

# American Baptist Churches USA

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Report of the General Secretary  
Chicago, IL  
March 13, 2013

The last several months have been weeks filled with exciting mission encounters, growth in program outreach, and a focus on planning.

Let me begin with the work of our board and staff. You have before you a brief description of the areas of focus we have adopted and around which we have organized the work of BGM. Under each area, you will find an outline of major emphases and ministries which we are undertaking. Let me briefly walk you through them.

Given that we have only 3 executive programmatic staff persons in addition to the GS – the list of program initiatives is impressive. When you add to that the many services we provide internally through accounting, personnel, travel and conference, and building management with only another 3 executive staff, it is even more impressive. This is made possible not only because of the dedication and skills of this excellent management team but also because of the talented and committed support staff. **I would like to propose for your consideration that we sponsor a staff appreciation day that would express our thanks to this excellent staff and would offer them something special whether it be an offsite luncheon, chair massages or some other tangible appreciation for their work. As an expression of the Board, it would mean a great deal to them.**

## COMMUNICATIONS

Communicating our role and our mission as BGM is a challenge.

It may sound like a tautology, but the challenge of being general is that we are general. Our ministry of leadership and program is more diffuse than that of other parts of the family except for perhaps our regions. Our challenge as BGM is to adequately interpret our ministry in ways that vibrantly connect it to the vitality of the communal and the missional dimensions of being church. “Serving as the Hands and Feet of Christ” is a wonderful crystallization of our ethos as ABC. Our task as BGM is to succinctly and graphically depict our diverse work.

Leo Thorne is working with Mary Roach Bailey, a gifted communication specialist, to help us refine our communication strategy. This includes an interpretation of our ministries that is both comprehensive and comprehensible. This effort also includes developing a regular printed piece that communicates with our constituency. As we strategize we need to be clear about the distinct roles that such a piece and our web site

would play. Mary is urging us to consider using a blog format that invites response in lieu of the statement format for the opening section of the web. We also are ordering video conferencing equipment for our conference room(s) in order to facilitate webinars and video conferencing with pastors and leaders. **We will bring details about our emerging strategy to our June meeting.**

## **OTHER MINISTRY/ADMINISTRATIVE MATTERS**

### *Search for a Director of Development*

Johnson Eapen, John McLaverty, Leo and I developed a job description and issued a job search for the position. We have identified three candidates who will be interviewed later this month. David Gnirk, Dee Dee Turlington, Debra Schill, Leo, Johnson and I, with John McLaverty as consultant, serve as the search committee.

### *Case Statements*

As a staff, I have challenged all of us, but particularly the service elements of ABCUSA to think like small businesses that continually have to make their case to their clients. So we are developing case statements that highlight not only the direct services we provide but also the unseen benefits of using our services versus outside vendors. We are attempting to make our case on both price-point and quality of service. **The goal is to have these to give to Executive Directors, Board Presidents and Board Treasurers before the June board meetings.**

I have also challenged each department to ramp up the feedback mechanism about their services. Now, every time I fly United, they want to know how I like the trip and how service might be improved. We are taking that lesson to heart by **instituting feedback practices, surveys of interest, etc.** Staff is responding well to this initiative.

I do not care for either mechanical or business metaphors in describing ministry. I find them less flexible and less accommodating to the work of the Spirit than organic metaphors. The metaphor I use often is that of the seed being sown and the seed growing and maturing drawing on Jesus' parable of the sower. So let me speak for a few moments about some of the seeds we have sown and seeds we are sowing.

## **TRANSFORMED BY THE SPIRIT**

I begin with "Transformed by the Spirit," a seed that is beginning to sprout and grow roots and branches across the ABC. We are entering two transitional phases in its life. One is a shift from a limited and controlled experiment to a viral and widespread experiment. For two years now we have worked with our regions with small groups to name the adaptive challenges we face as the church in North America and to encourage initial experiments by these groups to address them. In BGM we have had two such teams at work, and we will be hearing from them about suggested experiments for us. This has been a learning time for us as we have tested assumptions and sometimes

presumptions and as we have refined questions and processes in order to offer our churches a way together to address the adaptive challenges we encounter. **The second phase will be initiated at the Biennial when we sow this seed more widely among our churches with the hope that the seed widely dispersed will lead to a viral movement of experimentation in ministry and mission.**

The second transition in *“Transformed by the Spirit”* is a shift from high dependency upon our consultants who have in actuality functioned as staff persons for us in this process to inner support for this process. **Elements of that are becoming clearer: a form of what we have called the Journey Team made up of region executives and pastors; a volunteer who will support the contacts and team-building with regions, the ongoing recruitment and training of coaches, and an internal assignment of an ABCUSA staff person to provide overall leadership. ABCUSA will provide the major leadership in this next phase.**

Friends, you took a risk in providing the financial support required for this seed to be sown. Your investment has garnered so far \$271, 341.00 from others who have joined in this effort. But I want to also point out to you, the fact that in God’s providence we have also experienced a balance of \$160,000+ this year of revenue over expenses. **You took a risk and God is providing!**

## **CCU/IR – INTERCHURCH RELATIONS**

You have already heard from our president about the visit of our joint ABC/COB church delegation to Israel. **ABC and COB are committed to sponsoring an annual such trip with Telos to raise awareness of the situation among our pastors and other leaders.** June Totten, chair of CCU/IR, has agreed to coordinate this on behalf of ABCUSA as part of the ministry of CCU. Now, interest has also been expressed by Progressive National Baptists to join with us in this effort. **COB wishes to explore other partnerships, for example a volunteer effort with Bethlehem Bible College, etc. I shall be speaking with Charles Jones about this.**

And while we were on that trip, two of our young adults, Greg Mamula who serves on the staff of ABC/NE and Alan Rudnick of BGM began a discussion with COB about young adults in ministry. Out of that has come the possibility of our **co-sponsoring a joint conference for young leaders. And PNBC is interested in that also!**

In a similar vein, the ABCUSA Staff Leadership Team met with the core staff of CBF in February as a way of exploring common interests and mission. There is a warmth of relationship and a desire for fellowship there that we need to cultivate. We have already worked closely with CBF on disaster relief in New Orleans, and in the co-appointment of the James family in Haiti and the Binkleys in the US. We are sharing pastors back and forth as well, so there are common interests that we have. No one is talking merger but it does behoove us to come alongside one another as we have with Church of the Brethren and increasingly so with Progressive Baptists. **I would suggest that we consider discussing with CBF naming them as yet a third denomination**

**with whom we have a “special relationship” alongside Church of the Brethren and the Progressive National Baptist Convention.**

## **CCU/IR – INTERFAITH RELATIONS**

Our second national Baptist-Muslim dialogue was highlighted by the participation of Ambassadors Susan Johnson-Cook and Rashad Hussein for a public forum that was well attended. We will publish the works of this second dialogue once again in the *American Baptist Quarterly*. In the second half of January, I led a mission team of ABWM leaders and others to experience Baptist-Muslim relations in Lebanon and the Republic of Georgia. We were hosted in a most marvelous manner in each place and we continue to be amazed at the ministries each engages. The Arab Baptist Theological Seminary is a pioneer in Baptist-Muslim dialogue through their annual Middle East Institute and their training of pastors. In addition, the Lebanese Society for Educational and Social Development is spearheading a major relief effort among the Syrian refugees flooding into Lebanon who are almost all Muslim. In Lebanon, we worked with the Arab Group for Muslim Christian Dialogue led by Dr. Riad Jarjour to arrange for a meeting with Lebanese women who are working to build relationships between women of our two faith groups. The meeting was inspiring and offered some practices and resources that could be implemented here by ABWM groups. Likewise, in the Republic of Georgia, we met with Muslim leaders in Batumi and our women spent time in conversation and dialogue with Muslim women from that community. **Our women have been invited by the Georgian Baptists to consider making this an ongoing relationship. As they returned these ABWM leaders have been sharing with one another about efforts and resources emerging in their own communities, and ABWM and CCU have set aside surplus funds from this trip for the development of a woman-to-woman resource guide for ABWM.** Seeds are being sown.

By invitation of the CCU/IR, Dr. Jeffrey Haggray of FBC, Washington DC, has agreed to represent us on the Shoulder to Shoulder initiative in addition to Mo Khan of our board.

## **STATE DEPARTMENT VISITS**

In the past two months, a number of us have been with members of the US State Department. The first was arranged with the ABC Taskforce on Refugees from Burma to address the continued human rights and religious liberty violations in Burma. Our delegation included leaders of the Baptist community from Burma in the US who spoke of their first-hand experience of these issues. What was to have been a 60 minute briefing turned into 90 minutes as State Department staff wanted to know more. We heard last week that the State Department did include religious liberty issues in their latest conversation with Burmese officials. The second visit was in response to an invitation to Dr. Syeed of ISNA and me to discuss efforts to ease Muslim-Christian tensions. We were able to speak about our efforts here, the work in Lebanon and the Republic of Georgia, and the recent BWA initiative in Nigeria that involved ABC through Dan Buttry. They wish to invite us back at a later date.

## ABCUSA SPONSORED CONFERENCES

### *The Big One*

The Mission Summit is well underway as you have heard or will hear from Reg Mills and Leo Thorne.

### *Rhythms of the Spirit*

August 5-8, 2013, we will co-sponsor with ABA this conference on spirituality and spiritual practices. Jeff Savage, our chaplain, will be a major contributor along with Betty Wright-Riggins, Renee Colson-Hudson and Brad Berglund. This conference is an experiment in itself, much like the first gathering of ABC theologians was in Puerto Rico. We are aware of the increasing number of American Baptists who are being trained as spiritual directors and of the heightened interest in the classic spiritual disciplines of the Christian church. This conference will test the waters for a focus on worship and spiritual life which is not supported anywhere else in ABC life. **Our board and staff leaders of the Professional Ministry Response Group have asked that this seed of interest be assigned to them for discernment as to whether God is calling us to offer more in this area.**

I have also had some interesting discussions with Palmer faculty about common interests. In our meeting I mentioned the example of our partnerships with ANTS on interfaith dialogue with Muslims, and with Central on ministers from Burma, and I asked them to consider what particular “charism,” or focus they might have which would lead to a partnership with them. In later conversation, their dean returned to this question and as he talked, it became evident that they have a vital interest in spiritual formation. **This wonderfully dovetails with Rhythms of the Spirit. An invitation was extended to them to attend this summer’s conference and for us to explore what partnership in this area might look like.**

I will also just briefly mention that **plans are underway for the second gathering of ABC theologians, for the Orientation to ABC life and now the Ministers Conference.**

### *Conference on Statelessness*

You have copies of articles written about the Conference on Statelessness that we co-sponsored with the World Council of Churches the last part of February in DC. It is not often one has the privilege to support and participate in a groundbreaking event. This conference was such an opportunity. This was the first gathering of church leaders from around the world with representatives from the UN and the US State Department to address this issue together and to ask, “What is the role of the churches in addressing the concern for people and people groups like the Roma in Europe, Haitians in the Caribbean, and the Rohingya of Burma?” I was surprised that these three groups are groups with which we have a connection in ministry. Our work with the Roma in Europe and people of Haitian descent in the Dominican Republic and the Bahamas, as well as our connection with the Rohingya through our advocacy with the State Department about religious liberty issues in Burma, not to mention our long-standing involvement in refugee issues and resettlement, already have involved us to some extent

in these issues. But there has not been a concerted focus on the issue of stateless persons as a separate and distinct issue from the refugee issue. This conference helped set directions for a partnership between the churches, the UNHCR and governmental organizations to address this issue.

## **CONCLUDING REMARKS**

In addition to all this our ongoing work continues with Regional Ministries, Women in Ministry, Transition Ministries, Stewardship and Fundraising, Web Management and News Releases, Biennial, Conference and Meeting support, HR resources, Building Maintenance and Occupant Services, and Financial Services.

Finally, even as we meet, Jeff Woods and Pat Hernandez are on their way to Burma as part of Central Seminary's program for students in Burma and the US. I give thanks that the talents of our staff are being shared world-wide.