

An Open Letter from the Ministers of
Judson Memorial Church in New York City
To
Regional Executive Ministers of the ABCUSA
January 18, 2005

Dear Sisters and Brothers in Christ,

As we celebrate the life of Martin Luther King Jr. and his words of non-violent peacemaking, we are compelled to write to you in response to your recent pastoral letter.

Judson Memorial Church in New York City has a long and rich tradition of celebrating the diversity within our American Baptist family and our world. We value equally our commitment to faith and social justice. As with so many other “biblically based” animosities that have divided us in the past, like racial prejudice and the inequality of women, we have likewise been led by the Spirit to stand against injustice and to move beyond the issue of the acceptance and affirmation of gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgendered people.

The appropriate “pastoral” response from you, our regional executives, it seems to us, would have been to leave matters as they are, even for the six-month period between your meetings, merely calling **all** to remain at the table. Many of you believe that is what has been done, but to our ears, only items 5 and 7 (unity in Christ, fidelity to his teachings, seeking discernment) truly reflect the spirit of a pastoral response. We feel that GLBT people, their families, friends, and churches have been clearly dismissed from the table.

Our country, at its best, practices “respectful dissent,” but Baptist polity calls for something much greater and more profound: soul freedom. To suggest that there may be a time, quite possibly in the near future, that the REMC will pronounce any reading of the “mind of Christ” for all Baptists is an insult to the history of discernment that has been quite active in our congregation.

We know that you are being squeezed from all sides, but we are hopeful that in the midst of the loud rhetoric, you will be ever mindful that we are talking about real people with real and deep feelings for the church. GLBT sisters and brother, and those of us who support them because we believe that to be the mind of Christ made manifest, do not want to feel we are any less faithful to Christian belief or that we are unwelcome in the ABCUSA.

There has been a great deal of controversy and accusations about those who would make homosexuality the focus of our denomination, and it has certainly dominated the American Baptist landscape. Who are “they” who wish to make it the focus? Judson Memorial has little interest in making this the focus of our denominational life because we have integrated, included, welcomed, and affirmed all people, including GLBT people. In the spirit of true Baptist freedom, and in openness to the free movement of God’s Spirit, we respectfully urge you to:

- Overturn the action created by the signing of the “pastoral” letter by rescinding the letter at your April meeting.
- Let the focus of our life together as American Baptists, from here on out, – the free movement of God’s Spirit among us and the adherence to our cherished, Baptist founding principles – be the guiding forces behind the desire we all have for unity within our American Baptist family.

- Join the people of Judson in our struggle to minister with and care for thousands of homeless GLBT kids who wind up on the streets of New York because their families, churches, and denominations have refused to accept them as the God-given, beautiful children they are. Our first pastor, Edward Judson's desire to bring together the "classes" and the "masses" continues to give us our mandate to faithfully work for justice for all, including homeless GLBT kids.
- Stand together for the founding principles of our basic freedoms as Baptists.
- Stand together with the simple Covenant of Agreement, the basic common ground that has under girded our Baptist unity and work these many years, without additions or deletions.
- Recognize that there are various interpretations of scripture, but one God and Creator of us all, one Jesus Christ whose radical justice and love for all crossed barriers unheard of in his time, and one Spirit moving among us, longing to be released to do the Spirit's work without our human restraints.
- Recognize that any or all of our understandings are imperfect, but arise out of our convictions and are thus sacred to each of us.

The time has long-since passed for meeting at a table where all are not welcome, where there is no one asking the question, "What would Jesus do?," where we do not look to the Spirit's leading. We, Judson's ministers, are moved by the message, so alive with energy to this day, in the *Letter from the Birmingham Jail* written by Martin Luther King Jr.:

"A negative peace which is the absence of tension (is less than) a positive peace which is the presence of justice...Injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere...The contemporary church is often a weak, ineffectual voice with an uncertain sound. It is so often the arch-supporter of the status quo."

As people of faith let us also realize that, in Dr. King's words,

"Dark clouds of ... prejudice will soon pass away and the deep fog of misunderstanding will be lifted from our fear-drenched communities and in some not-too-distant tomorrow the radiant clouds of love and brotherhood will shine over our great nation with all their scintillating beauty."

In the Spirit of Justice, Love, and Inclusion,

Karen H. Senecal, Minister

Gary W. Harris, Interim Minister