

**General Secretary's Update (June-August 2017)**  
**BGM Executive Committee Meeting**  
**September 14-16, 2017**

This has been a very busy summer for ABCUSA/Office of the General Secretary! Our team has made significant progress on several fronts, in response to the mission priority themes outlined in previous General Board meetings: 1) Unify ABC around Core Convictions and Joyful Mission; 2) Strengthen Regions as they Serve Clergy and Churches; 3) Promote the Mission of National Agencies and Partners; 4) Lead into an Era of Church Growth, Evangelism and Creative Service; and 5) Encourage Creative Partnerships.

**Organizing the OGS Team for a Missional Future:** As its administrative responsibilities for other national partners lessens, and in response to the need to provide a compelling narrative for United Mission growth, OGS must quickly reconfigure itself into a nimble and effective missional team. We have made excellent progress on several fronts in this regard:

- 1) Creating a more healthy and faithful team. We have been working diligently to break down silos within OGS, strengthen friendships, share meals, affirm good work and encourage conversation around creative new ideas. SLACK has been an exciting and integral part of our strategy, replacing emails for more user-friendly communication. In just two months, our 37 team members have sent 2,792 messages to one another! These include group as well as individual direct communications.
- 2) Seeking two new Associate General Secretaries to promote the mission priorities. The search is progressing well, with 36 applicants representing a wide variety of ethnic, cultural, gender and regional backgrounds. Eleven candidates have been invited to GotoMeeting introductory interviews scheduled for September 11. Finalist interviews (2-3 candidates per position) are scheduled for October. The goal is to offer formal calls by November and have those chosen to commence their service on January 1, 2018.
- 3) Reorganizing the OGS Team: With the demise of the Computer Center in mid-2018, it is critical that ABCUSA/OGS upgrade its IT, website, social media and communications capabilities. We propose combining communications, ABCIS, MRD and two employees we hope to retain from the CC into a new ABCUSA missional communications team. This summer they have held a retreat and follow-up meetings to work on a new CORE database to enhance our communication with all ABC clergy and churches.
- 4) Promoting Staff: In support of the reorganization, OGS should consider promotions for Bridget Lipin, who should serve as Team Leader for the missional communications team, and Tina Turner, who should serve as United Mission Coordinator.
- 5) Transitions: Marilyn Tyson will retire at the end of 2017. It has been suggested that we recognize her at the November 2017 BGM meeting.

**Revitalizing United Mission for Growth:** This summer, OGS has focused on creating a strategy and new materials in support of United Mission. We believe it is possible to reverse the decades-long decline through creative communication about compelling ministries that are "powered by United Mission."

- 1) Building on exploratory work done prior to June, Bridget, Tina and I have assessed the Mission as a Vehicle materials, and created improvements to make UM promotion more effective, useful and modern. The key consideration is how to create attractive and effective letters, bulletin inserts, email blasts and web articles that include regions as genuine partners in the UM promotion effort and that can be sustained operationally (in terms of production schedule and costs). The Committee will see initial designs (customized for 4 regions) at the September meeting. The ABCUSA website needs a major refresh to support the new missional emphasis we plan to project.
- 2) Who is responsible for United Mission promotion? In addition to the changes above, the ministry responsibilities of the General Secretary, the 3 Associate General Secretaries, and the WIM/Transitional Ministry National Director should expect to devote approximately 25% of their time to UM promotion, through story collection, collaboration with partners, and communications with churches and pastors.
- 3) In most non-profit organizations, board members are expected to both donate and fundraise. I would be interested in the Executive Committee's thoughts on this issue.

**Our Missional Future Requires Stronger ABC Relationships:** ABCUSA is a movement of ministries and regions connected by voluntary covenant, a heritage of core convictions and mission cooperation. In an age of divisiveness, our ties need to be strengthened and nurtured.

- 1) The National Executive Council (NEC) has met twice this summer. After vulnerable and honest conversations, we have agreed to work together to make national leadership gatherings (NEC/NLC) more intentionally focused on producing practical, valuable and tangible outcomes for participants. Conversations need to focus on strategic issues that qualitatively and quantitatively advance all of our ministries, make us better leaders and provide useful take-away wisdom and insights. We need to invite the best experts from varied fields to teach and guide us into a more missional future.
- 2) REMC leaders and I are beginning to talk about how OGS and REMC can work cooperatively. I am most happy that several Executive Ministers are planning to come to the November 2017 BGM meetings and Mission Center ceremony.
- 3) Jeff Woods continues to provide helpful and effective guidance to several regions involved in Executive Minister searches.
- 4) Regions across the country continue to contact us for speaking events, annual sessions and conversations. It is vital that the General Secretary and the Associate General Secretaries be present in a pastoral way in regions – every region, every year.
- 5) When he returns from sabbatical this month, Green Lake director Ben Mott and I will discuss the future of ABCUSA/GLCC relationships.

**Our Biennials Need to Be Reworked to Enhance Our Missional Future:** The 2017 Mission Summit in Portland was a success in many respects, but the attendance reflects a “hard truth” – biennials continue to be less popular, as measured by attendance of non-staff participants. We can no longer ignore the trends we are experiencing, but must instead re-envision and re-birth biennials to make them a compelling event that American Baptists will support with their enthusiastic participation. The NEC made this point quite clearly at its August 28 meeting.

- 1) Annie Marcucci and I recommend that the 2019 event be hosted by the Puerto Rican Baptist Convention, and the 2021 Convention in Hartford be hosted by New England Baptist regions. In between, we recommend that Green Lake host the 40<sup>th</sup> Anniversary Celebration of Women in Ministry, the most important national meeting anticipated for 2020. Green Lake applied to host a biennial, but the NEC does not believe it is a convenient venue.
- 2) The focus and activities must be re-oriented to meet the spiritual and ministry needs of pastors, church leaders and lay people who seek to be serious disciples of Jesus Christ. Unlike our biennials, there are many conferences that consistently attract thousands of participants – many of the American Baptist. The pastors need a “National Learning Academy” in which cutting edge skills and vocational training can be offered; lay leaders need guidance in how to make their churches more healthy, financially strong, and missional; and regional leaders need state of the art organizational leadership development. Furthermore, we should travel to a city to engage it, learn from it, and impact it in a missional way, through the love of Christ. Regions should be invited to participate and contribute in a meaningful way, on a par with national partners. The national partners need to develop creative ways of engaging participants, and turning them into enthusiastic supporters. Traditional business should be kept to a minimum, and divisive issues saved for conversations in other forums.
- 3) Attendance Goals: The 2019 event should be organized to welcome 2,000 participants – not including paid staff. This is what I have heard from others...Low attendance dampens enthusiasm and discourages future participation. Plenary speakers should be selected who have a track record of drawing people. The event has to integrate OTABL in a greater way, and feature family-friendly activities for all ages.

**Our Missional Future Depends on Existing and New Partnerships:** ABCUSA is strengthened by positive ecumenical and mission-based affinity organizational relationships. This summer, I have been in communication with the full range of our traditional ministry partners – Baptist World Alliance, North American Baptist Fellowship, National Council of Churches and World Council of Churches, as well Christian Churches Together, Churches for Middle East Peace, Christian Community Credit Union and American Baptist Foundation. Additionally, I have spent a day with John Upton, Executive Director of the Virginia Baptist General Association and the former President of BWA) and Scott Ridout, President of Converge (formerly Swedish Baptist Convention). In September 2017, I am attending the Baptist New Covenant meeting and am scheduled to provide greetings on behalf of ABCUSA.

Going forward, four new partnerships are offered for discussion and blessing:

- 1) **The National Institute for Civil Discourse (NICD)** is looking for ABCUSA to join other national organizations to be partners in the Initiative to Revive Civility. Cooperative Baptists are considering becoming partners. The Initiative builds upon Standards of Conduct that provide a framework through which leaders, citizens and the media may model and revive a spirit of civility. These Standards ask us all to be respectful of others in speech and behavior, listen fully and seek to understand, take responsibility for

personal behavior and actions, act with integrity, practice non-violence and promote civility in political discourse. See <http://nicd.arizona.edu>.

- 2) The **United States Holocaust Memorial Museum (USHMM)** is our country's official memorial to the Holocaust. The USHMM provides for the documentation, study, and interpretation of Holocaust history. It is dedicated to helping leaders and citizens of the world confront hatred, prevent genocide, promote human dignity, and strengthen democracy. USHMM has offered to provide free specialized training to ABCUSA clergy who wish to help their congregations understand the Holocaust, foster positive ecumenical relations, oppose prejudice (such as anti-Semitism and Islamophobia), and fight for human rights. The proposal involves 2-3 days of workshops for groups of 20-24 clergy and leaders. The DC Baptist Convention has offered to co-host an additional day for ministry discussions in light of their unique setting. We hope to hold the first "retreat" in October/November 2018. See <https://www.ushmm.org>.
- 3) **Fresh Expressions** is an innovative church planting and ministry creation international movement which originated in the United Kingdom's Church of England. See <http://freshexpressions.org.uk>. In the United States, the Virginia Baptist General Association, hosts the national office (<http://freshexpressionsus.org>). ABCNJ has worked with Fresh Expressions, with positive results, for five years. About 10 other ABC regions have expressed interest in partnering with Fresh Expressions. I believe it to be an integral aspect of my hopes for Transformed by the Spirit 2.0.
- 4) **ecoAmerica** has been in conversation with the BGM's Creation Justice Network, and is eager to partner with ABCUSA so that we can encourage our congregations to integrate faith with environmental responsibility. See <https://ecoamerica.org> as well as the religious movement called Blessed Tomorrow: <https://ecoamerica.org/faith/>.

**Topics for Additional Discussion:**

- 1) Transformed by the Spirit
- 2) Development - Fundraising
- 3) The Mission Center Move
- 4) World Relief Committee, OGHS and Disaster Relief

Faithfully submitted,  
Rev. Dr. Lee B. Spitzer, ABCUSA General Secretary  
September 4, 2017