

AMERICAN BAPTIST CHURCHES USA: RESPONSES/ACTIONS PERTAINING TO HOMOSEXUALITY

There are two Resolutions that address homosexuality. In October 1992, the ABC General Board passed the resolution “American Baptist Resolution on Homosexuality” which states “. . . the practice of homosexuality is incompatible with Christian teaching.” In June 1993, the same board passed a resolution: “American Baptist Resolution Calling for a Dialogue on Human Sexuality.” It states “. . . there are a variety of understandings throughout our denomination on issues of human sexuality such as homosexuality” and calls for a “dialogue concerning these issues.” The resolution encourages a process that “seeks unity and avoids divisiveness.”

A summary history of the subsequent responses and activities related to the issue can be found below.

NOVEMBER 2005: The General Board voted “To amend the document entitled We Are American Baptists by adding the following statement to the section A Biblical People: Who submit to the teaching of Scripture that God’s design for sexual intimacy places it within the context of marriage between one man and one woman, and acknowledge that the practice of homosexuality is incompatible with Biblical teaching.”

This historical document was adopted by the General Board in 2005 as an identity statement. The intent of the proponents of the original document was to amend the common criteria that serve as minimal qualifications for an ABC Cooperating Church. Amending the common criteria would require ratification of the regional offices following a General Board vote, and this step was never pursued.

JUNE 2002: The General Board adopted new Standing Rules 5.2 and 5.3 relating to receiving and dismissing cooperating churches. The changed Standing Rules provide that a church dismissed by the Region may make a request to the General Secretary to remain an ABCUSA Cooperating Church. The church then has 18 months to apply for membership in another region. If, after 18 months, that church fails to receive membership in another Region, the General Board will no longer recognize that church as a Cooperating Church of ABCUSA.

NOVEMBER 2001: The General Board adopted amendments to Standing Rule 5.1.1, Common Criteria for a Cooperating Church, and voted to forward the revised Common Criteria to each covenanting Region for consideration, vote and report of vote by November 2002. In addition to other changes, the amendments added, “affirm the statement entitled ‘We Are American Baptists’ (revised 6/19/98). . .” [November 2002: The required number of Regions voted to adopt the amended Common Criteria and the changes became effective January 1, 2003.]

NOVEMBER 1999: The General Board voted to amend the votes on denying the appeals of dismissed churches to take effect on June 30, 2001.

JUNE 1999: The General Board voted on the appeals of 5 churches to remain Cooperating Churches of ABCUSA but not of their Regions. The appeal was granted for First Baptist Church, Granville, Ohio, and denied for four California churches: First Baptist Church, Berkeley, Lakeshore Avenue Baptist Church, Oakland, New Community of Faith, San Jose and San Leandro Community Church, San Leandro.

NOVEMBER 1998: In response to the Commission on Denominational Unity report, the General Executive Council began consideration of a General Board proposal for a due process (mentioned above) which will be dependent upon it becoming part of the Covenant of Relationships as enacted by the

covenanting parties. The GEC also began ongoing consideration of the adequacy of the five criteria for Cooperating Churches (Standing Rule 5.1) and their implications for the Covenant of Relationships.

JUNE 1998: The General Board voted to adopt amended recommendations from the report of the Commission on Denominational Unity. These included maintaining the 1992 “Resolution on Homosexuality” “as reflective of the prevailing understanding of American Baptists,” and maintaining the “American Baptist Resolution Calling for Dialogue on Issues of Human Sexuality,” but adding to the text a recommendation to “engage in dialogue concerning these issues.” Another recommendation called for adopting “the ‘Common Ground Process for Church Groups Facing Contentious Issues’ as a procedure by which issues identified by the General Board as potentially divisive be considered and developed.” Also affirmed was “the right of a church dismissed by a region to appeal that decision to the General Board if it believes it was denied due process. After adopting a standardized due process procedure, if the General Board decides that due process has been violated, the church will be reinstated pending further appropriate action by the region. The decision of the General Board will be final.”

NOVEMBER 1997: The General Board began consideration of the report of the Commission on Denominational Unity, which it had established two years earlier “to find ways to deal constructively with issues around which there has been considerable disagreement.”

NOVEMBER 1996: Responding to the unanimous request of the Commission on Denominational Unity and the recommendation of the General Board Executive Committee, the General Board determined to delay any decisions regarding the dismissing of churches or homosexuality until it acted upon the final report of the Commission.

AUGUST 1996: The Ministers Council of the American Baptist Churches USA sponsored a dialog on homosexuality featuring Dr. Manfred Brauch, president of Eastern Baptist Theological Seminary in Philadelphia, and Dr. William Herzog, vice president and professor of New Testament at The Divinity School, Rochester, N.Y. The scholars, while interpreting Scripture differently on the subject, expressed respect for one another and the hope that the dialog would further the conversation throughout the denomination. A videotape of the presentation was made available as a resource for churches and individuals.

JUNE 1996: The Regional Executive Ministers Council, noting the need for careful deliberation called for a moratorium on any action by the General Board pertaining to the status of those churches as members of American Baptist Churches USA.

JANUARY 1996: Delegates from congregations within the American Baptist Churches of the West voted to support the Board of Managers’ proposals to revise the region's Covenant of Relationship with its congregations and to dismiss four congregations. The revision included an amendment allowing the region “to take actions necessary to maintain the unity of its own life and mission.” That action was in response to the four churches’ affiliation with the Association of Welcoming and Affirming Baptists, an organization supporting full participation of homosexuals within church life. Also dismissed at about the same time were a church in Granville, Ohio, through the Columbus Association (which had not affirmed the ABC of Ohio’s commitment to the Covenant of Relationships), and a church in Alaska (not part of an ABC/USA region), also by its Association.

JANUARY 1996: The Commission on Human Sexuality Resources, following a report to the General Board in November 1995, issued its “Final Report and Annotated Bibliography.” At the request of delegates to the 1991 Biennial Meeting, the General Board had established the Commission in June 1992, directing it to: work with the regional executive ministers to identify issues of concern in the area of human sexuality, identify available resources for use by local churches in response to the needs identified

and recommend ways to facilitate their use. In extensive input gathered from groups and individuals within the denomination, the call from all levels was for issues of human sexuality to be explored from a strong biblical and theological grounding. Specific areas identified included: help in maintaining healthy marriages, building strong relationships, parenting, and living in singleness. Respondents did not identify homosexuality as a priority concern, and the subject was dealt within the larger context of human sexuality.

NOVEMBER 1995: The General Board established the Commission on Denominational Unity “to find ways to deal constructively with issues around which there has been considerable disagreement.” Specific reference was made to the General Board resolutions on homosexuality and human sexuality and to their implications. The Commission’s report noted “the urgency of addressing how we... make statements and commit to actions without fracturing our fellowship in regard to differences surrounding those statements and actions.” A final report was anticipated by November 1997.

JUNE 1993: The General Board affirmed (96 yes, 69 no, 3 abstentions) an “American Baptist Resolution Calling for Dialogue on Human Sexuality” which maintains “that there exists a variety of understandings throughout our denomination on issues of human sexuality such as homosexuality” and encourages “dialogue concerning these issues.” The resolution urges American Baptists to “seek unity and avoid divisiveness” in the process.

OCTOBER 1992: In response to another initiative from the West Virginia Baptist Convention, and in lieu of a possible referendum of all American Baptist churches, the General Board, in a mail vote (in accord with the Standing Rules in effect at that time) affirmed (110 yes, 64 no, 5 abstentions) a one-sentence “American Baptist Resolution on Homosexuality”: “We affirm that the practice of homosexuality is incompatible with Christian teaching.”

JUNE 1992: The American Baptist General Board narrowly defeated (88 yes, 91 no, 2 abstentions) the resolution “Homosexuality and the Church,” which had been presented by the West Virginia Baptist Convention. Citing “pressure by some to gain acceptance within our denomination of both the practice of homosexuality...and the ordination to the Christian ministry of avowed practicing homosexuals,” the resolution identified God’s plan “for the fulfillment of sexual union...to be one man and one woman in...heterosexual, monogamous and lifelong...marriage.” It maintained that “the redeeming love of Christ” is available to practicing homosexuals “as it is to all who turn to him in faith and repentance.” (The American Baptist News Service reported: “During three hours of discussion and orderly debate preceding the vote, speakers for and against the resolution emphasized varying interpretations of Scripture, biological causes of homosexuality and the Baptist tradition of ‘soul liberty’ of individuals and local church autonomy in addressing the issue.”)

JUNE 1991: In Charleston, W.V., Biennial Meeting delegates again wrestled with the subject, affirming (1,124 yes, 539 no, 46 abstentions) a Statement of Concern on “Homosexuality and the Church” brought through the signature process by the Clarksburg (W.V.) Baptist Church. The statement rejected “the homosexual lifestyle, homosexual marriage, ordination of homosexual clergy or establishment of ‘gay churches’ or ‘gay caucuses’” while affirming “that the church should love and minister to the homosexual, but condemn the sin of the practice of homosexuality.” In another approved Statement of Concern, “Human Sexuality” (927 yes, 877 no, 38 abstentions), delegates called on the General Board to initiate a process of identifying resources for “clarification and guidance” for “a Christian understanding of God’s gift of sexuality.” (In response, the General Board established the Commission on Human Sexuality Resources in June 1992.)

JUNE 1987: “Homosexuality,” a Statement of Concern to come before delegates through the signature process at the Biennial Meeting in Pittsburgh, was defeated (408 yes, 474 no, and 71 abstentions) after

considerable discussion pro and con. It held that “Scriptures repeatedly depict homosexuality as a social and moral evil.” While calling for ministry “to those even within the church who are struggling with homosexual impulses,” the statement maintained “the unrepentant homosexual has no claim to full acceptance in the Christian community.”