



AMERICAN BAPTIST CHURCHES USA

Rev. Dr. Lee B. Spitzer
General Secretary

“The Collective Conscience of our Country”

A Pastoral Update from the General Secretary

August 5, 2019

Dear ABCUSA Family,

TWENTY dead, 26 wounded.
NINE dead, 27 wounded.

As a disciple of Jesus Christ, the Prince of Peace (Isaiah 9:6), I find myself once again writing to our churches and leaders in reaction to horrific mass shootings. *El Paso, Texas. Dayton, Ohio.* In just a few minutes of violence, 29 people lost their lives, and 53 others were injured.

Like Virginia Beach (where we met in June) and many other cities before this weekend, these mass shootings continue to challenge the collective conscience of our country. These outbreaks of evil are not normal, and must not become normative. Communities in every geographical sector of our country have been victimized. As a spiritual family dedicated to serving as witnesses to the peaceable kingdom of Jesus, we must not become numb to the pain of people who have suffered loss, be tempted to rationalize away the hate, racism and prejudice behind most of these attacks, or give in to a despair which prevents us from embracing solutions to the underlying challenges symbolized by these events.

We need to speak out in Jesus' name. In June, 78 ABC national leaders, regional executive ministers and I expressed our collective solidarity with the people of Virginia Beach in a public letter published in the leading local newspaper, as approximately 1,400 American Baptists gathered in that city for the 2019 Biennial Mission Summit.

In July, the General Council of the Baptist World Alliance passed an historic statement, **A Resolution on Current Manifestations of Religious Intolerance and Religiously-Motivated Violence.** It was my privilege to compose the original draft. This BWA resolution, the first to specifically address anti-Semitism in many decades, states (in part) that the Council:

EXPRESSES its deep concern over recent instances of religious intolerance and religiously-motivated violence around the world since its last meeting in 2018, including but not limited to: the attacks against synagogues in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, USA; and Poway, California, USA; attacks in Christchurch, New Zealand against two mosques; and the deaths and injuries to hundreds of Christians during a coordinated set of bombings throughout Sri Lanka on Easter morning;

ACKNOWLEDGES that these events remind us that various forms of religious intolerance, both from individuals and as a result of government action or inaction, continue to pose a significant threat to individuals and to societies across the globe;...

ENCOURAGES all Baptists to demonstrate that by living in peace with everyone (Romans 12:18), we reaffirm that prejudice, hate, and violence cannot defeat respect, love, and faith; and

CALLS upon the BWA member bodies to offer the hand of sincere friendship to our neighbors of other faiths, as an expression of biblical teaching that all human beings are made in the image of God (Genesis 1:27), and as a prophetic response of God's love against all manifestations of terrorism, violence, and religious intolerance (Romans 12:21).

Last week, along with other Baptist and Christian leaders, I endorsed the Baptist Joint Committee's **Christians Against Christian Nationalism** statement. In my endorsement, I stated:

"American Baptists, as a denominational family, have consistently been advocates for religious and civil liberty for all and for the concept of "a Free Church in a Free State" (1986 ABCUSA Policy Statement on Church and State). Key tenets of the divisive ideology of Christian nationalism are incompatible with Baptist theological and social convictions. American Baptists historically have advocated for respect, tolerance, justice and freedom for everyone in our country (and world), while resolutely opposing all manifestations of racism, prejudice, fear and injustice. May we continue this witness in 2019, and into the future."

As helpful and necessary as such statements may be (for we cannot remain silent), we all recognize that words of protest are not sufficient. We must live out our commitment to be part of a peaceful, just and wondrously diverse society. As we each consider what changes to endorse and work for, I find myself focusing on the following issues:

- ◆ Our society desperately needs a spiritual revival, and we have Good News to share. Our witness for Jesus must be free from all forms of racism and prejudice.
- ◆ Terrorism and violence cannot be justified from a Christian perspective.
- ◆ Citizens of a free society do not need to wield military grade automatic weapons. Regardless of our political persuasion, let us work together for reasonable laws and regulations related to responsible gun ownership and use.
- ◆ People seeking a new life in our country are worthy of our love, care and welcome. It is time for our political leaders to fashion a new and more just system to process and handle immigration. Many of our fellow American Baptist brothers and sisters are first or second-generation immigrants; our denomination would be spiritually diminished without them!
- ◆ Our churches have an opportunity to model how to engage in positive civil discourse with those with whom we disagree. In November 2018, the ABCUSA Board of General Ministries endorsed the National Call for Reflection, Prayer and Reconciliation initiative of the National Institute for Civil Discourse (NICD). NICD partners with the Office of the General Secretary on civil dialogue workshops and seminars. I commend this organization's materials to you and your church.

The status quo is not acceptable; positive and constructive change is essential. How is God speaking to you?

Yours in Christ,



Rev. Dr. Lee B. Spitzer
General Secretary, ABCUSA