

Response from Dale V. Salico Executive Minister of ABCPSW
(reported to the PSW region board on Thursday, December 9, 2004)

At our last meeting I reported action taken by the ABCPSW Ministers Council Executive Committee with my encouragement and support, in response to learning that a lesbian pastor in Massachusetts, who had married her partner in a ceremony at her church, was elected President of the Ministers Council of Massachusetts and a member of the Ministers Council Senate of the ABCUSA.

This situation has drawn attention to the fact that the policy of the ABCUSA, "The practice of homosexuality is incompatible with Christian teaching," is not implemented with any consistency in the ABC.

At the meeting of the General Board and related governing bodies of the ABCUSA in Green Lake, November 17-21, the deep divisions in the ABC over issues related to homosexuality were very evident. In his report to the General Board, ABCUSA General Secretary Dr. A. Roy Medley called American Baptists a "bridge denomination" urging American Baptists to prioritize our unity above the issues that divide us: "The question for us is whether we will mirror our culture in this latest embodiment of alienation or whether we will serve as a counter-cultural community of reconciliation. . . I support the freedom of the majority to state their discernment. At the same time we have also accorded to those who dissent the freedom to challenge the majority knowing that when prophets do arise they are seldom a product of the majority opinion. And I support the freedom to dissent as essential to the authority of Scripture." Citing Matthew 13:24-51 Dr. Medley warned against the danger of our sorting the tares from the wheat. Referring to Romans 14:13ff where Paul discusses issues of conscience, Dr. Medley warned those who believe they have knowledge of the truth against injuring their brothers and sisters by their actions. In conclusion the General Secretary urged the General Board not to become "a regulatory agency over entities you have no power to regulate. . ." and to keep their focus on mission as "job #1."

In contrast to the General Secretary's plea for American Baptists to continue the inclusive policy of recent years, Dr. Larry F. Johnston, a consultant hired by the ABCUSA to reverse two decades of stagnation and decline in mission giving, warned that the window of opportunity to bring necessary deep change to the ABC is closing. "Shortfall has become fast-fall, and you may be on the edge of a free-fall." Continuing to do the same thing the ABC has done in the past two decades, he insisted, will lead to the end of the denomination. In a meeting with the Regional Executive Ministers Council he stated, "There is no putting the homosexual issue aside. If you don't think it is the elephant in the room, dear saints, you don't get it! . . . This is not a diversity issue. It is a theological/moral issue. Do not confuse the categories. . ." Dr Johnston stated that Executive Ministers have a fiduciary responsibility for the life of the denomination: "If the assets of the Ministers and Missionaries Benefit Board eroded year after year, would no one take action? Yet, I have shown you the erosion of assets of all the churches that have left. The overwhelmingly preponderant reason they have left are the divisions over homosexuality and theology."

Following a long and very open discussion the Regional Executive Ministers Council approved a pastoral letter to American Baptists in which they committed themselves to the following actions:

1. We will voluntarily refrain from recommending or approving persons who are practicing homosexuals (gay and lesbian persons) for positions and ministries on the regional and national levels of denominational life.
2. We will voluntarily refrain from conducting or participating in marriage ceremonies for same-sex couples.
3. We will voluntarily refrain from making stereotypical statements about homosexuals, participating in homophobic behavior, making uninformed assumptions about homosexuals, or from participating in public demonstrations advocating on either side of this issue.
4. We will voluntarily refrain from making threats of withdrawal of resources and threats of withdrawal of fellowship.
5. We will pray and work constructively to embrace our unity in Jesus Christ and promote our fidelity to His teachings.
6. We call on all American Baptists to embrace and live out items 1-5 in the same spirit and commitment that we are pledging.
7. We commit ourselves to prayerfully discerning a way through this controversy and plan to report on our progress to the General Secretary and General Board by June, 2005.

The REMC committed itself to make a recommendation to deal decisively with the issue of homosexuality for the ABCUSA in their meeting in April 2004. The recommended action may be either a plan to preserve the unity of the ABC or to find a peaceful way to separate. Because of the critical importance of this meeting, I will interrupt my sabbatical leave to be in attendance.

Prior to the meeting of the General Board, a group of 15 American Baptist leaders gathered at the invitation of Dr. Paul Borden of ABC of the West and myself to discuss how, in light of the missional stagnation of the ABCUSA, we could work to advance the cause of Christ through like-minded American Baptist churches and agencies across the country. The decision was made to form the Great Commission Network.

The Great Commission Network will be a movement of American Baptist mission agencies and congregations committed to accomplishing the Great Commission and embrace a common commitment to share the gospel of Jesus Christ based on a historically orthodox belief in the integrity and authority of the Bible. The mission of the network will be to resource congregations to fulfill the Great Commission with excellence in culturally relevant ways in order to change their communities and advance God's Kingdom throughout the world.

Those gathering at Green Lake lifted a vision of 1000 healthy growing congregations actively reproducing disciples, leaders, and new congregations. Member agencies and

congregations must demonstrate health, growth, reproduction and a sacrificial commitment to world mission, or openness to the deep change required to make this happen. In addition, members of the Great Commission Network will embrace a commitment to historic Christian orthodoxy expressed in a confession of faith and a policy statement regarding human sexuality.

At this point, ten Executive Ministers in the ABC have indicated an interest in the Great Commission Network. A second meeting is scheduled to take place January 31 at Friendship Baptist Church, Yorba Linda. It is anticipated that this meeting will be attended by a larger number of American Baptist leaders from across our denomination.

It is clear that the future of the American Baptist Churches in the USA is at a critical juncture.

I ask you to be in prayer for the leadership of the American Baptist Churches that the Spirit of Christ will give clear guidance in these difficult days. I ask for your prayers as well as your wise counsel as I strive to provide leadership that will be faithful to the clear teaching of the Scripture and to the mission of Christ in the world.

- Dale Salico - Executive Minister (ABCPSW)