in the parable of the Good Samaritan (Luke 10:25-37).

In the churches’ long history with people of other religions, as the church has struggled to make actual God’s gift to community, we have sins of which to repent and faithfulness to celebrate: While Christians themselves have suffered persecution at the hands of those of other faiths as well as at the hands of each other, Christians have persecuted Jews, and crusaded against Muslims. Christians have enslaved Africans and other peoples, and have participated in subordinating indigenous peoples and seeking to erase their spiritual traditions. Many Christians have accepted or perpetuated the use of their religion to validate the imposition of western culture and economic domination. Anti-Semitic and anti-Muslim biases, together with racism and ethnic biases have flourished among us.

On the other hand, we rejoice that Christians were leaders in the anti-slavery movement, and have worked for the human and communal rights of many people. Christians have fought oppressive economic and social systems of many societies, including our own, and have resisted injustice without regard to cost. Christians have also invited transformation of those ways of living that damage others and undermine the one human community. In many of these efforts Christians have worked closely with people of other faiths.

We recognize that scripture speaks with many voices about relationship with men and women of other religious traditions. When Jesus was asked, “What must I do to inherit eternal life?” he, referring to his Jewish traditions, answered, “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your strength, and with all your mind; and your neighbor as yourself” (Luke 10:25-27). Love of God and love of

neighbors cannot be separated. We rejoice in our common conviction that Jesus calls us to ministries of reconciliation. We look forward together to see the manner and the making of this miracle in our times.

Call to Action:

- (1) To call on American Baptists to devote further attention and study to the gospel and our own historic Baptist teachings and traditions, that we might be informed, compassionate neighbors, bearing witness to the lordship of Jesus Christ and salvation through his name to those of other faith traditions experiencing prejudice;
- (2) To encourage American Baptist professional church leaders and laity to educate themselves in a better understanding of other faith traditions, to devote further attention to issues of interpreting scriptural teaching; and of the issues which have united and divided us, particularly in areas where conflict is imminent;
- (3) To encourage dialogue with Americans of other religions to promote peace and justice in the U.S. and around the world; and in particular with American Jews and Muslims as integral to the churches efforts for peace in the Middle East; to encourage inter religious dialogue in other situations in which religion is identified as a factor in conflict situations;
- (4) To condemn all forms of bigotry which turn religious differences into excuses for defamations, stereotyping, and violence; to defend their victims; to challenge and rebut statements about other faith groups or individuals that embody religious stereotyping, prejudice and bigotry;
- (5) To challenge and commit our staff and our churches to examine and to uproot all that might contribute to prejudice in our teaching, life and ministries; including both intolerance toward Christians and Christian intolerance of others;
- (6) To recommit ourselves to the historic Baptist principle of the separation of church and state which has allowed us freely to worship in a free land; to uphold its implication of religious freedom for all persons; to defend the rights and liberties of cultural, racial and religious minorities; in the same manner that we defend our own;
- (7) To support ongoing work with cooperatively related organizations and people of other religions and cultures in public policy advocacy; refugee resettlement, and overseas programs; the prevention of family violence and abuse; and to initiate work in other program areas.

Adopted by the General Board of American Baptist Churches – November 2003  
112 Yes, 1 No, 4 Abstentions

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Policy Base:

American Baptist Policy Statement on: Church and State #7039:12/86

We realize that our concern for, and action on behalf of, the religious liberty of others is too often in direct proportion to our sense of our own religious liberty. We are grateful for the freedom to exercise our rights, and we will not lose sight of the denial or violation

of the rights of others. We will not allow fear of differing religious practices, insecurity in our own beliefs, convictional differences or evangelistic zeal to prompt us to condone or ignore discriminatory practices or persecution of unpopular religious groups. We will not forget that we were once "outsiders" ourselves.

We claim our right, and declare our intention to:

. . . 6. Identify with and defend the religious liberty of others, even if we disagree with their views or actions;

American Baptist Policy Statement on Human Rights #7021: 12/76

American Baptist Policy Statement on Peace #7037:12/85

In its commitment to its understanding of the gospel and its proclamation of the love of God for the world, the General Board of the American Baptist Churches will support efforts to work toward peace and justice in accordance with the following principles:

1. As believers in God who is able to do miraculous works, we call on all Christians to humble ourselves, acknowledge our limitations and earnestly seek God's interventions in areas on peace and justice. As followers of Jesus Christ, we are called to be peacemakers, to live in right relationship with God and others, and to be active agents for reconciliation and justice.

American Baptist Policy Statement on Racial Justice #7032:3/89

Therefore, as American Baptists:

(2) We recognize that the formal and informal structures within our society have been used to institutionalize our racist actions and enable us to avoid personal responsibility. We recognize our individual and corporate responsibility to work for racial justice and will initiate and support actions toward the elimination of institutional racism.

Supporting Statements:

American Baptist Resolution Against Manifestations of Prejudice #8175:12/88

Resources and Websites:

Office of Cooperative Christianity, American Baptist Churches USA  
[www.abcusa-unity.org](http://www.abcusa-unity.org)

[http://www.abcusa-unity.org/Resources\\_InterfaithDialogue.html](http://www.abcusa-unity.org/Resources_InterfaithDialogue.html)

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