

December 10, 2004

An Open Letter to Regional Executive Ministers  
American Baptist Churches, USA

Dear Sisters and Brothers in Christ:

Grace and peace to you from Jesus Christ who sets us all free and calls us to unique and powerful ministry in this troubled world.

I am in receipt of a pastoral letter approved by a majority of you at your meeting of November 22, 2004. Its stated intent is to preserve unity in our denomination. I believe it does nothing of the sort. I believe it represents a blatant disregard for basic Baptist polity and practice, is a travesty to justice-loving Christians and will do untold damage to our American Baptist denomination.

I pastor a church that welcomes all people regardless of all of the barriers we might erect. I fear this statement calls us to be like the gatekeepers at the doors of the church in the recent United Church of Christ ad. This statement will not show our denomination as one of racial diversity and radical inclusion that it has been for decades. Instead, it pulls us down into the abyss of factionalism and exclusion. It also tells others who are looking for a church home what they have too often feared—that they are not truly welcome in an American Baptist Church. With all of its language of humility, it arrogantly excludes people like me and those in my church. It assumes that those who believe in the acceptance of gay and lesbian people are not being faithful to the Gospel of Jesus Christ. Nothing can be further from the truth. I base my stand on acceptance and inclusion directly from the Gospel of Jesus Christ. I am writing this open letter as an attempt to speak the truth in love to you and to a people desperately in need of the saving power of Jesus Christ.

I know you are concerned by the way homosexuality has dominated our discourse. It has certainly blurred our mission as American Baptists. I pray for the day when we will find the reconciliation in Christ where, to paraphrase Paul's letter to the Galatians, there is no male nor female, no slave nor free, Jew nor Gentile, right nor left, red nor blue and even gay nor straight for we are all one in Christ Jesus.

I fear that your statement will be seen by some of those opposed to the acceptance of homosexuals as too little, too late. If it is meant to appease them, I have little faith that it will do so. For it seems that many in this group want nothing short of a purge and pogrom of anyone who does not interpret scripture as they do. This group is not being true to our Baptist heritage and polity. But worse than that, the teachings of this group, embraced by most religious media, do severe damage to our gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender (GLBT) sisters and brothers.

Let us be clear. This is not simply about homosexuality. It is about people: people that I love; people in whom I have seen the face of Christ. All of the gay and lesbian members of the three churches I have served in my fifteen years of ministry have been victims of hate crimes at one time or another. Gay young people are seven times more likely to commit suicide than non-gay teens. The University of Minnesota says that hate crimes have increased locally and nationally against the GLBT community while it has decreased for other groups. I believe this is a direct result of the teaching of too many of our churches. Your pastoral letter does nothing to stem the flow of this violence. If anything, it gives it even more weight. By not decrying hate crimes, the onus is on the oppressed to change, not the oppressors. Your call to voluntarily refrain from accepting homosexual people has no clear timeline for ending and no apparent goal other than to simply not rock the boat. The boat has been rocking for years and has thrown many in my community overboard. I should hope that people like you would be the ones to throw a life preserver to those in the deep water where sharks and cold seek to wreak havoc. Instead, those in the water see those in the boat turn their backs on us, hoping that the sharks might make the problem go away. Your pastoral letter hits those of us in the water like a heavy anchor. And yet, we are your sisters and brothers. I appeal to your Christianity and your morality to throw a life preserver to those in the water.

We have a sickness in our denomination. It has a demonic portion to it. It is the sin of exclusion. Until we exorcise this sin, we are confounded by it, confined by it, defined by it, and immobilized by it. The ongoing revelation of Jesus Christ demands that we be vigilant against any who would exclude. Homosexual people are not the problem. Exclusion is the problem. Exclusion closes the doors of the church and closes the eyes and ears of good people who need to witness the life-changing power of Christ in our homosexual sisters and brothers. I have seen this spirit. I know that Jesus Christ exists and thrives in the hearts of many of our GLBT sisters and brothers.

Whenever Jesus was faced with an opportunity to exclude or to ostracize someone, he chose not to do so. Instead he constantly called upon us to welcome the outcast and the stranger. His testimony to the Syrophenician woman, the Gerasene demoniac, blind Bartimaeus, the leprous, the religiously excluded and the poor ought to give us pause as we seek to further encircle the wagons around our crumbling denominational structure.

I am encouraged by the recent statement by our American Baptist Black Caucus which calls us to refrain from excluding anyone. Inclusion is at the heart of the Baptist tenet of soul freedom and individual liberty. I am reminded of the words of our ABC brother, the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. His *Letter From the Birmingham Jail*, includes some stinging words to the white clergy who were telling him to not be so uppity in his quest for civil rights. He wrote:

“History is the long and tragic story of the fact that privileged groups seldom give up their privileges voluntarily. Individuals may see the moral light and voluntarily give up their unjust posture; but as Reinhold Niebuhr has reminded us, groups are more immoral than individuals. We know through painful experience that freedom is never voluntarily given by the

oppressor; it must be demanded by the oppressed. Frankly, I have never yet engaged in a direct action movement that was ‘well-timed,’ according to the timetable of those who have not suffered unduly from the disease of segregation. For years now I have heard the words ‘Wait!’ It rings in the ear of every Negro with a piercing familiarity. This ‘Wait’ has almost always meant ‘Never.’”

I believe your call to voluntarily refrain from appointing people who happen to be gay or lesbian to leadership positions is a form of segregation. It is a way of saying “wait.” Since you do not call for dialogue or any kind of reconciliation, it appears to mean ‘never.’ I believe God weeps at this hubris.

Sisters and brothers, I call on you to exercise leadership that will uphold our Baptist heritage, not deny it. I call on you to remove the walls that divide us and help us to be bridge-builders, as our General Secretary encourages us. I call on you to resist the temptation to exclude your GLBT sisters and brothers from ministry and from our churches. I call on you to show the moral courage to foster dialogue that will lead us to a place of acceptance and ministry for and with all of God’s children.

I hope that I have spoken the truth in love. I applaud those who voted against this statement. I applaud all who decry violence against our GLBT sisters and brothers. And I long for the day when we can all lay down our physical and spiritual weapons and celebrate the presence of Jesus Christ in our mutual American Baptist life.

May peace be with you in this wondrous holiday season. May we all find in the Advent of Christ’s birth a new sense of commitment and ministry. May the future be bright for all of us who call ourselves American Baptists.

Yours in the bonds of Christ’s love,

The Rev. Douglas M. Donley  
Pastor  
University Baptist Church  
Minneapolis, MN