

## A Resolution for the General Board from Mid-American Baptist Churches Board of Region Ministries

### A Resolution of Concern for the Family and our American Baptist Family of Churches

Families today face tremendous challenges. Violence in many forms continues to plague our families. Too many of our family members are incarcerated. Too many adults in our families must work two or more jobs to make ends meet. High mobility, low wages, the high costs of childcare and healthcare all contribute to the precarious situation of our families. Divorce, while often necessary, continues to tear apart our children's safety net. Re-marriage for adults can be a blessing, but it comes with the additional challenges of blending two or more families. All of this is in the context of a rapidly changing global economy that offers even more uncertainty for our families.

Today's media is saturated with programming and commercials that tell our families that we are what we buy and often treat the human body itself as a commodity. Sexual promiscuity is often portrayed as normal, confusing our youth and undermining parental values. This subverts the gospel message that we are all beloved children of God meant to protect, respect and cherish one another.

Yet the family is amazingly resilient. Most families continue to love and care for one another despite tremendous odds. Over and over again families choose to set aside their differences and disagreements in order to work together for the good of the family.

Given the context of these serious challenges to the family, it is understandable that some of us are also alarmed by the growing acceptance of gays, lesbians and bi-sexual persons. The Bible appears to some of us to condemn homosexuality while others do not see this condemnation in the intent of the scriptures. (Leviticus 18:22; 20:13 and Romans 1:26-27) Interpretations of these and other scriptures vary widely within our American Baptist family.

For the past thirty years some of our churches have been engaged in special ministries to individuals and families of gays, lesbians and bi-sexual persons. These churches have witnessed the damage that can be done to individuals when family members disown or reject one another. It is deeply unfortunate that some of these churches and their clergy have in turn experienced rejection by other American Baptist churches.

Therefore we call upon American Baptists to continue to love and care for one another. We call upon American Baptists to set aside our differences and disagreements with one another in order to work together for good of the entire family.

We call upon families to:

- Cherish all family members as children of God.
- Refuse to reject or disown family members.
- Be gentle and supportive of family members who are struggling with concerns around their sexuality.
- Trust the work of the Holy Spirit in the lives of loved ones.

- Allow individuals to interpret the scriptures for themselves in the context of strong family relationships.
- Wherever possible, to encourage the preservation of the family.
- To encourage monogamy in life-long relationships as the best choice for individuals, couples and their children.
- To encourage chastity in singleness and support celibacy for those who are so gifted.
- Accept the life-partners of family members even when those persons do not have the blessing of marriage.
- Accept the children of blended families as though each were adopted into their own immediate family.

We call upon churches, regions and our American Baptist family to:

- Work to restore and preserve this family called American Baptists.
- Welcome all persons into our churches.
- Refuse to reject each other for our interpretation of scriptures.
- Refuse to dis-fellowship members or churches because of differences in interpretations of scriptures.
- Discuss these concerns with humility and kindness.
- Respect those churches and persons who are alarmed by the growing acceptance of gays, lesbians and bi- sexual persons and see it as a threat to the family.
- Respect those churches and persons who have chosen special ministries of acceptance toward gays, lesbians and bi-sexual persons.
- Allow all churches to freely select their own ministers and candidates for ordination.
- Call upon all leaders to live in our families in ways that are based on fidelity in monogamous relationships, chastity in singleness and in celibacy for those who are so gifted.
- Reaffirm the commitment of the ABC to the autonomy of the local church knowing that that local church is the fundamental unit of mission and ministry just as the family is the fundamental unit of discipleship.

## Policy Base

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## AMERICAN BAPTIST POLICY STATEMENT ON FAMILY LIFE

June 1984

American Baptists, with our heritage of respect for the Word of God and for the individual conscience, have a contribution to make to the public discussion of family life today.

1. A basic theological conviction underlying American Baptist policy toward families is that God calls each Christian to discipleship in every area of life. Believers make life-shaping decisions in response to God's call. We affirm that for Christian disciples choices about singleness, marriage, parenthood, and living in covenantal, intentional family arrangements are to be made soberly, with prayer, and as integral parts of the Christian's response to God's call in Jesus Christ. We affirm the competence of the individual soul to

determine God's will in such matters through the reading and interpreting of Scripture, through dialogue with God, by considering the teaching and counsel of the Christian community, and by seeking and testing the wisdom of sisters and brothers in Christ.

2. We affirm that God intends marriage to be a monogamous, life-long, one flesh union of a woman and a man, who in response to God's call leave father and mother and cleave to one another. We affirm God's blessing and active presence in marriage relationships so entered in response to God's call.

We affirm the full implications of this understanding of marriage, especially that God calls partners to work at personal growth, to deepen skills in communication and decision making, and to invest both their time and energy in the development of their marriage.

We affirm that the grace and forgiveness of God are sufficient to sustain, heal, and renew our lives when our marriages are ended by death or separation or divorce.

We affirm that in God's grace remarriage for divorced Christians is appropriate where the issues which ended an earlier marriage have been addressed and the new marriage shows promise of fulfilling God's intention for the marriage relationship.

3. We affirm that children are a gift from God, entrusted to parents for love, care, and nurture. We affirm parents as the first teachers and spiritual guides of their children; we believe parents are responsible for involving their children in the life of the Christian community. We affirm the reciprocal responsibility of grown children for the well-being of aging parents.

4. We affirm Christian families as agents through which the Good News is proclaimed, received, and lived out so that persons might fulfill God's redemptive purpose in history.

5. We affirm the Church as the inclusive family of God in which

- persons living alone find intimacy and support with sisters and brothers in Christ;
- youth are challenged to become autonomous disciples of Jesus Christ and are helped in their journey by committed peer and adult friends;
- aging persons are enabled to share the wisdom of years through intergenerational fellowship;
- divorced persons and single-parent families are strengthened by the presence and involvement of caring Christian friends in their lives;
- family groups experiencing conflict within marriages or between generations are supported, reminded of God's grace, and helped to find resources for healing;
- individuals and family units will experience God's love and come to know and accept Jesus Christ; individuals and family units are equipped and inspired to build a social order of respect and care for every person, all family groups, and ethnic communities.

6. We are committed to providing programs of education and support

- To guide and nurture persons making choices about singleness, marriage, divorce, remarriage, and parenthood;
- to enrich couples seeking to fulfill God's intention in their marriage;
- to empower parents striving to raise children according to Christian principles; to enable parents in their roles as teachers, managers, and advocates; and to sustain parents when young adult children struggle with sexual orientation, divorce, job loss, or death;
- to strengthen family units of all kinds, including single-parent and blended families, foster and adoption families, those living in group homes and other covenantal family-like groups;
- to equip family members and family units with skills and vision for witness to God's grace and participation in God's work of making peace and justice in the lives of individuals and society.

7. We are committed to working with others for public policies and practices which enhance the status of families and empower them to do their unique work of nurturing succeeding generations of citizens.

8. We are committed to advocating for the rights of all families, and especially those with dependent children and aging members, to the necessities of life: shelter, safety, nutrition, medical care, and education.

9. We are committed to advocacy on behalf of families with special needs including

- those where parents are separated by illness, military service, or work;
- those caring for a family member with disabilities or the infirmities of age;
- those whose breadwinners are unemployed.

**10. We are committed to modeling in our congregations and denominational life a vision of an inclusive, intergenerational community, a family of God, in which the variety of family forms, the richness of ethnic traditions, and the gifts of all persons from newborns to the very old, are respected, enjoyed, and celebrated.**

#### **BIBLICAL-THEOLOGICAL BASE (From statement on Family Life)**

The Bible approaches family life with great honesty and serious idealism. The rivalry of brothers (e.g. Genesis 4:1-16; 25:21-34; 27; 37), the duplicities and infidelities of spouses (e.g. Genesis 27; 30:1-25; Judges 14; 2 Samuel 11), the tensions of parent and child (e.g. Genesis 26:34-35; 37:5-10; 2 Samuel 14-18; Luke 2:41-51) are vividly portrayed. Equally vivid are stories of great love (e.g. Genesis 25:19-21; 29; 37:3; Hosea 1-3), examples of faithfulness and loyalty (e.g. Genesis 39; 45:4-5; Ruth; 1 Samuel 18-20), and moments of reconciliation (e.g. Genesis 33; 45).

In the Old Testament, family relationships are used repeatedly as metaphors for the relationship of God and Israel (e.g. Deuteronomy 32:11-12, 18; Isaiah 46:3-4; 49:14-16; Jeremiah 3:1-5; Ezekiel 16; Hosea 2:19-20). In the parables and sayings of Jesus, images of marriage and family life are used frequently to express the nature and reality of God's rule (e.g. Matthew 21:28-32; 22:1-14; Matthew 25:1-13; Luke 11:11-13; Luke 15:11-32; John 3:3-6).

Baptists read the Old Testament from the perspective of the New Testament and especially in the light of Jesus' teachings. As a result, three Old Testament themes are highly valued:

(1) A vision of marriage as a monogamous, life-long, one-flesh union is affirmed by Jesus as God's intention for marriage "from the beginning" (e.g. Genesis 1:27; 2:24; Matthew 19:3-6; Mark 10:2-9).

(2) A vision of the parent-child relationship as one of tender care, mutual responsibility, and mutual benefit (e.g. Exodus 20:12; Deuteronomy 6:6-7; Proverbs 1:8-9; 6:20-22) is reinforced by Jesus' special attention to children (e.g. Matthew 18:1-6; Mark 10:13-16), his assumptions about the depth of parental care (e.g. Matthew 7:9-11) and his insistence in word and deed that adult children fulfill their responsibilities to dependent parents (e.g. Matthew 15:1-9; John 19:26-27).

(3) A recognition that God creates new family bonds where none existed before (e.g. Deuteronomy 26:5-11; Ruth) is proclaimed by the Church as the New Covenant in Christ through which the brokenness and partiality of human kinship is transcended and healed (e.g. Matthew 3:9; 1 Peter 2:9-10). The New Testament church became the new family of God for those whose acceptance of Christ cut them off from their biological families (e.g. John 9) and for those in special need, such as widows, for whom the church became a family (e.g. Acts 6:1-6; 1 Timothy 5:1-16).

Jesus assumed marriage and family relationships as givens. Even though the gospels include stories of conflict between Jesus and his family (e.g. Mark 3:20-21, 31-35; Luke 2:41-51; John 7:5), he saw in marital and parent-child relationships images of the divine-human bond. Jesus blessed a wedding at Cana, enjoyed the warmth of family gatherings in the homes of Peter and of Mary and Martha, responded with compassion to the parents of sick and dying children, and thereby affirmed the rich possibilities of family life. His teachings of humility, mutual service, forgiveness, and the primacy of persons over property and tradition form the bedrock of any Christian approach to questions of family life in any culture or historical era.

At the same time Jesus put the highest priority on the Kingdom of God and recognized the potential for conflicts between family loyalties and commitment to God's will and rule (e.g. Matthew 10:21, 35-37; Mark 10:29-30). For Jesus, no institution, neither Temple, nor Law, nor Sabbath, nor Family can claim ultimate allegiance. Only participation in God's will and acknowledgement of God's rule can claim our ultimate concern. Jesus' own singleness and celibacy (e.g. Matthew 19:10-12) accents the priority of the Kingdom in his own life.

Salvation history begins with the call to Abraham and Sarah to leave father's house and kin and land and venture to a new place and through divine covenant to found a new family by which all the families of the earth may find blessing. Salvation history culminates in the Son of Abraham (e.g. Matthew 1:1) and the Son of God who founded a more inclusive, spiritual family in which the blessings of family relationship are made available to all regardless of race, or gender, or life condition.

Finally, the New Testament both refers to a wide variety of familial households (e.g. Mark 1:29;

Mark 6:1-3; Luke 1:5-25, 39-44, 57-66; Luke 10:38-41; John 11:1-44, 13:1-11; Acts 9:36-42; Acts 10; Acts 16:1-2; Acts 18:1-19) and includes specific attempts to guide Christians in family living. The common touchstone of these teachings is mutuality of responsibility and service to one another in Christ (e.g. Ephesians 5:6-9). We affirm the New Testament vision Christian family living in which Christ is the head of the household and all members are mutually responsible to one another and to Christ. With this vision, a sense of serious idealism and biblical honesty we seek to articulate an American Baptist policy on family life today.

### **Additional Supporting Policy Statements**

#### **American Baptist Policy Statement on Human Rights December 1976**

As American Baptist we declare the following rights to be basic human rights, and we will support programs and measures to assure these rights;

3. The right to develop family structures, to build mutually satisfying human relationships and to nurture, train and educate children;

#### **American Baptist Policy Statement on Christian Unity June 1978**

We must engage in fresh, biblical studies which can be based on frank examination of the conscious or unconscious presuppositions with which Baptist have traditionally read and interpreted the Scriptures.

### **Additional Supporting Resolutions**

#### **American Baptist Resolution on Family Violence December 1982**

#### **American Baptist Resolution Calling for Dialogue on Human Sexuality March 1993**

#### **American Baptist Resolution on Reconciliation November 1993**