

THE AMERICAN BAPTIST CHURCHES OF THE GREAT RIVERS REGION (GRR)

Regional Profile - 2022

ABC
GRR

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PURPOSE, VISION AND STRATEGIC THEMES

The American Baptist Churches of the Great Rivers Region
Churches Centered in Christ, Committed to the Whole Gospel, Covenanted Together

- **Our Purpose:** *To challenge, assist, represent and empower American Baptist congregations in Illinois and Missouri.*
- **Our Vision:** *Healthy congregations engaged in effective Christian ministry locally and globally.*

Four “strategic themes” (overarching goals) set the broad directional priorities of the Great Rivers Region. Included with each strategic theme are supportive actions, services, and programs that contribute to each.

- **Strategic Theme One:** *Cultivate a passion for mission both locally and globally.*
 - We will speak a challenging word from God to God’s people about God’s mission;
 - We will promote the mission offerings and opportunities of American Baptist Churches USA;
 - We will encourage mission involvement through trips, local opportunities, conferences, and Mission Partnership Networks;
 - We will help congregations identify and engage their local mission field;
 - We will continue our covenant relationship with the Federation of Baptists in Costa Rica and Hungary;
 - We will identify communities that would benefit from a faith-based ministry;
 - We will encourage congregations to seek opportunities for cooperation and collaboration;
 - We will continue congregationally and regionally to foster ecumenical relationships.
 - We will foster diversity across our region and encourage healthy and vital interracial and intercultural relationships.
- **Strategic Theme Two:** *Create a learning and resource network of GRR congregations and pastors.*
 - We will feature GRR congregations and leadership in regional workshops and events;
 - We will gather and distribute information about creative ministries in GRR congregations;
 - We will encourage “learning communities” of GRR pastors;
 - We will connect GRR ministers and congregations by Internet “Social networks”;
 - We will provide targeted conferences, resources, consultation, and coaching;
 - We will lift up and spotlight creative GRR congregations to encourage and educate others;
 - We will encourage pastors and congregations to partner with community agencies that better humanity.
- **Strategic Theme Three:** *Recruit and retain competent, qualified pastoral leadership for GRR congregations.*
 - We will prepare ministerial leaders by scholarship and internship grants;
 - We will challenge and encourage pastors and congregations to identify potential ministerial leaders;
 - We will establish educational and training standards for ministers and implement an ordination process based on those standards;
 - We will guide congregations through times of leadership transition;

- We will coach congregations through the search process to find the best pastor;
 - We will advocate for fair compensation and benefits for ministers;
 - We will provide and encourage continuing education for ministers;
 - We will establish behavioral expectations for ministers and exercise disciplinary action when necessary;
 - We will mentor new pastors to achieve their greatest potential;
 - We will consult with pastors and congregational leaders for the health of the local congregation.
- **Strategic Theme Four:** *Deliver core services with partnership, quality, innovation, communication, and accountability.*
 - We will establish and maintain relationships with congregations, ministerial leaders, and our ABCUSA family through competent partnerships;
 - We will strategically plan, manage, and enhance financial resources for mission and ministry while meeting legal, regulatory, and ethical expectations;
 - We will recruit, train, retain, support, and equip staff to accomplish regional goals;
 - We will learn, communicate, collaborate, and be productive in a positive work environment;
 - We will exemplify Christian devotion and behavior in all we do.

HISTORY AND GEOGRAPHY

- **Origin:** Baptist roots in this part of Middle America include the first identifiable Baptist church, New Design (1787); “Baptist Preaching” in St. Louis in 1798 and the work of John Mason and Sallie Paine Peck beginning about 1818. The Pecks, appointed as the first Baptist Home Missionaries by the Triennial Convention, planted churches, encouraged associations, founded schools, and educated clergy. Peck was a strong and tireless advocate for missions. He helped organize the first Baptist Convention in Illinois in 1834 from which the GRR was later born.
- **Baptists in Missouri:** After numerous realignments of Baptists in Missouri, in 1959 thirteen churches joined to create the Missouri Convention of American Baptists and soon were recognized by the ABC. In 1967, after less than a decade this convention chose to merge with the Illinois Baptist State Convention to form The Great Rivers Region of the ABC/USA.
- **The Great Rivers Region:** The GRR was so named because it straddles or borders four of the great rivers of the United States, the Illinois, Missouri, Mississippi, and Ohio Rivers. It covers the states of Illinois and Missouri, not including Chicago (a separate region). As in Missouri, there were other configurations of Baptist churches in Illinois before the organization of the Great Rivers Region. A focal point of the early struggle was the “comity agreements” between Southern and Northern Baptists. Though eventually ignored they were part of the difficult efforts to clarify identity. Some regional churches still have official ties to the Southern Baptists Convention, the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship and National Baptists in addition to the ABC/USA.

- **Participants:** At the birth of GRR there were 266 churches with 66,000 resident members and 48,000 enrolled in Sunday school. As with other religious groups we have experienced decline. There are now 198 churches.
- **Governance:** The Regional Ministry Board is the corporate body of the GRR and conducts all of its business. This includes establishing policies, determining priorities, hiring staff, setting goals and committing resources. The Board is organized into three divisions with specific governance responsibilities assigned to each: Ministry of Planning & Review, Ministry of Staff Relations, and Ministry of Financial Stewardship. The region is also divided into five geographic areas for representative, administrative and programming purposes. At the present, the GRR employs five full and part-time staff, plus an additional seven part-time contract services. (See Staff Configuration)
- **Guidance:** The Board has adopted two clear statements that embody our purpose and our vision. They are stated elsewhere, as are four strategic themes that inform and guide us to accomplish our vision and purpose through services, events and media resources. We also pray for and believe that the Holy Spirit guides us in our planning and ministries.
- **Communication:** With advancements in technology and in response to the global pandemic, we now make more effective use of the internet. Most meetings are conducted via Zoom. We will probably continue that format in the future, saving both time and travel expenses. The monthly *Mainstream* newsletter is sent to churches and individuals electronically with some hardcopy mailings. Other periodic electronic mailings include updates and information sent from the Executive Minister, informative professional newsletters from other leading sources, and updates from partner institutions and regionally connected missionaries.
- **Geography:** Missouri has a wide variety of topography, from the Mississippi delta of the Southeast corner to the Ozark Mountains, to its many significant lakes and extensive rolling countryside. Illinois is called the Prairie State for good reason. A large part of central and northern Illinois is part of the “true prairie.” However, Illinois also includes rolling hills and lakes particularly in the southern and western portions of the state.

DIVERSITY OF CHURCHES AND MEMBERS

- **Diversity of Lifestyle:** With two major cities in Missouri and the sprawl of Chicago in Illinois, much of both states are affected by the affluence generated by those cities. Yet, we also have other smaller cities, a multitude of small towns and a generous amount of rural area. Thus, we have farmers, skilled laborers, executives, educators, politicians and entrepreneurs within our churches and communities.

- **Diversity of Church Size:** About 44% of the GRR churches are small with 75 or less in worship on any given Sunday. Many are located in towns of less than 5,000 or in open country. They are challenged as they attempt ministry in such an environment. But others are in cities and metropolitan areas with their own challenges.
- **Ethnic Diversity:** The Great Rivers Region now includes a total of 35 churches which are primarily African-American. With St. Louis and Kansas City having major concentrations of African-Americans, 46.4% and 28.2% respectively, this trend should continue. Increasingly, Hispanics have also shown interest in the GRR. Asians from Myanmar/Burma, results of the 200-year-old ministry of the Judsons, have also formed churches in our region.
- **Theological Diversity:** With the history of Baptists in Illinois and Missouri, it is not surprising that the entire range of Baptist theologies is represented in some part of our region's family. Yet, we represent the mainstream of American Baptist thought and practice (leaning right of center). Most importantly, we have covenanted together to carry out our mission and ministries, both locally and beyond, with a minimum of debate or demands.
- **Worship Style Diversity:** The entire range of music and worship styles is represented in the churches of the GRR. Some use only contemporary music; some use only traditional hymns and songs while others use a blend of both.

DIVERSITY OF POPULATION IN MISSOURI AND ILLINOIS

- **Diversity of People:** The population makeup for the two-state area shows that Illinois had a total estimated population of 12,812,508 in 2020. Of that number 61.4% are white; 14.1% are African American; 18.2% Hispanic, 5.9% are Asian. Missouri statistics show a total population of 6,154,913 in 2020. Of this number 77.0% are White, 11.4% are African American, 4.9% are Hispanic, and 2.2% are Asian. Foreign-born persons in Illinois account for 14.1% of the total population while in Missouri that number is 4.2%.
- **Diversity of Religion:** Christianity is the most prevalent religion in Illinois, with the major denominations being Roman Catholic followed by Baptist. The Baptists of Illinois include those of the ABC/GRR, Southern Baptists, Free Will, National, Independent, and numerous others. The state also has small populations of Jewish, Muslim, Buddhist and Hindu groups. Missouri is overwhelmingly Protestant, with Baptist being the largest denomination. Methodist and Presbyterian are also large Protestant groups. The state also has a fairly large Catholic population, along with small populations of Jewish, Buddhist, and Muslim groups. The Mormons have an extensive history in both Illinois and Missouri. In Illinois, Nauvoo, with its impressive temple, was their first claim as "home." In Missouri, the Mormons claim Independence as their primary "home."

FINANCIAL STRENGTH AND STABILITY

- **Financial History:** During the last fifteen years, there has been a difficult and dangerous drop in contributions to support regional ministry. Denominational conflict, a great recession, rising costs, dwindling congregations and the pandemic have each taken a major toll. However, under the careful guidance of our Executive Minister, and support by the Regional Board, we have kept solvent by using some of the interest from our endowments. During this time, we have reduced staff, mostly by attrition, and have decided, very painfully, not to replace those persons. As a result, our full-time ministerial staff has been reduced from eight full-time to one full-time and two half-time members, plus seven contract services. Our full-time administrative staff has been reduced from five to one and a half.
- **2021 Summary:** During 2021, the income in our current fund totaled \$730,968; expenses totaled \$764,108. Although our expenses exceeded our income by \$33,138, our expenses came in \$182,628 below the \$946,736 that was proposed in the 2021 budget.
- **Financial Stability:** All accounts are current; audits are regularly made and there are no outstanding debts. As of December 31, 2021, our assets totaled \$7,164,381, of which \$6,738,188 are in investments.

MISSIONS AND SUPPORT

Total ABMS (American Baptist Mission Support) for the year 2020, was \$1,450,930 and placed the GRR #4 among all regions of ABCUSA. In addition, Great Rivers Region churches:

- Sent over \$40,000 to Antioch in the Ville outreach program in St. Louis in response to the riots that were happening in Ferguson, Missouri. (2017-2019)
- Continued our good relationship with the Federation of Baptists in Costa Rica. Over the years, several mission trips have been made under the guidance of John Grisham. Currently, a number of GRR churches continue to make Costa Rica a mission destination.
- Actively promote financial support of ABC missionaries that serve in Costa Rica. (Ruth Vindas and Sue Hegarty) or have roots in GRR churches (Scott and Tan Coats, Annie and Jeff Dieselberg, Kristy Engle, Katie and Taku Longkumer, Becky and Larry Stanton). Support is also given to Paul Rollet (Philippines) and Amanda and Jon Good (Hungary).
- Received a surprise estate gift of \$298,000 in 2016. We reverse tithed on that gift, keeping 10% and giving 90% to individual missionaries through International Ministries.
- Received the income from the sale of three closing church campuses in addition to the sale of our regional office building. Approximately 50% of the total income from these sales were given to ministries and missions within the GRR and the ABCUSA.

- Created two opportunities to come along side pastors, missionaries and churches who are struggling as a result of the global pandemic. Both were funded by the recent sale of property.
 - Created a special fund to help meet emergency needs of our individual pastors and missionaries. Individuals may apply for up to \$5,000 in assistance. Exceptions can be made based upon need. There is no repayment expected. Upon its creation, \$5,000 was sent immediately to Beirut, Lebanon, to assist with disaster relief.
 - Created the Post-COVID Restoration Loan to provide emergency loans to churches needing emergency building repairs. A church can borrow up to \$15,000 and has five-years to repay with the first three years interest free and one percent interest assessed during the fourth and fifth year.

INSTITUTIONAL PARTNERSHIPS

- **Camps**
 - Blackhawk Baptist Camp, 4491 W. Henry Rd., Oregon, IL
 - Lake Springfield Baptist Camp, P.O. Box 556, Chatham, IL
- **Campus Ministries**
 - Baptist Student Foundation, University of Illinois, Champaign, IL
 - The Baptist Campus Ministry at Northern Illinois University, DeKalb, IL
 - University Baptist Foundation, ISU and IWU, Normal, IL
 - American Baptist Campus Ministry at Southern Illinois University, Carbondale, IL
- **Colleges**
 - Bacone College, Muskogee, OK
 - Franklin College, Franklin, IN
 - Judson University, Elgin, IL
 - Ottawa University, Ottawa, KS
 - William Jewell College, Liberty, MO
- **Seminaries**
 - Central Baptist Theological Seminary, Shawnee, KS
 - Evangelical Seminary of Puerto Rico, San Juan, PR
 - Northern Baptist Theological Seminary, Lombard, IL
- **Children's Ministry Institutions**
 - Alaska Children's Services, Inc., Anchorage, AK
 - Kids Hope United—Northern Region, Lake Villa, IL
 - Kids Hope United—Hudelson Region, Springfield, IL
 - Kodiak Baptist Mission, Kodiak, AK
 - Murrow Indian Children's Home, Muskogee, OK
- **Neighborhood Ministry Centers**
 - Friendship House of Christian Service, Peoria, IL
 - Rainbow Acres, Camp Verde, AZ
 - Christian Center, Anadarko, OK
 - Bethel Neighborhood Center, Kansas City, KS

ALTERNATIVE MINISTERIAL EDUCATION

Alternative Ministerial Education (AME) was created by the Regional Ministry Board of the Great Rivers Region for the purpose of providing an alternative, non-traditional education primarily for those pastors serving "family" or "pastoral" size churches and/or bi-vocational pastors. This avenue of preparation is referred to as "Track III" in the ABCUSA Standards for Ordination. Several individuals who have completed the program now serve in positions of pastoral leadership in GRR churches.

CHURCH REVITALIZATION INITIATIVE

The Church Revitalization Initiative (CRI) is designed to come alongside committed pastors and church leaders who are willing to do what it takes to revitalize their churches. The initiative was implemented in 2017. Although the number tends to fluctuate, there are currently fourteen active churches enrolled ranging in size from 20 to over 100. Their pastors and church leaders have been working hard to help their churches as they work through the process of revitalization with many churches exhibiting new life.

STAFF CONFIGURATION

- **Ministry**
 - Interim Regional Executive Minister, Rev. Patty Bilyeu, (Full-time)
 - Co-Interim Regional Associate Executive Minister, Rev. Rob Kirbach (Half-time)
 - Co-Interim Regional Associate Executive Minister, Rev. Dr. Brian Romanowski (Half-time)
- **Administrative**
 - Executive Assistant & Office Coordinator, Nancy Fromme, (Full-time)
 - Administrative Assistant, Sally Jones, (Part-time)
- **Contract Services**
 - Area 1, Area Assistant, Rev. Bill Steger
 - Area 2, Area Assistant, Rev. Patti Meyer
 - Area 3, Area Assistant, TBA
 - Area 4, Area Assistant, TBA
 - Area 5, Area Assistant, Rev. Dr. Delano Benson
 - Alternative Ministry Education, Rev. Dr. Paul Maitland
 - Church Revitalization Initiative, Rev. Wally Holt
 - Floating Office Person, hired on a need basis

REGIONAL OFFICE

- American Baptist Churches of the Great Rivers Region
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