

# “Rhythms of the Spirit” Report • American Baptist Churches USA

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## Deepening Our Discipleship – Focus on Spiritual Formation

The *Transformed by the Spirit* initiative has helped change the outlook of American Baptist congregations. Through this emphasis congregations are being urged to more fully engage their communities and the world for the sake of the gospel. However, a church which is outwardly focused in mission can only be sustained by a strengthening of the discipleship of its members. Just as a tree can only grow as far as its root system will sustain it, so a congregation can actively engage in outward mission only as far as their rootedness in Christ will permit.

The focus statement adopted by American Baptists several years ago twinned these two aspects of Christian life and ministry.

American Baptist Churches are Healthy Missional Churches  
that Nurture Devoted Disciples of Jesus Christ  
who Live their Lives in Mission and ministry  
for the Healing of the World  
through the Love of God.

Vibrant Christian communities engage in personal and corporate spiritual disciplines and practices which invite one into a deeper experience of Christ as devoted disciples. Vibrant Christian communities engage the world as the hands and feet of Christ for the sake of its healing.

As an outgrowth of *Transformed by the Spirit*, in 2014, ABCUSA introduced a two-year initiative in spiritual formation which has been received as an essential aspect of sustaining the outward missional efforts of our congregations. The program has been well-received. In 2017, this initiative enters its fourth year. Rhythms of the Spirit focuses on three primary areas.

### 1. *Rhythms of the Spirit* retreats

High values of the Retreat aspect of *Rhythms of the Spirit*

1. **To provide a full three days of daily spiritual rhythm based on the historic Christian monastic day as developed by the Benedictine tradition.** This includes a rhythm of praying the Psalms, reflective and meditative singing, silence, a devotional reading of scripture called Lectio Divina, a focus on spiritual practice and the great silence at night. Our hope is that, as participants experience this rhythm, they will be motivated to appropriate aspects of it in their daily lives.

2. **Partnering with ABCUSA Camp and Conference organizations to provide space for these retreats.** This generous partnering keeps retreat costs down and creates a united spiritual vision among a variety of ABC organizations. The partner organizations have included The Ministers Council, International Ministries, Green Lake Conference Center in Wisconsin, Redwood Glen Camp and Conference Center in California and Camp Canonicus in Rhode Island.
3. **Creating unique, diverse teams of leaders within the ABC to provide spiritual leadership for the retreats.** Five team configurations have been created to lead Rhythms retreats. 1. Jeff Savage, Rene Colson-Hudson, Betty Wright Riggins and Brad Berglund. 2. Jennifer Davidson, Rita Berglund, Larry Jay, Sherry Johnson and Brad. 3. Carlos Daria Peralta, Judy Fackenthal, Karen Gygax Rodriguez and Brad. 4. Joyce and David Reed, Jeff Savage, Karen Gygax Rodriguez and Brad. 5. Judy Fackenthal, Betty Wright Riggins, Rene Colson Hudson and Brad.
4. **Providing spiritual direction throughout the retreat to signal the importance of this emerging ministry.** Rhythms leadership teams are made up of certified spiritual directors. Throughout the retreat, participants may sign up for one-on-one spiritual direction with one of the leadership team. It is my hope that the ministry of spiritual direction will be provided at all future denominational conferences and retreats.
5. **Partnering with ABC organizations to cooperate with programming and communication.** In 2017, two rhythms retreats are scheduled. The first will be in cooperation with the Biennial Mission Summit in Portland, OR. Rhythms “elements” will be incorporated into the gathering. The August, 2017 Rhythms retreat will be held at Camp Canonicus with the help and support of the staff of ABCORI. This high value of partnership is meant to demonstrate that life in the Spirit is cooperative and unifying.

**Results:** The Rhythms retreats have been very well received by those who participate. These kinds of comments are common.

*I'm still in awe of the experience I had at "Rhythms..."...life-changing for me.*

*I certainly had a profound and life altering experience at the "Rhythms of the Spirit" retreat. Thank you for the excellent music and leadership.*

*Thanks for faithfully leading. My family and I found the last 4 days at "Rhythms of the Spirit" to be a great blessing.*

Participants have come from across the country and represent a diverse cross-section of denominational life. Average attendance is from 15 – 25 participants. One retreat was smaller and one retreat was larger. The attendance goal is 20 – 25 people. A website and a facebook page have been created. [www.rhythmsofthespirit.com](http://www.rhythmsofthespirit.com)

## **2. Network of American Baptist Spiritual Directors.**

We are aware of more and more American Baptists, both clergy and lay, who are expressing their vocation of Christian ministry in serving as spiritual directors. This is a new phenomenon in ABC life and in the past, ABCUSA has not sought to identify and network those involved in this growing ministry specialty. Over the past two years, a network of American Baptists who have been or are being trained in spiritual direction. Much like the ABCUSA-initiated biennial gatherings of ABC-related theologians has been well received as an expression of the denomination's interest and concern for its theologians, so, too, we believe that this effort signals the denomination's awareness of this expression of Christian vocation and will offer important support to American Baptists in this ministry path. This effort is sustained through a website dedicated to those in this specialty. [www.abcspiritualformation.com](http://www.abcspiritualformation.com)

## **3. The Practice of Pilgrimage**

An ancient form of spiritual practice that is being re-appropriated by the Protestant tradition is the practice of pilgrimage. One definition of pilgrimage is as follows:

*A pilgrimage is a ritual journey with a hallowed purpose. Every step along the way has meaning. The pilgrim knows that life giving challenges will emerge. A pilgrimage is not a vacation; it is a transformational journey during which significant change takes place. New insights are given. Deeper understanding is attained. New and old places in the heart are visited. Blessings are received and healing takes place. On return from the pilgrimage, life is seen with different eyes. Nothing will ever be quite the same again.*  
– Macrina Wiederkehr, *Behold Your Life*, p. 11

A Pilgrimage to

**Taizé**

July 14 – 25, 2017  
(includes Chartres and Paris)

Sponsored by American Baptist Churches USA  
In partnership with TheThreshold  
and Illuminated Journeys

In July, 2017, ABCUSA is offering its fourth pilgrimage to the Taize community in France. Taize is an ecumenical spiritual community founded by Brother Roger Shütz and has inspired millions around the world through their worship resources and their common life and witness. The time there will be spent in worship, prayer, and reflection upon the practice of the spiritual life. You can read more about Taize in this article written by Brad. <http://www.thethreshold.us/Taize.htm>

The Rhythms of the Spirit initiative is managed, coordinated and developed by the Rev. Brad Berglund. Brad and his wife Rita, have developed a ministry of Spiritual Formation and pilgrimage that is seasoned and has hosted more than 500 participants in the past 18 years.

**Evaluation:** Rhythms of the Spirit is off to a good start. The past three years have been a success.

The 2016 Green Lake retreat following the Mission Conference had approximately 15 participants. For one of those participants, this was her third time.

The Ministers Council partnership in Washington DC was very successful with about 60 people in attendance. It was a beautiful example of the ways contemplative experiences can be integrated into a larger conference experience with a high degree of diversity of style reflecting the diversity within the ABC family.

Because Brad's position with ABCUSA is project-focused and part-time, it is necessary for these high-value programs to find ways to be communicated and promoted within the wider denominational family. Help is needed to promote the existing program. Help is also needed to imagine the future and the many ways an emphasis on spiritual practice, spiritual direction and pilgrimage can be incorporated more fully into denominational life.

**Moving Forward:** Success in the future can be determined by the degree to which denominational life becomes permeated with a focus on spiritual practice and spiritual formation.