



Connections

CONNECTIONS is a ministry of ABCUSA. Email the editor at: bridget.lipin@abc-usa.org

Interview with Acting General Secretary Jeff Woods

“As a religious entity, trust building and healthy relationships are the life breath of our denomination.”

Q: Are you excited about your new role?

A: I am more humbled than excited. I remember placing a call to Valley Forge many years ago and the current General Secretary, Bob Campbell, answered the phone. I was so excited and told my friends that I had actually talked to the General Secretary. I didn't think that would ever happen again. My understanding of the role has grown over the years. I still recognize the importance of the role, but I also realize that the role is completely dependent upon working in concert with others.

Q: Can you briefly describe how you became an American Baptist?

A: I grew up in an American Baptist Church in Indianapolis. I became a Christian at a young age and was very active in our youth group. I became involved in the wider American Baptist family at a young age, serving in various positions of the Baptist Youth Fellowship of Indianapolis.

Q: So, becoming a minister was a natural occurrence?

A: Not really. I attended Purdue University to become an actuary, but mid-way through, God called me into the ministry. I graduated from Purdue with majors in statistics and management. I attended seminary and started working as an Associate Pastor in an ABC congregation, the First Baptist Church of Madison, Ind. Six weeks into that position, the senior pastor had a massive heart attack and never returned to ministry. I had my first funeral, wedding, Baptism, and leading of Communion within eight days. That was my confirmation of the call. I have loved doing ministry ever since. I have also served ABC congregations in Milan, Bloomington, and Rushville, Ind.

Q: After that?

A: In addition to my seminary training, I found myself pulling from those research and management degrees, so I went back to school and completed a Ph.D. program focusing on those

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Interview *(continued from page 1)*

same two majors that prepared someone to do institutional research. I have simply applied those tools toward the strengthening of congregations and regions over the last 30 years.

Q: You also served as an executive minister.

A: Yes. I loved serving as the executive minister for the American Baptist Churches of Ohio. I had a great staff and the congregations were very responsive to working together and strengthening one another.

Q: You previously served as Acting General Secretary. Do you anticipate your role being different this time?

A: I suppose. I look forward to using my gifts for ministry in this transitional role.

Q: Can you share any of your priorities and perhaps challenges?

A: I would like to work on strengthening relationships at the national level. Several years ago, the General Executive Council (now National Leadership Council) focused upon building trust with one another. The resource that we used (a book called *The Speed of Trust* by Stephen Covey Jr.) suggests that trust is either a tax or a dividend in an organization. The greater the trust, the greater the speed and effectiveness with which decisions are made.

Q: So, building trust will be one of your emphases?

A: Yes, but it goes beyond that. Tax and dividend language is corporate language. As a religious entity, trust building and healthy relationships are the life breath of our denomination.

Q: What other priorities do you have?

A: Hosting events is the most visible expression of the work of the Office of the General Secretary. We work directly with the annual National Leadership Council meeting and the Mission Table event, and are cohosting a “Celebrating Ministering Women: Radical. Redeemed. Ready.” Conference, and planning has begun for a Biennial Mission Summit in

2021. We need to show the world the best of the ABC through these gatherings.

Q: What message about American Baptist Churches USA do you believe should be shared with churches and partner organizations?

A: I think that it is important to realize that ABCUSA has a unique role in the life of the denomination. While many parts of the ABC family engage in missional activities, host gatherings, support constituents, and perform administrative functions, ABCUSA is bound to always achieve those tasks with the whole family in mind.

Q: Can you give an example?

A: Consider the hosting of events for instance. While many of our ABC entities host incredibly inspiring gatherings that appeal to various parts of our constituency such as Space for Grace, the World Mission Conference, etc., when the Office of the General Secretary gathers persons for the Mission Table, the table is comprised of all parts of the ABC family: including local church representatives, regional executives, national leaders, Associated Ministry Organizations, caucuses, colleges and seminaries. Similarly, when we host a Biennial Mission Summit, the event is planned by, with, and for the whole family. Because the Office of the General Secretary serves as the modality within our ABC family, we perform all of our functions with the whole in mind and each function is influenced by our American Baptist heritage, principles, and values.

Q: Do you have a specific scripture that speaks to you?

A: When I was younger, I regularly quoted Philippians 4:13, “I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me.” I later realized that there is another verse in that same passage that says, “I have learned to be content with whatever I have.” I give my all to what I commit to, but I also try to remember that ultimately we are only responsible for our own efforts. The results and growth are always in God’s hands. ■

COVID-19 Updates from American Baptist Churches USA

With the new challenges we are navigating with COVID-19, American Baptist churches, regions and organizations are working tirelessly to meet community needs and consider the impacts this virus will have on spiritual life and outreach, as well as finances. We have compiled resources and information related to COVID-19 at www.abc-usa.org/coronavirus.

Call to Prayer

On March 20, the National Executive Council of American Baptist Churches USA issued a Call to Prayer, to last 21 days beginning on March 21, and ending on April 11, 2020. Although this time has passed, we invite you to visit our website at www.abc-usa.org/21daysofprayer for worship resources you can use, and to continue to pray for those affected in your local churches.

Denominational Work Continues Amidst Change

The ABCUSA Office of the General Secretary is working to connect and collaborate with partners across the American Baptist family as we navigate this unprecedented new challenge that has been brought about by the COVID-19 virus. Acting General Secretary C. Jeff Woods has held weekly calls with the Regional Executive Ministers to provide a place for information sharing and support, and has had regular check-ins with the National Executive Council members and Regional Executive Ministers Council Officers. Staff have also had numerous conversations with local church pastors, and are continuing to monitor and distribute resources for local churches. Internally, staff have been restricted from travel, and have moved to a work at home policy, while continuing to provide regular service and connection.

We have also been involved in discussions about assistance, including strategizing about the One Great Hour of Sharing Offering and learning and sharing about assistance that the Ministers and Missionaries Benefit Board is providing.

Specifically, for pastors who are experiencing financial hardship as a result of the coronavirus, the Ministers and Missionaries Benefit Board (MMBB) is offering emergency assistance according to the following guidelines: “While all members are eligible for assistance, focus would be placed on assisting those in pastoral leadership and those who are most likely to suffer income loss during this crisis. Requests would be made on a one-time basis rather than spread over a period for expedition and ease of administration.” Additionally, “Pastoral leaders who are forced to leave their churches or whose church is forced to close may also be eligible for premium assistance.” Applicable clergy in need of this assistance should contact MMBB directly.

During this time, a number of national events have been postponed. Regional events and local church events have also been postponed or cancelled in the midst of the uncertainty that the coronavirus brings. The American Baptist Churches Mission Table and National Leadership Council meetings have been postponed. “Celebrating Ministering Women: Radical. Redeemed. Ready.” conference has been postponed, from June 2020, with plans to reschedule for a time when health concerns are lower and when travel will be easier and safer. The Baptist World Alliance Congress, a meeting of Baptists from around the world which occurs every five years, has been postponed from July 2020 to July 2021. Even the Olympics have been postponed from July 2020 to July 2021. We hope that you will be in prayer with us for these future events and keep these events on your radar as we move through the current health crisis. ■

Restore Us, O God

—An excerpt of a prayer, submitted by General Secretary Emeritus Rev. Dr. A Roy Medley

Stir up your might,
And come to save us,
Restore us, O God;
Let your face shine,
That we might be saved.
—Psalm 80: 2b-3

O Lord, our God,
With the Psalmist we pray,
“Stir up thy might,
And come to save us.
Restore us, O God;
Let thy face shine,
That we might be saved.”

From the rising of the sun to
the setting of the same,
We cry out,
“Stir up thy might,
And come to save us.
Restore us, O God;
Let thy face shine,
That we might be saved.”

From great cities and
hidden villages,
We cry out,
“Stir up thy might,
And come to save us.
Restore us, O God;
Let thy face shine,
That we might be saved.”

From East, West, North
and South,
Thy children cry out,
“Stir up thy might,
And come to save us.
Restore us, O God;
Let thy face shine,
That we might be saved.”



Meet Karen M. Podsiadly— President of American Baptist Churches USA

Karen Podsiadly notes her priorities for her term as President of American Baptist Churches USA as follows:

“First, I am committed to standing courageously at this time in the history of our denomination with my heart focused on gathering all of our American Baptist Family as we imagine what the future holds for us as individuals, churches, communities, regions, the nation and world.

Second, to assist as we continue to renew and strengthen relationships within our American Baptist Family. It is through these strengthened relationships that we will further enhance our service and witness both locally and abroad.

Lastly, to strengthen the Board of General Ministries and Nominating Committee during this time of discernment and preparation for the call of our next General Secretary. I am in prayer and ask that you join me as we seek God’s blessings in leadership and direction.”

When asked how she sees the role of President of American Baptist Churches USA fitting into her daily life, which includes a full-time University routine, she said, “For me, it is quite seamless. A lot of my work at the State University of New York (SUNY) Brockport is around leadership, leadership development, and how we look at the world and serve. At the College, I work to help people see, ‘how they can affect the communities they live in?’ We look at service and how we help people make an impact. We need to consider how we serve, understand and ultimately show the love of Christ.”

“In order for us to really impact the world, we need to work together, talk together, and understand one another.”

Podsiadly’s ABC involvement includes serving as the President of the American Baptist Churches of the Rochester Genesee regional board and being on the pastoral committee for the Region Executive Minister search. She is also a member of one of the largest African American churches, Mt. Olivet Baptist Church, which has a strong history of American Baptist Churches affiliation.

During her 20 years of membership at the church, Podsiadly previously worked with leaders of the church to examine the question, “how do we equip our leaders to serve members and community?” She has been involved with the church’s tutoring program, served as a bible study teacher, held the role of President of American Baptist Women at the church, and was a member of the board of trustees.

Podsiadly’s work as Director of Community Development at State University of New York (SUNY) Brockport involves working with the leadership development, community service, and democratic engagement programs for students. Her team facilitates episodic community service opportunities, service trips, and democratic engagement activities aimed at providing individuals access to their ballot. She is also an adjunct professor in the Department of African & African-American Studies and teaches a freshmen seminar.

“I am most excited and passionate about helping people bring their voice to the table. In order for us to really impact the world that we need to exist in, we need to work together, talk together, and understand one another. That’s really where I see all my worlds converging . . . how can I serve as a conduit for that? I am excited to serve. I am truly looking forward to seeing what God’s plan is for me with American Baptist Churches,” says Podsiadly. ■

ABCUSA President Karen M. Podsiadly is serving in this role for the current Biennium, running January 1, 2020–December 31, 2021. Officers were elected at the Biennial Mission Summit, June 21–23, 2019 in Virginia Beach, Va.

Now is the Time for Faithful Generosity

Churches, clergy, and laypersons across North America and around the world are navigating uncharted waters as they struggle to deal with the effects of COVID-19. Some are scrambling to implement new technologies related to connecting and giving. Others are advocating for a time of Sabbath rest. Still others are mourning losses of in-person liturgies and practices that have always been essential to their worship experience.

Certainly times such as these can be the impetus to adapt and adopt practices that perhaps we should have done long before now. However, I invite you to consider these additional timely aspects of faithful generosity.

1. Now is the time to consider best practices for keeping your community connected.

And if your faith community includes multiple generations, that means multiple ways of communicating. Most everyone with an age in double digits has a phone, and mass phone communications have their place. But if you want your church to continue to be engaged in spiritual thought during this group gathering hiatus, you're going to need to employ social media, text, and email, and dust the cobwebs off your website. How many ways do you have to reach out to your faith community? Do you have databases and lists created? Most importantly, are you using them? **Faithful generosity includes being good stewards of our relationships.**

2. I've been a clergy spouse for more than four decades, and know as well as anyone that church is more than worship time. **Now is the time to tell "the rest of the story" about your church's mission and ministry that goes on 24/7/365.** Now, go back to point #1. If you have a good communication system in place it's going to be easier to tell your story. And let's add another layer. Are you telling your story to the community beyond your faith

community? Give your people and your local media good news that might be arising from this crisis--volunteering, giving extra to those whose incomes are affected, inviting joining your worship online. **Faithful generosity includes being clear and enthusiastic about the mission and ministry to which you are called.**

3. **Now is the time to temper the complaint that the only time the church talks about money is when it is asking for it.** Eventually this being at home, all the time novelty is going to wear thin and people are going to look for meaningful ways to spend their time. The Ecumenical Stewardship Center can help. Your church may want to take advantage of the complimentary subscriptions being offered in partnership with American Baptist Churches USA and the Ecumenical Stewardship Center. These subscriptions will provide access to content from *Giving Magazine* and theme materials (see page 6). **Faithful generosity includes asking the question, are we focused on funding, or are we growing generous givers?**

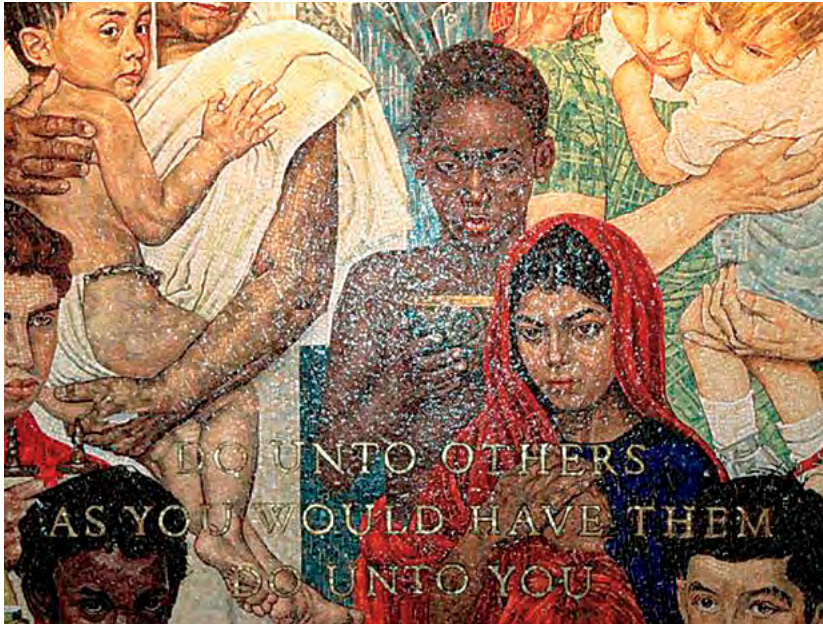
4. And yes, **now is the time to consider the ways technology can be an asset in our giving and connecting.** If you don't have options to give beyond Sunday morning, simply, you should. And, like millions of homes across North America today, there is a junior high student living at my house who is now going to school online. In her case, it's not just downloading and uploading assignments. Creative teachers have posted videos and created chat rooms and are meeting with students in real time. And at least one of these digital natives seems to be having some fun in spite of it all, because she's not afraid of this technology. **Faithful generosity includes a spirit of abundance that looks for opportunities, not obstacles.**

"I invite you to consider these additional timely aspects of faithful generosity."

We have no way of knowing if the writer of the book of Hebrews could in any way envision today's world when chapter 10, verse 25 was written. We do know that we have been blessed with opportunities to "gather together" in new ways. And we know that Jesus encouraged us to be yeast, salt, and light. Faithful generosity embraces all of these: giving that multiplies and enhances, hospitality that invites and engages, and generosity that leads to Christ. **It will always be the time for that.**

This article was written by Marcia Shetler, Executive Director/CEO of the Ecumenical Stewardship Center. Reprinted with permission.

Golden Rule 2020: Join the Movement!



How can you participate in Golden Rule 2020?

1. Adopt the Golden Rule as a theme for your church or specific activities within your congregation in 2020.
2. Set aside a time in service on a monthly basis to pray for the healing of divisions in our church and in our country.
3. Once a month encourage Sunday School lessons and/or sermons about the relevance of the Golden Rule to our nation's public life.
4. Visit the ABC website for resources to share with your congregations.
5. Schedule civility conversations, dinners or coffee hours in your church or community.
6. Arrange to have a civil discourse training session in your church or community. These sessions are great for regional meetings and/or individual church or community gatherings.
7. Take advantage of additional resources for pastors and servant leaders at www.revivecivility.org. *Join the Movement!* ■

American Baptist Churches USA is inviting partners and congregations to participate in *Golden Rule 2020: A Call for Dignity and Respect*.

Jesus commands us in Matthew 7:12, "In everything do to others as you would have them do to you; for this is the law and the prophets." Golden Rule 2020 ask that we as a body of believers and individuals intentionally embody this Scripture, while elevating the discourse in our spheres of influence.

American Baptist Churches USA has long recognized the need to make space for productive challenging conversations. We have engaged in healthy discussions during our Mission Summit Conversations and through utilizing Baptist Talk as a methodology. Civil discourse calls us to the table once again to speak on issues with the intention of promoting more civil conversations and behaviors rooted in love, in an era where lack of civility is the norm rather than the exception. There is a renewed urgency for respectful communication and deliberate community building in our nation. American Baptists are joining other denominations through our partnership with the National Institute of Civil Discourse, Initiative to Revive Civility to promote civility across our country.



New Complimentary Stewardship Resource Now Available

ABCUSA has purchased licenses for American Baptist churches who would like to use this online subscription from the Ecumenical Stewardship Center for the 2020 theme *Faithful, Hopeful, Loving*. This complimentary subscription based on 1 Corinthians 13:13 includes the *Giving* magazine and 9 categories of digital files to enhance your congregation's emphasis experience. ■

Email ABCResources@abc-usa.org and request your complimentary subscription today!

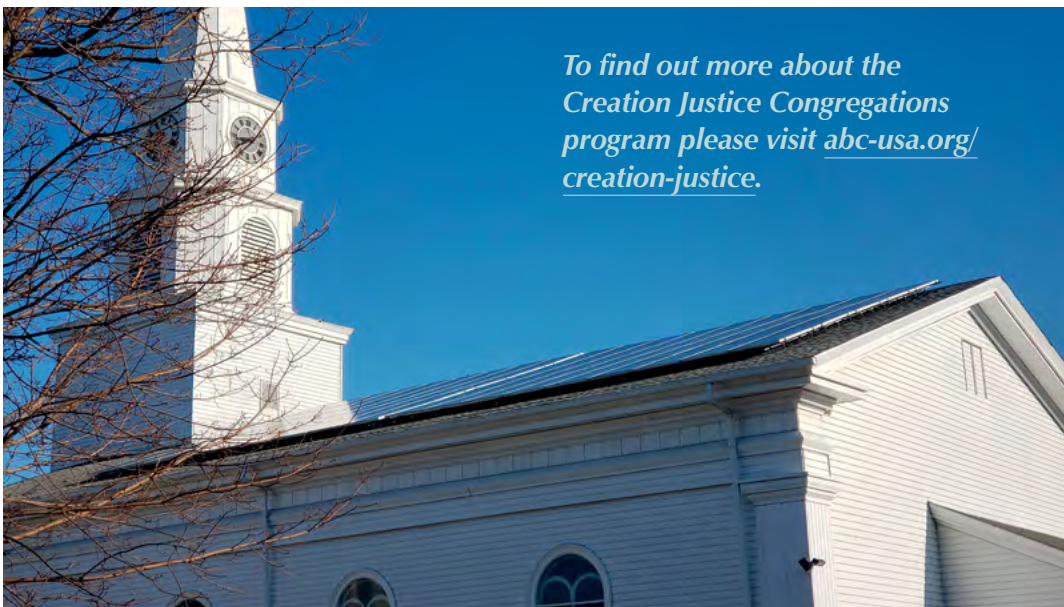


Consider How YOUR Local Church Can Make Creation Justice a Part of Your Daily Life

On a beautiful sunny summer day, the Vacation Bible School participants at First Baptist Church in Needham, Mass. help plant a garden. The First Baptist Church in Hightstown, N.J., installed solar panels on the roof. Equipped with gloves and buckets, members of the First Chinese Baptist Church of San Francisco, Calif., recently gathered for a beach clean-up. In Fort Collins, Colo., the American Baptist Church's sign states their commitment to creation justice for the community to see. In four different ways, these four geographically diverse churches have made creation justice an important part of their ministry as a local congregation.

The American Baptist Churches Creation Justice Network (CJN) encourages all local congregations and ministries to consider the ways in which they can use their Christian witness to care for God's creation. The CJN designed the Creation Justice Congregations program to recognize and celebrate the many ways ABCUSA churches seek environmental justice and protect God's creation as well as to inspire and equip congregations to take further action. To share your congregation's story or to find out how your local church can become a Creation Justice Congregation, please send an email to Rev. Rebecca Driscoll, ABC Minister for Creation Justice at Rebecca.Driscoll@abc-usa.org. ■

As the ABCUSA Office of the General Secretary works to highlight and practice creation care in new ways through work with the ABCUSA Creation Justice Network and our new Minister for Creation Justice, we are excited to move to printing *Connections* on recycled paper.



To find out more about the Creation Justice Congregations program please visit abc-usa.org/creation-justice.

Top left to right: First Chinese Baptist Church of San Francisco; American Baptist Church in Fort Collins, Colo.; First Baptist Church in Needham, Mass. Left: First Baptist Church in Hightstown, N.J.



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The logo for "United in Christ Together in Mission", featuring a stylized globe with a cross and the text "United in Christ Together in Mission" around it.

On March 27, Acting General Secretary C. Jeff Woods published a letter centered around supporting churches, pastors, and regions. In the letter, Woods wrote:

“As Christians, we know that prayer and action go hand in hand. We pray fervently and we act diligently by maintaining social distances, washing our hands, safely volunteering, and following the mandates of our local, state, and national governments. As American Baptists, we have an exemplary record of exceeding expectations in doing the right thing.

Today, I am encouraging all of us to take another action and continue to support our churches, pastors, and regions during this critical time of ministry.

I have spoken to many pastors during this time of chaos and bewilderment and I believe that our ABC pastors are working harder now than prior to the onset of COVID-19. They are working differently, and with even more effort as they check on their congregants through electronic means, meet the emotional needs of families, youth, and the elderly, help staff community resources, research and post best practices related to the pandemic,

figure out how to stream worship services and Bible studies, and the list goes on and on.

In the same way that a missionary must learn an entirely new set of practices in order to minister in a new culture, our pastors are learning how to be a pastor in the midst of social distancing restrictions and other disruptive conditions. Some of these learnings will have positive implications for the future of ministry and require deeper thinking, more collaboration, and increased creativity. Such adaptive work is extremely difficult and can take its toll on the leaders of our congregations and regions. Ministry has become even more difficult in recent days and we must not ignore the emotional, financial, and physical health of our pastors.

Our local churches, pastors, and regions are worthy of our support. Thank you to all who are continuing to support your local church and pastor through the mailing of your tithes and offerings and online giving.”

Read the full letter on our website www.abc-usa.org