



minister

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A WORD OF INTRODUCTION

By Joe Kutter



Enormous time and energy has been invested in the proposed plan to restructure our denomination. Delegates to the Biennial in Pasadena will be asked to approve the plan.

For this issue of *Minister*, we have asked several individuals to respond to the question, how will this new structure impact ministerial leaders and local ministries? I am grateful to each writer for taking time to reflect on the question from his or her particular perspective. I believe that together, these short articles provide an excellent introduction to the plan and its intended impact.

Years ago, Bob Dylan sang, "the times, they are changing." Times have changed dramatically since 1972 when the current denominational structure was adopted. Our culture has required

us to choose between change and the slow death of irrelevancy. We have been required to learn new things and to do old things in new ways in order to minister effectively. It isn't surprising that the denomination which relies on changing congregations in a changing environment will be required to change.

The question is not, shall we change? The question is, are we making the right changes? This edition of *Minister* is intended to help you to describe the proposed changes to your local constituencies and to decide for yourself if this is the right way to go.

Grace and Peace,
 Dr. Joe Kutter Acting Executive Director
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How Much Change Can Structural Change Produce?

By Liliana Da Valle



At our 2009 Biennial in Pasadena, CA, the American Baptist family will face the task of voting for a proposed new structure that intends to bring change on different fronts. After several years of dedicated effort on the part of the General Executive Council (GEC), a writing team, a transitional team, and the General Board we have finally arrived at a place of change that is comfortable enough for everyone to move forward and introduce it to all our constituents.

Change is a funny thing: on the one hand we cannot escape it; on the other we always resist it. This particular change was motivated by the desire to streamline our operation as a denomination with the goal of reducing costs, plus the

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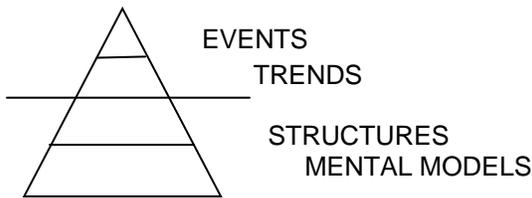
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need to find a way to overcome the theological and ethical differences that polarized us and left us bleeding.

A Word About Change

There are different levels of change as popularized by Peter Senge in his book *The Fifth Discipline* (Doubleday Business-Oct 1, 1994). The depth of change is directly proportional to the length of time that it takes to produce it.

Consider the following diagram:



EVENTS are activities that take place at one point in time. A workshop that lasts one hour or two, a homecoming that takes place during a weekend, or even a revival that stretches for a whole week are just examples of events. Many of our churches think that events can produce real change, but more often than not that's not the case. Events effect very little change in the life of an organization.

TRENDS, on the other hand, are more extended time-wise. Trends may last three months or three years, but the point is that they are seasonal and over before we know it. Trends produce short-lived change in an organization. For example, a discipleship program may last three months and may change the life of the congregation for some time. But inevitably, things resort back to usual.

If you imagine the pyramid to be an iceberg, the line in the middle is equivalent to sea level. Both events and trends are very noticeable and exciting. Under the line, though, we find the types of change that produce long-lasting results.

STRUCTURES change the whole operation of an organization by lending a new framework to do business. Typically, institutions change their structures every fifteen to eighteen years.

Finally, we find MENTAL MODELS. These are the guiding paradigms by which the whole organization lives and subsists for generations. A

change of mental models is revolutionary, and often times it just happens, perhaps as a result of God bursting into human history.

As we move into post-modernity, many mental models are changing even when we don't intend it. I believe this is the case with the structural change of the American Baptist Churches USA. There are in particular two changes that will force us to think differently, and we'll have to retrain our minds to do that.

Main Changes

One of the most remarkable changes in the ABCUSA's new structure is the shift from a legislative emphasis to a missional one, leaving the adoption of positions and resolutions to be decided by local churches at the regional level. Therefore, when we meet together as a denomination at our Biennials, we will sit at the Missional Table to discuss issues pertaining to our common mission and ministry in our own communities and around the world.

This is truly a return to our origins as a Baptist Missionary Society. Historically, local churches realized they could not individually reach out the world with the gospel, so they came together with the objective of multiplying their resources by joining in the missional venture. Moreover, staying away from legislating about issues lifts up the Baptist principles of freedom of conscience and freedom of the church. (*The Baptist Identity: Four Fragile Freedoms* by Walter B. Shurden, Smyth & Helwys Publishing-Aug 1997).

The second important change proposed by the new structure is to morph into a federation model of relating, where the national boards will be interrelated but not interlocking. The number of members of each Board (National Ministries and International Ministries) will be reduced and they will be exclusively members of their respective Board, and not members of the General Board also. This will give them autonomy and freedom to conduct their business without being tied to the meeting schedule of the General Board, or having to render double duty by serving on both the General Board and their own.

As I said before, I believe these two changes will force us to think differently, especially in relation to issues of representation and identity. For a

number of years we've been accustomed to lifting up issues that, we believed, molded our identity as a denominational family. Even having a minority report was a part of such identification.

As we have been unable to reach agreement on issues in recent years, we have seen our identity threatened and our community jeopardized by division. In the future, if this new structure gains the support of our constituents, our communal identity as a Baptist body will be defined by the missions we carry on together. Likewise, the federation model will help our national boards to be defined by their focus on mission rather than by their membership on the General Board.

How Does the New Structure Impact Me?

No longer having Statements of Concern at the national level will place the burden on us to initiate them at the local and regional levels. Most regions have abandoned the practice either by decision or by default. Some think it's too divisive, others just don't have any energy left for it. In the new structure we will have to assume the responsibility for stating concerns, adopting positions, and defining issues the Baptist way, creating accountability systems for ourselves.

A very practical difference we will experience is in the representation system. Each of the regions will have only one representative to the Board of General Ministries. In addition, however, each region will nominate five such representatives; their names will go to the Leadership Pool from which the Nominating Committee will choose the candidates to present at the Biennial. In nominating the five candidates to the Leadership Pool, each region will try its best to offer diversity in terms of urban, suburban, rural; large, small, and mega-church; ethnicity; race; gender; age; geography; language; culture; clergy/lay; physical ability; and economic class.

The voice of the local church will be heard mostly at the Mission Summit that will take place during each Biennial.

The goal of the Mission Summit is to discern and articulate broad priorities for American Baptists for the upcoming biennium and beyond. The deliberations of the Mission Summit shall include a consideration of implications for the ministry of the local church. (Proposed Bylaws)

Finally, this new model will touch all of us financially. The new Board of General Ministries will be considerably smaller, and the national boards will pay for themselves. All this will result in savings of approximately 39% over the current costs.

All in all I'm excited about these changes and I believe they'll be very positive. It will take us some time to get used to them, but in the end we'll be stronger in our mission, though looser in those things that have kept us locked in for so long.

Dr. Liliana Da Valle is Executive Minister of American Baptist Churches of Rhode Island.

Impact on Congregational Life

By Roy Medley



Joe Kutter has asked me, "What difference will the new structure make in the relationship between OGS or the General Secretary and local ministerial leaders and congregations — and more generally, how might the new structure impact congregational life?" Let me begin by responding to the more specific portion of the question.

The Board of General Ministries will be able to focus more sharply than could the General Board on the core functions that the Office of the General Secretary is charged to fulfill. Predominant among those functions is a focus on ministerial leadership of the denomination, because OGS has lodged with it several of the ministries and functions that relate directly to the health of clergy and congregations.

Among them are:

1. The task force that succeeded the Ministerial Leadership Commission, which brings together representatives from churches, seminaries, centers for ministry, regions and national ministries to discuss denomination-wide concerns for ministerial leadership;
2. Women in Ministry; The database for the professional registry and congregational statistics in American Baptist Churches Information System;

3. Stewardship development;
4. Regional ministries; and
5. The relationship with Administrative Ministry Organizations, which include the Ministers Council and Interim Ministries.

As the Office of the General Secretary looks to the future, we are already discussing how to more sharply focus on the equipping of ministers to be servant-leaders of communities of disciples who serve as the hands and feet of Christ. We see this as consistent with the pastoral nature of the ministry of the General Secretary and the charge of OGS to provide professional leadership within the denomination.

OGS's goal, in cooperation with ABC mission partners, will be to connect with and provide resources for ministerial leaders in their call to lead and serve the dynamic entities we call congregations or, for those in specialized ministry, to be the expression of their mission in the world. To that end we are at work to launch one pilot effort with a region later this year.

In preparation we have asked the question of each ministry area in OGS, "Out of your area of responsibility, what can you offer that would enhance ministerial leadership?" Regional Ministries staff has been integrally involved in much of the Lilly-sponsored research concerning life in US congregations. And through various ecumenical stewardship resource groups, we have at our disposal many resources for growing faithful, generous disciples.

We want those learnings and resources to be widely known among our clergy. But we have not stopped there. The Treasurer's Office and Human Resources have been asked that question, too, as we strive to share learnings and practices from several different disciplines. We know that ministerial leadership today requires competence in a wide variety of areas.

The ongoing formation of disciples (including ministerial leaders) is critical to the life of the church, and in contemporary America, to the renewal of congregations and effective witness in ministry and mission. Discipling is broader than Christian education, though that is an important part. It is life formation which is shaped not only in the learning environment but also in the practices of the church and the individual.

As Brian McClaren has noted, discipleship is not only about practicing our faith but also "faithing" our practices. It is the outgrowth of living ac-

ording to our "alternative script" – Bruggeman's characterization of scripture. So, we hope that our focus will be broader than techniques alone – though sharing of best practices of ministry is important to us all. We will also touch on the heart of our life in Christ as we seek to foster robust spirituality that is the fruit of being centered in Christ.

Partnership with the Ministers Council is critical to our efforts. That partnership has already produced the biennial minister's conferences that we began in 2004 and that will continue with "Together in the Lord" in January 2010. But I look forward to our collaboration expanding beyond that effort.

I want us to build upon the Lilly and ecumenical resources we have and the track record of the Ministers Council in innovative efforts such as Together In Ministry. I want us to utilize a collaborative, interactive model in which ministers are not seen as passive recipients of formulas or prescriptions that will magically cure our problems. The life of the world, the church and the minister are far too complex to be accommodated by neat and tidy recipes for success in ministry and mission. Any efforts on our part must also include deep and sensitive listening and mutual learning as respected partners in ministry.

My personal commitment to being present with and among our ministry leaders, congregations and institutions continues. I value the opportunity to be present with our churches, pastors, chaplains, seminary professors, pastoral counselors and missionaries as we each fulfill the call to ministry entrusted to us. It keeps me in touch with the realities of ministry, the needs of the church, and the national and world contexts in which we are involved in mission.

The prayer summits I led several years ago across the country were rich experiences of connection. My preaching and speaking engagements with local churches or regions are important to me and those will continue. We have also created a blog that I regularly send out as a more informal means of communication, and I continue to look for other methods that keep me connected with ministerial leaders. For example, I was grateful for the invitation to serve as a "chaplain" at the 2008 Ministers Council Senate.

Now let me speak more to the general part of the question. One of the most promising aspects of the proposed new structure is the introduction of

the Mission Table. This places a missional engine at the heart of ABC life.

Using input from the Biennial Mission Summit and its participating groups, those who gather there — and local churches have a key voice at the table — will help identify mission priorities and create networks among the mission partners for achieving those priorities. Mission partners will include the Ministers Council, American Baptist Women's Ministries, and the seminaries and colleges, as well as the national boards and regions.

The charge to this table is to be a missional "think tank" for the denomination. This will be one of the most experimental parts of the new structure and, as such, I believe it holds much promise for us. It captures the tremendous energy for mission resident in ABC life. It makes the question, "How shall we be the hands and feet of Christ in the world?" the driving force of our life.

In just the past couple of weeks I was reminded of the vibrant pulse of mission that has run through the ABC as I visited Christian Centers in Pittsburgh and Chicago. There I reflected on the role of the Baptist Missionary Training School, mused about the theological institutions we have created, thought about the thousands of congregations we have planted across America, and considered the countless cultures overseas with whom we have shared the gospel. How I pray for a losing of that Spirit again among us, and I believe the Mission Table will be an important instrument in that effort.

To prevent the Mission Table from being hijacked by the latest and hottest issue within the denomination as the General Board often was, it was not designed to be a governance body. It is a forward looking, learning, networking, evaluating body whose sole purpose and mandate is the life and mission of the church. It will not speak for anyone; instead it will be a table where we can speak with every one of our mission partners.

The Ministers Council will also be represented in other key arenas, including the National Leadership Council and the National Nominating Committee. The new structure is committed to enhancing the voices of churches and local leaders in our denominational life.

The program boards will achieve a somewhat greater amount of autonomy and the ability to focus on their charter purposes in this structure. One key to that is the ability to recruit board members with the particular skills that their board might need at any given time.

This is in line with their nature as modalities — mission agencies of the church — whereas the Board of General Ministries will have members nominated by every region as an expression of its function as a modality representing and acting for the life of the denomination as a whole. This will be the first time since the '70s that any of the national boards have had directors who focused primarily on the functions of that board, including General Ministries.

We are clear that what we are presenting to the Pasadena Biennial delegates is a living document that will continue to morph and mature. It will require adjustments, additions, and even, in some instances, the recognition that something is not working. What I hope all will see is that there is no change in our commitment to the mission statement adopted by the General Board in June 2005, and summarized in our focus statement:

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.

Dr. A. Roy Medley is General Secretary of American Baptist Churches USA.

Impact 2010

*By Aidsand F.
Wright-Riggins III*



I applaud the direction of our denomination as ABCUSA explores new ways of creating community, forging identity and engaging in mission in 2010 and beyond. I believe that the proposed structural changes will allow us to do these things more effectively and efficiently. My hope is that the changes, if approved, will lead to increased partnership and participation between the local church and its leadership with the various national mission entities. While our current

structure served us well in the 70s and 80s, by the time the 1990s rolled around, it became time-worn.

Our current structure is a child of the waning days of Christendom in America, designed primarily for legislation and regulation while affirming the fundamental values of representation and diversity. At one time, the denomination wanted to speak with a single voice on national and international issues of importance. At one time, our denomination was moving towards a single standard when it came to things like ordination, educational requirements and commissioning. The days of regulating local churches and regions on these matters are long gone.

The best thing about our current structure has been the representative process and commitment to racial-ethnic diversity and gender inclusiveness. For almost two score years, those commitments have been effective in changing and growing our denomination in such a way that ABCUSA is one of the most racially diverse and gender inclusive denominations in mainline Protestantism. American Baptists are healthily represented at the General Board table by a balance of whites and people of color, men and women, clergy and lay, and a balanced geographic distribution.

One flaw in our current structure is the overlapping of Board structures where the same group of people wear a multiplicity of fiduciary hats. Our current structure dictates that the Boards of International Ministries and National Ministries elect their Board of Directors only and exclusively from among people who sit as directors of the General Board of ABCUSA. This means that a director on the General Board also serves as a director on either the Board of National Ministries or the Board of International Ministries.

In most cases, these same directors also serve as directors on their Regional Boards. Therefore, a "Representative" is likely to be a director of his or her Regional Board, the General Board, and one of the Mission Boards. As though this were not enough responsibility for one person, our current structure also calls for persons sitting as a Director on one Mission Board to serve as a member of the other Mission Board. Our current structure wears out good people with endless meetings, competing commitments, and confusing bureaucracies.

Our current structure makes it particularly difficult to recruit and retain pastors to serve as directors on a multiplicity of denominational boards. Besides serving their churches, most of the pastors I know have time for perhaps only one other really big thing to engage in as an expression of their ministries (such as community engagement, politics, education, etc.). It is the rare pastor who has both the time and the interest to serve concurrently on three different denominational boards. If that pastor serves with distinction on any of the three boards he or she is a part of, the chances are that he or she will become part of an executive committee, special task force or commission.

One of the positive impacts of the proposed new structure is the de-coupling of our board structures, which would allow each board to recruit board members who are not required to wear other denominational hats. I believe that this is really significant when it comes to clergy leadership at the denominational level. The pool of clergy leadership willing and able to offer excellent skills and direction to a single board will only expand in our new structure.

This will be a good thing for pastors serving as directors and the churches they serve going forward. In the future, seldom will we have the need for a "meetings week" where a pastor would have to be absent from the pulpit on Sunday morning in order to accommodate the denomination's need to fit everything in.

Our commitment to diversity and our current representative process has made ABCUSA a very big tent theologically, politically and culturally. That is a good thing. For the last twenty years, however, we have found it incredibly difficult to speak with one voice or to discern the mind of Christ on several issues of importance. We have become adamant in our perspective that our denomination is the "American Baptist Churches" and not the "American Baptist Church."

Increasingly, local churches and regions do not feel that the "denomination" speaks for them. While I am not sure if our current amalgamation of societies, associations and regions doing ministry as the American Baptist Churches USA is a denomination in the truest sense of the word, I am pretty clear that while every entity (church, region, society, etc.) refuses to have its voice muffled, no entity these days is completely comfortable with having another speak for it.

The proposed new structure provides a way for each of the partners in our system, from the local church to the Board of General Ministries, to speak its own truth without having to affirm continuity or compliance with the truth of others, nor engaging our denomination in endless theological and cultural battles. Positively, this will increase our capacity to form communities of learning and practice addressing our fundamental needs for identity and community.

From where I sit as Executive Director of the American Baptist Home Mission Societies (National Ministries), the proposed new structure will free our denomination up to do what it does best, to engage in mission and to partner with each other to make mission happen.

For the last twenty years a large number of pastors and churches disengaged from ABCUSA as culture wars and structural battles became the order of the day. I am proud of the work of my colleagues on the General Board and General Executive Council who for the last couple of years have sought to get back to the business of making the main thing the main thing.

For the Home Mission Societies, that means addressing mission in America. I believe that in our new setting, with a board free to do its business and speak its truth, we will find committed leaders to direct us, and willing and prayerful churches and individuals to join us, in that enterprise. The decisions that we make this year will have a deep impact on what we are all able to do together in 2010 and beyond.

Dr. Aidsand F. Wright-Riggins III is the Executive Director of the Board of National Ministries.

<p>Impact on International Ministries <i>By Reid S. Trulson</i></p>	
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We are on the cusp of change. Our present denominational structure is about three and a half decades old, and the delegates to the June, 2009 Biennial will be considering a proposal for organizational change. In truth, this is not unusual within American Baptist life. Our past shows that we and the generations before us have lived with recurring cycles of change.

We Baptists in America first came together on a national scale to do mission in 1814, when our predecessors formed The General Missionary Convention of the Baptist Denomination in the United States of America for Foreign Mission (popularly known as the “Triennial Convention”). We had walked together in that pattern for only three decades before we began reconfiguring our structure. This began a pattern of significant organizational change that would repeat itself within American Baptist life every thirty years or so (1814, 1844-5, 1871-74, 1907, 1934-47, 1972, and 2009).

It is reasonable to conclude that we tend to reshape our organizational life on a *generational cycle*. If this conclusion is accurate, then the current move toward structural change is occurring true to form. At best, these changes can help each generation of American Baptists reorganize for mission in ways that are appropriate for *their* particular cultural context. This, in fact, is good mission practice.

The intent of the denominational restructuring proposal is to reshape us into a “federation of missional agencies.” I believe a change of that nature can have positive consequences for our life as American Baptists, and will likewise be constructive for the particular mission of International Ministries.

My positive assessment of the restructuring proposal is rooted in the important distinction between *modalities* and *sodalities*. Modalities are entities whose concern is for the welfare of an entire group. People may be “born into” a modality. Sodalities, on the other hand, are entities within or alongside modalities that have a more narrowly defined purpose.

People must intentionally choose to become part of a sodality. For example, the Roman Catholic Church is a modality, while the Jesuits, Franciscans and other contemplative and mission orders within Catholicism are sodalities. On the community level a local church is a modality, while the church’s choir, Sunday School, mission committee, usher board, and so on are sodalities.

When a sodality begins to take on the broadly based functions of a modality, it loses its singular focus and its effectiveness in accomplishing its original task. The unintended consequences of

expecting a sodality to function as a modality were amply demonstrated early in the life of International Ministries.

As noted earlier, the General Missionary Convention (now incorporated as the American Baptist Foreign Mission Society, and since 1972 doing business as the Board of International Ministries) was formed as a sodality for the singular purpose of foreign mission. At the start, however, some leaders believed that this new entity should also take on responsibility for pastoral training, frontier evangelism, literature production and other common interests of the local churches.

The experience of the next decade, however, proved that addressing the broad needs of the whole Baptist movement increasingly compromised the organization's ability to accomplish its primary function. Therefore in 1826 the organization returned to its original focused purpose of cross-cultural mission to make disciples outside of the United States. New sodalities were then created to fulfill other focused purposes: the Baptist General Tract Society (1824), the American Baptist Home Mission Society (1832), the American Baptist Historical Society (1853), and so forth.

Our present denominational structure is configured as an interlocking directorate that requires the International Ministries Board of Directors to attend to broad and varied denomination-wide functions as well as to the unique needs of international, cross-cultural mission. In effect, the present structure has been a twentieth century version of that nineteenth century experiment (1817-1826) which sought to fulfill sodality and modality functions at one and the same time.

A federation will move us from that interlocking directorate into an inter-relating structure, a "third way" that recognizes and builds on the strengths of both our modality and our sodalities.

International Ministries is a sodality whose focused mission is to cross cultural boundaries around the world, making disciples of Jesus Christ. We understand disciple-making to mean helping people to *come* to faith in Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior, to *grow* in that relationship with Jesus, and in so doing, to *change* the world through the power and working of God's Spirit.

We seek to fulfill this mission by partnering with the body of Christ in the countries of our service while reaching out to meet human needs. And, we seek to guide our actions based on our core values of faithfulness, integrity, servanthood and humility.

We recognize that God calls some men and women to ministry within their own context in the United States and Puerto Rico, while others are called to cross into different cultures to serve. The federation model can enable International Ministries to shape its board with leaders who have a committed passion for international mission as well as needed cross-cultural knowledge, relationships, and skill-sets. Its smaller size can facilitate the ability to learn from and to incorporate best practices of non-profit boards.

The United States and Puerto Rico are shaped by many distinctive cultures -- ethnic, linguistic, regional, generational, religious, and so forth -- yet these cultures also share *macro-cultural*, or general, overall characteristics. We now understand that western macro-culture has become increasingly post-modern and post-Christendom. While we may not yet fully understand this major cultural shift away from modernity and Christendom, several features seem now to be fairly evident:

- People today insist on making choices for themselves, rather than accepting choices made for them by authoritative people or institutions.
- The core elements of the Christian story are no longer common knowledge within society.
- Our churches are more at the margins of society than at the center.
- People have less loyalty to inherited relationships and give themselves instead to causes that they themselves have chosen and in which they can meaningfully participate.
- Change is rapid and accelerating.
- People are participating more readily in causes and movements than in institutions.

Reshaping ourselves as a "federation" can help us as we continue to become a more nimble entity, with the flexibility to experiment and the ability to adapt and offer more choices for participation in global mission. Even within the constraints of our existing structure, International Ministries has been acting to reshape itself in ways that are an appropriate fit for our 21st century cultural context.

World Mission Conferences have become accessible to new constituencies by being offered in a weekend format at locations across the nation. Missionary Partnership Teams are now giving more than 400 people a purposeful ministry to specific missionaries. The Missionary Partnership Networks that the teams help to build and coordinate are enabling individuals and local churches to construct meaningful relationships and participate with missionaries. International Ministries is offering opportunities and services to some 2,500 short-term missionaries each year through VIGM—Volunteers In Global Mission. And International Ministries continues to develop its interactive website, providing news, information and opportunities for involvement on an ever increasing scale.

Post-modern promotion of individualism and self-sufficiency leaves many with a yearning for community. Thus there is a continuing role for our American Baptist general body (modality) that facilitates identity and community based on our shared values. Because people seek choices, our life together should promote the emergence of more, rather than fewer, American Baptist options. This intentional offering of choices is consistent with being a missional movement.

No organizational structure is perfect. The restructuring proposal being presented to the Biennial delegates likewise is not perfect. But in my view, it reflects good mission practice and will substantially advance the effectiveness of International Ministries to fulfill our mission of glorifying God in all the earth, by crossing cultural boundaries to make disciples of Jesus Christ.

Dr. Reid S. Trulson is Executive Director of the Board of International Ministries.

<p>ABCUSA Reorganization Report</p>	
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In November 2008, the General Board of ABCUSA endorsed a new set of Bylaws for the American Baptist Churches USA. This was a necessary step so it could come before the 2009 Biennial in Pasadena for consideration. If adopted, the changes would take effect in January 2010.

This was the culmination of three years of work. Actually, it is much longer than three years because several previous attempts at reorganization never got past the General Board. The plan finally endorsed by the General Board is radically different from the previous attempts at reorganization. It essentially undoes the defining work of the Study Commission on Denominational Structure (SCODS) and the Study Commission on Relationships (SCOR). SCODS and SCOR created the denomination that most of us know as ABCUSA.

In order to understand the reorganization plan that will be considered at the 2009 Biennial, it is probably helpful to consider the denomination that SCODS and SCOR created.

Are We a "Denomination" or Not?

A dear colleague of mine often says "American Baptists are not a denomination." How can she say that?

Prior to the 20th Century there was no nationwide organization that anyone could point to and say "They are American Baptists." Baptists have been here since the earliest days of the Republic, and played an important role in establishing the principle of religious freedom for our fledgling democracy. But Baptist churches pretty much acted independently or came together for limited and focused purposes.

Baptist churches formed "associations" very early in American life (the Philadelphia Baptist Association in 1707 was the first). Those early associations declared several purposes: (a) fellowship and mutual encouragement, (b) cooperation in ordination through training and the assessment of candidate character, (c) mediation of internal church disputes, (d) assurance of sound theology and doctrine, (e) addressing moral issues, and (f) practicing church discipline.

Some of these associations coalesced to form state "conventions." At the same time, the missionary fervor of the late 18th and early 19th centuries resulted in several co-existing special focus societies based on individual (not congregational) membership.

The Triennial Convention, more properly known as the General Missionary Convention of the Baptist Denomination in the United States for

Foreign Missions, was formed at Philadelphia in 1814. Early debates in the Triennial Convention shaped not only its future, but the future of Baptists in America. Some wanted the Convention to have an expansive role, working not only in foreign missions but also home missions and publication. Others wanted the Convention to focus exclusively on foreign work. Some (mostly in the South) wanted the Convention to be composed of congregations, and thereby integral with churches. Others wanted the Convention to remain a society of individual membership. Eventually, at a meeting in Boston in 1826, the Convention decided to focus on foreign work, and remain a society of individuals unrelated to congregations.

The Tract Society was created in 1824 for the purpose of publishing and distributing evangelistic tracts. In 1840 it was reorganized as the American Baptist Publication and Sunday School Society. It was a "Bible Society, Book Concern, Tract Society, Colporteur Agency, and Sunday School Union." The Publication Society enjoyed broad support from Baptists in both the North and the South.

The American Baptist Home Mission Society was formed in 1832 in New York to assume the role of mission work within the United States, which had been discontinued by the Triennial Convention (1826). The constitution said that "the great object of this Society shall be to promote the preaching of the gospel in North America." In contrast to the Tract Society (and later the Publication Society), Baptists in the South were very little involved with the Home Mission Society. The cool reception in the South may have been due to resentment of the Society's domination (perceived?) by New England Baptists as much as anything. These were all independent organizations, whose membership often overlapped.

Like every other religious group in the United States, Baptists were not immune to the regional, cultural, social, economic, and political upheaval that would finally erupt in gunfire at Fort Sumter in 1861. Baptist battles predated the Civil War, but reflected the same forces that were at work in society. The Triennial Convention, after years of debate and avoidance, finally refused to appoint slaveholding missionaries in 1845. This may have been a contrived test case, but it served the purpose.

Offended Baptists, primarily in the South, left the Triennial Convention (not the Publication Society!) to create the Southern Baptist Convention—a much more cohesive and comprehensive organization, which is what they had wanted from the very beginning. Like the Civil War, which would come in another 15 years there were many reasons the Southerners left. For some slavery truly was the point, for many others congregational independence had been violated, for others freedom from the "tyranny" of New England Baptists was primary, and others wanted a different kind of organization.

The lasting effect was the regionalization of Baptists in the United States, essentially into those loose societies, associations, and conventions in the North and the singular, overarching Southern Baptist Convention in the South. Baptists in the South would resist forming their own publication society (the Sunday School Board) until 1891. Until then they happily continued to use American Baptist Publication Society resources. This pattern of regionalization would persist for the next 100 years.

In the North, independent Baptist societies and special interest groups multiplied through the latter half of the 19th Century. But growth for independent societies with no unified or coordinated purpose, competing for finances and attention, became increasingly problematic. By the close of the 19th Century, the Publication Society was in serious financial difficulty. After false starts and failing efforts, a petition signed by less than 200 powerful Baptist leaders in 1906 demanded a unified meeting of the societies in Washington DC for the express purpose of creating a national body.

A Denomination Emerges

In the midst of power politics and uncivil meetings, the Northern Baptist Convention (NBC) was ultimately birthed. While action began at the 1907 meeting, the Convention was not actually incorporated until 1910. The name would be changed to the "American Baptist Convention" in 1950, presumably as a pre-emptive move against the Southern Baptist Convention. Although it was a "convention" in name, it was not at all like the Southern Baptist Convention. It retained its fundamental societal character.

In 1910 there were five cooperating societies held together contractually with the Northern Baptist Convention. The state conventions became affiliating organizations. All retained their status as independent corporations with their own governing boards. The existing Executive Committee was transformed into a General Council of less than 50, and was vested with all the authority of the Convention (which was not much) between sessions. The annual Convention meeting was the only representative body.

The stated reasons for the creation of the NBC were:

1. To provide unity and cooperation in worldwide evangelistic efforts,
2. To offer theologically-informed public witness on issues of social and denominational concern, and
3. To promote a distinct national identity.

While all three points are worthy of elaboration, the third underscores that a national identity was lacking (not surprising considering our history to this point), and that such a national identity was worth promoting.

The move was not universally applauded. Some feared the specter of “popery.” Others thought it usurped the mission and evangelistic tasks of congregations. Still others simply preferred the freedom of choice afforded by the societal approach which had existed up to this point. In many ways the debate was the same as the Triennial Convention in Boston in 1826.

The NBC was only marginally effective at best. The creation of the Convention raised expectations that, to a large extent, it was not structured to deliver. Societies continued to operate independently. Social and theological rifts in America took their toll on the Convention. Financial difficulties continued. Frustrations mounted. In an article published in 1952 (not even 50 years after the creation of the Convention), William Lippard declared the NBC a “failure.”

While dissatisfaction persisted, there were sporadic attempts at organizational changes—some modest, others dramatic. Finally, a Study Commission on Denominational Structure (SCODS) was appointed in Boston (1968). The Commission documented many of the concerns across the denomination. The final proposal was pre-

sented and accepted at the Convention in Denver (1972). Because this resulted in a radically different organization, there was a planned follow-up study. This group, the Study Commission on Relationships (SCOR) was appointed in 1972 and reported in 1976. At the meeting in San Diego (1977) a new set of Bylaws was adopted. This is essentially the organization we live with today:

- Our name was changed to “American Baptist Churches USA” (ABCUSA).
- The annual convention meeting was abandoned for a Biennial meeting that retained very little of the legislative/policy power of the Convention (this was transferred to the newly formed “General Board”).
- The two constituencies of ABCUSA were identified: local congregations and covenanting regional organizations (state conventions). This often overlooked action was significant given our history.
- Written covenants between the disparate corporations became the basis of our life together in a document called the “Covenant of Relationships.”
- The General Board was created as a proportionately representative body with legislatively established and maintained diversity. This body functioned as the legal Board of Directors for the corporation known as ABCUSA, but was forbidden to create or implement programming on its own. That function was reserved for the “national program boards.”
- The historic societies were now identified as the Board of Educational Ministries (BEM), the Board of National Ministries (BNM), and the Board of International Ministries (BIM). The Ministers and Missionaries Benefit Board (MMBB) had already been created as a denominational board in 1911. Thus, MMBB was different from the other mission societies in its origin and legal structure from the very beginning.
- While the historic societies remained distinct legal entities, these boards were ostensibly under the control of the General Board. Society membership was defined as the elected representatives on the General Board. Further, there was interlocking membership between the program boards and the General Board. General Board approval was required to hire Executive Directors, but the General Board ultimately could not hold them accountable. This interlocking structure was a creative

way to bring the societies together while protecting their legal identity, but it proved to be very problematic. Board members frequently complained of confusion over roles and conflicts of interest. It also proved very difficult for the General Board to create broad goals and hold the program boards accountable for their implementation.

- The position of “General Secretary” was intended to become “the focal point of the structure” built around a single denominational staff, including the directors of the historic societies as “Associate General Secretaries.” This person served — and serves now — as the CEO of the corporation known as ABCUSA and had a staff identified collectively as the Office of the General Secretary. The General Secretary and staff were employed by and accountable to the General Board. The plan created high expectations of the General Secretary in terms of denominational leadership and coordination, but structurally made effective leadership impossible. From the very beginning, General Secretaries struggled with implementing denomination-wide vision and goals while working with legally-independent program boards led by equally independent Executive Directors. Further, General Secretaries were frustrated by working with a representative General Board which was internally divided by loyalties and passions.
- Special interest ministries and programs were gathered under the ill-defined and unregulated umbrella of “Administratively Related Organizations” (ARO). This included eleven entities that were “too dissimilar to constitute an operationally definable set.”

Despite the mistakes and some questionable decisions, two moves in the work of SCOR/SCODS qualify as inspired. The first was to define the membership of the historic mission societies as members of the General Board, who were the elected representatives of the churches. This drew a clear line of accountability to the churches that comprised ABCUSA for the first time. Most people forget that before this the societies were composed of individuals, with no direct accountability to churches, and that the boards were self-sustaining.

The second inspired move was to use “covenant” as the glue to hold 35+ autonomous and semi-independent groups together. This was a biblically-based framework which reso-

nated with most American Baptists, and allowed us to be together in a profound way without discounting congregational independence.

Today we have a generation of American Baptists who have known nothing else, and do not realize how American Baptist identity as a denomination was created in this era for the first time. Three things in particular shaped the emergence of a national identity for American Baptists.

The number one success story of this era was United Mission. This shared funding program, as much as anything, created the ABCUSA identity that matured through the 70s and 80s. At the same time, the success of United Mission set the stage for the financial crisis that emerged as we moved from the 20th to the 21st century. United Mission capitalized on our passion for international missions. But other components of American Baptist life came to depend on United Mission. Most regions neglected teaching, reporting, and creating passion for their own mission and ministry because they “rode the coattails” of International Ministries. At the same time, many did not recognize that regions were often functioning as “mini-mission societies” whose visible role was to support the work of International Ministries.

Among those participants in American Baptist life with near-exclusive dependence on United Mission funding was the General Board and all its work through the Office of the General Secretary. Consequently, the General Board became very vulnerable as the costs of maintaining an adequately representative system and a general staff rose at the same time as significant numbers of pastors and churches increasingly devalued, and even resented, the work of the General Board.

In addition to United Mission, the adoption of policy statements and resolutions by the General Board contributed significantly to a national denominational identity. Taken as a whole, these statements presented ABC identity as a biblically-oriented people, striving to hold both the personal and social demands of the gospel together. However, these statements became a source of dissension as we came to the close of the 20th century. Repeated reductions in the size of the General Board (in response to financial pressures) resulted in a board that was less

and less representative of the constituent churches. This, coupled with a changing political climate, an ethos of institutional mistrust, and the growing social fragmentation resulting from tribalization, contributed to a nagging dissatisfaction with both the process and practice of policy statements. Further, the inability to implement such statements led some to question their value, especially when seen alongside the dissension that accompanied them. The irony is that the same practice which contributed so greatly to establishing an American Baptist identity became a significant source of dissension and dissatisfaction.

Lastly, this era witnessed an unparalleled explosion of ethnic diversity in the denomination. As we entered the 21st century, we found ourselves to be the only denomination in the United States without an ethnic majority. While this cannot be entirely attributed to the structural design envisioned by SCODS/SCOR, it is true that there were organizational decisions, practices and policies that all led to this wonderful distinctive of American Baptist identity.

We are, however, confronted with the challenge of moving on to the next level. The simplistic philosophies, strategies, and tools for dealing with ethnic diversity that were formulated in the 60s do not seem adequate for the complex task of creating bona fide community life in the multicultural setting that confronts us today.

It can be said that the work of SCODS/SCOR resulted in a national denominational identity for American Baptists. The documents written by these commissions make it clear that they rightly recognized they were proposing a "significant change from a collection of societies to a national organization." This was a remarkable achievement.

Today it seems to me a miracle that the plan was adopted. Still the rhetoric promised much more than the structure was able to deliver. SCODS/SCOR was seeking a structure to "carry out programs in terms of comprehensive goals and objectives." But they underestimated barriers and overestimated cooperation.

Growing Dissatisfaction and Crisis

As in the case of the NBC, the creation of ABC-USA brought mixed responses. There were unrealistic expectations and fears. Many old con-

cerns continued; new ones appeared. Finally, a negative feasibility study for a denomination-wide financial campaign triggered action by the General Board.

The Review Commission on Denominational Structure and Process was created by the board in 1997. It was charged to "study, assess, and make recommendations with respect to the present and future structure and process of the denomination."

The Commission engaged an independent organization to conduct a denomination-wide survey. From that survey, the Commission summarized several issues that would inform their thoughts about organization. They considered four options:

1. Maintain the *status quo*,
2. Return to the societal model,
3. Modify the present structure, or
4. Design a unified mission organization.

The Commission pursued the fourth option: merging the existing national corporations into one corporation with a single board. The proposal failed, primarily because of the concerns of national staff and the historic mission societies over the loss of independence and identity. Incidentally, these were the same reasons a similar proposal failed in 1908.

However, the issues that led to the Review Commission in the first place persisted and were complicated by the looming demise of BEM. A second study group was formed in 2001.

It reported that uncertain and troubled relationships seemed to be a root issue in the denomination. After a lot of work involving professional consultants and facilitators, the study group presented a modest proposal to the General Board in 2002. In other words, the study group took approach 3 that had been considered and rejected by the Review Commission.

Unfortunately, the same dynamics that doomed the work of the Review Commission were present in the study Group. Some on the General Board expressed the concern that the proposal did not go far enough. Others opposed even the minimal level of organizational integration that the proposal envisioned. In the final analysis, some of the proposals were implemented administratively and the legal relationship of Adminis-

tratively Related Organizations to the General Board were clarified. But most of the substantive proposals that would require Bylaw changes were allowed to fade.

In the meantime, the Board of Educational Ministries failed, discord within the denomination grew, there was a second negative feasibility study for a denomination-wide campaign, and the financial pressures, especially on General Board operations, became critical.

While much has been made of the role of the sexuality debate during this time, many of us believe that it was merely the presenting symptom of deeper issues in American Baptist life. Both feasibility studies, which were referenced above, found growing alienation and mistrust with the national denomination. The conflict, and our inability to deal effectively with it, exposed very different (even incommensurate) interpretations of how our structure should work.

It also exposed some of the ways in which our organizing documents were inconsistent with one another. In one sense, these radically different understandings of identity and inconsistent documents reflect who American Baptists are—a loose amalgam at best. In the final analysis, we must confess that our present structure is not equal to the promises it has made and cannot adequately address conflicting values among us.

The most recent attempt at reorganization originated in denominational staff meetings in 2005. The Regional Executive Ministers Council (REMC) and General Executive Council (GEC; consisting of REMC plus key national staff) both met in San Antonio. The denominational conflict over homosexuality, which had been on slow simmer since the Commission on Denominational Unity Report in 1997, had come to a full boil in the Fall of 2004 and threatened to explode in the Summer of 2005.

Many of us went to the REMC and GEC meetings in April 2005 hoping we could find a way to avoid a denominational meltdown. The meeting did not end well. One of the seven statements produced by that meeting included:

The GEC recognizes that mission is most effective when appropriately contextualized to its cultural setting. Therefore, the GEC recommends to the General Board the establishment of a task

force to (a) examine the nature of our present cultures and the impact of postmodernism, and (b) assess implications for potential organizational change for ABCUSA.

In November 2005, the GEC adopted the following resolution:

Building upon its action in the Spring of 2005, the GEC has observed a confluence of events that are symptomatic of a need for a comprehensive reevaluation of the very character of what it means to be a denomination in this day, and that we accordingly resolve to put in place a process to review the Covenant of Relationships to include a review of our values, structure, and decision-making processes that would form the basis of a new relationship together.

In April 2006, the GEC identified four key issue areas that needed to be addressed in the midst of the denominational crisis. These were:

1. Denominational leadership,
2. Denominational structure,
3. The “representative process” for the General Board, and
4. Denominational relevance to congregations and pastors.

In June the General Board charged the GEC to prepare a reorganization proposal. The GEC set an ambitious timeline in which a reorganization proposal would be presented to the General Board in November 2006 so it could be considered at the Biennial in 2007.

The GEC also proposed eight criteria which should inform the reorganization effort, and these were endorsed by the General Board:

1. Protect and secure the local church as the fundamental unit of mission by preserving historic Baptist freedoms and enacting a balance of autonomy and interdependence.
2. Demonstrate respect for ethnic/gender/cultural/theological/generational diversity and inclusiveness in all processes and purposes.
3. Increase the potential for fundraising through United Mission and other sources.
4. Implement substantial cost reductions for General Board operations.
5. Enable ABCUSA to establish, celebrate, implement, and monitor outcomes of mission and ministry.

6. Resolve the division over homosexuality or at least move the denomination forward on this issue.
7. Provide for commitment to clear accountability, holding each other responsible for maintaining covenants.
8. Provide central office functions for the denomination.

The GEC was unable to meet its own deadline, so work continued. In June 2007, the GEC presented its recommendations to the General Board, which then assumed responsibility for it. With some modifications, the General Board endorsed proposed Bylaws at its meeting in November 2008. These would be considered at the Biennial meeting in Pasadena in June 2009 and, if adopted, would take effect January 2010.

The Proposal

It is important to understand that it is only Bylaws which will come before the Biennial in Pasadena, and that those Bylaws deal only with the General Board of ABCUSA. Other changes can be anticipated in the Standing Rules and also the Covenant of Relationships. It is a mistake to think that passing these Bylaws will result in a sweeping reorganization of all American Baptist entities. Regions, Administratively Related Ministries, colleges and seminaries will not experience structural changes as a result of this work.

The structure is basically a move back (but not all the way) to the societal model that existed before SCODS/SCOR. In other words, this proposal corresponds to Option 2 that the Review Commission on Denominational Structure and Process considered and rejected in their report. If adopted, what will these new Bylaws change?

1. The interlocking boards created by SCODS/SCOR would be undone. BIM, BNM, and MMBB would once again become self-sustaining boards. Each board would have a special category of directors whose authority would be limited to assuring ABCUSA connections could not be broken. Other than leaving ABCUSA, these boards will be pretty much free to do whatever they wish. While we have no details from these boards, it is certain that all would be much smaller.
2. The General Board would become the Board of General Ministries (BGM) and remain the legal corporate entity of ABCUSA. It would no longer be a proportionately representative-

board. Six members would be *ex officio* (President, Vice-President, Budget Review Officer, Past-President, Inter-caucus President, and the General Secretary). Other members would be elected at the Biennial, with one person coming from each covenanting region, and five persons "at large" nominated for diversity. With one "special" director (see #1 above) that makes a total of 46 on the board. The Board of General Ministries would be charged to "manage the affairs of the ABCUSA," through 19 specific tasks. Seven of those tasks are identical to responsibilities given to the present General Board. Twelve are modifications, expansions, or clarifications of present tasks. One task of the present General Board has been deleted—that is the power to "formulate, adopt, promulgate, review, amend, rescind, and implement American Baptist Policy Statements and Resolutions...." In its place, a new process is proposed (described below; see point 7).

3. The General Secretary would remain the CEO of ABCUSA, and the Office of General Secretary would remain the staff of BGM. Functions specified in the Bylaws would be essentially as they are outlined now.
4. The National Staff Leadership Council (NLC) would replace the present General Executive Council (GEC). It would consist of the President of ABCUSA and staff members of covenanting organizations. Initially, the NSLC would have about 60 members. Membership in NLC would be managed by the NLC itself.

The eligibility requirements (set in the Bylaws) include that the organization:

- have an autonomous board and be financially stable,
- have a paid Executive, and
- demonstrate its willingness to support the statement of purpose of ABCUSA, cooperate wholeheartedly in such relationships and projects at all levels of denominational life which seem advisable, be identified as an organization related to and participating in the life of ABCUSA by the use of the name and/or logo, be primarily devoted to providing programs and/or services to the ABCUSA, and be accountable to the ABCUSA Policy Statements, Resolutions and Public Witness Statements, together with any internal covenants within the NLC.

The purposes of the NLC are: (a) Building and fostering authentic relationships within the NLC. (b) Participating in continuing education related to respective roles. (c) Facilitating implementation of denominational priorities. (d) Demonstrating progress on those priorities in their respective boards. (e) Conducting trend analysis. (f). Suggesting means of improving the functioning of the denomination. (g) Participating in theological reflection.

5. The Biennial would continue to be a “family” gathering, primarily for worship, education, and celebration. Certain governance tasks would continue to reside with the Biennial, such as election of BGM members, election of officers, and changes to the Bylaws of ABCUSA. In addition, the Biennial would feature “Mission Summit” opportunities. Those opportunities are open to all who attend the Biennial. The purpose of the Mission Summit is “to discern and articulate broad priorities for American Baptists for the upcoming biennium and beyond.” Those broad priorities would be contained in a published report.
6. The Mission Table would be the ongoing organization charged to refine and pursue the broad priorities identified by the Mission Summit. The Mission Table is a large “mission think tank” chaired by the President of ABCUSA. Its membership includes national and regional staff, representatives from American Baptist seminaries and American Baptist colleges, and one local church participant from each region (selected by the Nominating Committee of ABCUSA). I think it adds up to 100-120 people. The intent is that the participants in the Mission Table would carry back to their respective boards and organizations those goals and priorities identified by the Mission Summit. However, the Mission Table has no authority to implement those goals and priorities.
7. The existing practice for Policy Statements and Resolutions would be totally revised. Public Witness Statements could be proposed by any of the covenanting boards (BGM, BNM, BIM, or the regional boards). In order to become a Public Witness Statement of American Baptists, the proposed statement would need to be affirmed by three-fourths of the covenanting boards. MMBB would not be part of this process. Existing ABCUSA Policy Statements and Resolutions would remain in effect until, and if, three-fourths of the covenanting boards agree they should be rescinded.

The Covenant of Relationships will continue to be the means by which BGM, BNM, BIM, MMBB and the regional boards will be held together. This work is yet to be done. And so will we return to the topic that set this ball rolling in 2005. As in the case of the Standing Rules, we can expect some changes in these agreements defining how we will live and work together.

Does this proposal meet the criteria endorsed by the General Board? Decide for yourself.

1. *Protect and secure the local church as the fundamental unit of mission by preserving historic Baptist freedoms and enacting a balance of autonomy and interdependence.* The local church was never at risk. This proposal changes nothing about that, because it never could in the first place. However, the historic mission societies will regain their freedom.
2. *Demonstrate respect for ethnic/gender/cultural/theological/generational diversity and inclusiveness in all processes and purposes.* While there was never any intention to alter the denominational commitment to inclusiveness, it must be admitted that it would be impossible to (a) reduce BGM numbers so radically, (b) move from the proportionately representative General Board to a self-sustaining board, and (c) at the same time radically reduce legislative functions (which have been key to maintaining diversity) without having some impact (real or perceived) on inclusiveness. While all the boards, when considered collectively, may demonstrate diversity reflective of the denomination, there is no failsafe assurance that will be the case for any single board.
3. *Increase the potential for fundraising through United Mission and other sources.* This remains to be seen.
4. *Implement substantial cost reductions for General Board operations.* It is true that the cost of operating the Board of General Ministries will be substantially less than the cost of General Board operations. Many of those savings are real. Others had already been realized because of significant cuts in staff and services. But others are achieved by redistributing costs. In any case, this change in structure is a temporary solution to the funding problem of the Board of General Ministries.
5. *Enable ABC/USA to establish, celebrate, implement, and monitor outcomes of mission and ministry.* The provisions are there as adequately as they are now.

6. *Resolve the division over homosexuality or at least move the denomination forward on this issue.* The problems (and there are many) swirling around the issue of homosexuality are very nearly intractable and brought the structure work to a stalemate. At a meeting in April 2007, the members of the GEC agreed that the simplest and most effective way for us to move forward was for each of us to agree that we would honor and implement the ABCUSA resolutions and policies relevant to the issue with regard to persons serving at the national level.

Further discussion led us to the conclusion that this should be true for all ABCUSA resolutions and policies, because once a resolution/policy is adopted by the General Board, all board members and the staff of the Office of General Secretary must implement those resolutions/policies whether or not they agree with them. The final form of the agreement, commonly referred to as "The Tucson Covenant" is: We covenant as GEC members to give due consideration to all ABC Policy Statements and Resolutions in recommending persons to serve at denominational levels.

7. *Provide for commitment to clear accountability, holding each other responsible for maintaining covenants.* An honest effort was made to include as much accountability as the structure would bear. However, we must admit that there is not much possibility for the kind of accountability that many would expect. This particular issue is probably better addressed in the Covenants of Relationship.
8. *Provide central office functions for the denomination.* The provisions will be there as adequately as they are now.

Possibility not Promise

This is real change. The self-realization that we are a "federation" has many consequences. Things will be gained, but others will be lost. I believe that one of the subtle expectations related to this is that in moving away from each other we will create space for us to stay together. The dissension and irritation we have with one another may be diminished. At the same time this movement lessens the breadth and depth of who we can be and what we can do together. Obviously, denominational relation-

ships are changing. The important question is: How will this movement influence our denominational identity which was created by SCODS/SCOR?

If we are consistent with our organizational philosophy as we work through the Standing Rules and the Covenant of Relationships, we will see the Board of General Ministries emerge as an administrative unit whose primary role is the Biennial and Mission Summit. BGM is not the General Board reborn. It is not representative and has no credibility to speak for the churches or to influence the direction of the denomination. Some will applaud this change, others will lament the loss.

The Mission Table and the National Staff Leadership Council will emerge as the focal points of energy, but their roles will be different. The Mission Table will translate, refine and focus the "voice" of the denomination heard at the Mission Summit. The Mission Table will speak dreams and hopes. The National Staff Leadership Council, having heard those dreams and hopes, will set about the task of making it happen. If the Mission Table tries to force its dreams into reality, or the National Staff Leadership Council turns a deaf ear to the voice, then frustration will rear its ugly head again.

Given our history with organizational change, we can expect a few to applaud this new structure, but many others to be critical. Some will wonder why something wasn't done another way, and others will worry about unseen pitfalls and imaginary demons. Probably most will ask "What difference does it make?" The answer, to a large extent, depends on our expectations for a denomination.

There is much about the proposal that I do not like. I see several significant problems arising. And I also know that there will be unintended consequences (as there would be with any change). I am worried most about unrealistic expectations. Knowing who we are, the wagon train of baggage we have, and our conflicting values, this is probably the best we can do. I support the proposal as a possibility, not a promise.

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For Churches and Clergy, a Bigger Question

By David Russell



During the Ministers Council Senate this past August, I attended a presentation by General Secretary Roy Medley and Associate General Secretary Jeff Woods about the proposed new denominational structure. At the time, I asked several questions of clarification, and perhaps because of that was asked to write an article for this edition of *Minister*. That's what curiosity will get you.

I write as pastor of a loyal American Baptist congregation. We are generous supporters of American Baptist mission, we have a few members who will occasionally attend ABC gatherings, and a couple of folks serve on boards of ABC-related institutions. We have a member who goes on a regionally-sponsored mission trip to Nicaragua every year. Nearly every year we have an ABC missionary or seminary professor or national staff person preach in our church. Our church serves as the American Baptist ministry to Iowa State University. This congregation has stronger ties to and greater familiarity with the denomination than most ABC churches. Despite all of this, many folks are not especially well informed about ABCUSA and don't see this connection as being terribly important. Many members feel good about being American Baptist mainly because it means we are not Baptists of a more conservative ilk.

With this and other congregations in mind, I will begin by asking a basic question: How much does denominational structure affect the local church, anyway? Do the way that regions and program boards and agencies of the denomination relate to one another and the way that we set priorities and work together on a national and global scale matter all that much to local congregations?

One of my first thoughts was to turn to history. As American Baptists, we have been through this before, and it seemed worth considering how previous denominational reorganizations affected local churches.

I considered asking members of my church who have been here 40 or 50 years how SCODS and SCOR affected First Baptist Church back in the 1970s. But I could imagine the strange looks and the responses I might get if I asked such a question – and if someone in the church actually understood the question, I could imagine the kind of answer I would get.

So I turned to a volume on my bookshelf, *Where the Spirit Leads*, published in 1980 and edited by Martin Marty. It was a kind of "State of the Union" for American churches; each chapter was devoted to a different denominational group. The chapter on American Baptists dealt almost exclusively with the denominational reorganization of SCODS and SCOR, with hardly a word about worship, mission, ministry, or theology. The outside observer might have believed that the only things happening with Baptists had to do with issues of polity.

What was interesting was that this was true of several of the articles in the book. In his "Afterword," reflecting on articles written about various Christian traditions, Martin Marty noted that "with few exceptions, the authors stress 'order' more than 'faith.'"

He went on to ask, "If by some divine fiat or swoop, all the ordering questions of the churches were solved, would faith and practice be much different? Could it be that we become expert at polity because tinkering is easy when it comes to something so visible?"¹

Marty's words certainly ring true today. Problems of organization are much easier to address than differences in theology and social ethics or shortfalls in revenue. And American Baptists are certainly not alone in focusing on issues of polity as a way to address deeper concerns.

The changes brought about by SCODS and then SCOR in the 1970s were a response to the cultural situation facing us as American Baptists at that time. We are now in a vastly different culture, with different needs and pressures, and the proposed new structure is an appropriate, if of necessity imperfect response to the needs of our time. While the new structure will not solve our differences in theology or cure our financial ills, it will make these situations easier to live with. But from a strictly congregational perspective, my feeling is that the reorganization of the 1970s did

not affect churches or clergy in a significant way, and that current changes will not have a great effect on churches and ministers today.

Having said that, I would like to make a few brief observations on how the proposed changes may affect clergy and churches, and then to turn to a larger issue.

1. The number of persons necessary to fill national board positions will be significantly less under the new plan. The General Board originally had 150 members; the Board of General Ministries will have 46, and the Board of General Ministries will meet less often than the General Board once did. The national program boards will likely be much smaller as well. Serving on a national board is a way that some folks become "cheerleaders" and "salespeople" for the denomination, and local churches that have board members among their members are (generally) more plugged in and supportive of the denomination. We will have fewer churches in which this will happen.
2. The process necessary to give public witness on societal issues will be more cumbersome and difficult. Public Witness Statements must be approved by three-quarters of the covenanting organization boards. This is a high bar. Meaningful statements might need to be "watered down" to gain $\frac{3}{4}$ approval, and by the time $\frac{3}{4}$ of the region boards could vote on a given issue, the issue at hand may no longer be current. All of this may serve to increase the importance of the prophetic role of the General Secretary, and it may make it more important for regional bodies and local pastors and churches to speak to such issues. Of course, different regions and different clergy will often be on different sides of significant issues, but if American Baptists are to speak to our culture, it will probably not be through official pronouncement of the national body.
3. A related observation is that the new structure will reduce the potential for conflict. Since we will be less likely to speak to divisive issues, issues of sexuality may not provide the flashpoints they have in the past. For local pastors and churches that have been caught up in fighting over homosexuality, this change will be welcome. Of course, this will not necessarily ease conflict within regions, which can be more intense than na-

tional battles because of proximity and familiarity.

4. With the new structure, it appears that the National Staff Leadership Council will be the power center of the denomination, limited as that power may be. All of the members of this group will represent a region, national board, or institution, and the welfare of these entities does not necessarily correspond to the best interests of clergy. Who will represent ministers? The Ministers Council Executive Director alone will specifically represent the interests of ministers in that group. (There will no doubt be local church pastors on the Board of General Ministries, but that group will have less responsibility and authority than the current General Board.)
5. The hope is that the Biennial will be a time of celebration and mission focus, with minimal legislative function. That sounds quite appealing. Biennials that focus on celebration and mission with a minimum of disagreement and discord would certainly be welcome, but the official agenda alone cannot insure this.

I can think of a few other changes that may affect churches and clergy, but it seems to me that on the whole, the proposed restructuring will not have a great impact on local congregations or on pastors. But perhaps the question is not, "How will the change in structure affect clergy and churches?" I would argue that a bigger question is, "How are the pressures that prompted the proposed restructuring affecting clergy and churches?" The bigger story is that the same factors affecting the national structure are already having an impact on ministers and churches.

In my own region, financial pressures have caused Mid-American Baptist Churches to eliminate the five area minister positions. On top of all of their other responsibilities, it is difficult for the region Executive Minister and Associate Executive Minister to provide pastoral care for all of the clergy in the region. To help fill this need, our Ministers Council is attempting to begin a "Pastor-To-Pastor" program wherein clergy provide care for one another. Similar programs exist in other regions. The trend is for pastoral leaders to take responsibility for their own care. The demise of the Ministerial Leadership Commission a few years ago is another example of a vacuum that makes the Ministers Council's work of advocating for clergy even more vital.

Financial pressures also affect churches in more direct ways. With the economic downturn, congregations already struggling will find it even harder to pay the bills, afford a minister, and provide health insurance for employees. I know of several churches dependent on endowment income that are struggling mightily because of the stock market. This, of course, is not news to anyone.

The move toward the ABC as a looser federation rather than a more centralized bureaucracy is also happening at the local level. In my area, the clergy-led Together in Ministry group has replaced the Area Minister-led cluster group. Members of the TIM group need not be church staff - or even American Baptists. With looser organization and less regional and national staff and programming, ministers and local congregations are taking greater responsibility for support, networking, continuing education, and shared ministry efforts. Churches and clergy will choose (and are choosing) to network around common interests, theologies, and ministry settings in addition to or instead of the traditional geographic and denominational networks.

This may include networks of urban churches, rural churches, university churches, emergent churches, ethnic and language networks, churches with a passion for social justice, and churches that relate to one another on the basis of shared worship styles (liturgical, contemporary, Taizé, etc.) Young clergy networks, Women in Ministry, “techie” pastors, and other clergy groupings will grow in importance. Technologies ranging from listservs to conference calls to video conferencing to Facebook help to facilitate such networking.

Looser ties make it easier for churches to have a variety of connections, and our increasing diversity increases the variety of connections possible. We have long had a number of congregations that have long been dually affiliated in terms of denomination. Many of our churches are also affiliated with one of the African-American Baptist conventions, and others are dually affiliated with CBF, the Disciples, the UCC, or another (or more) denomination(s).

For many, denomination is not necessarily the most important affiliation, and this trend will no doubt grow. There are ABC churches that are in the Willow Creek Association, in the Association of Welcoming and Affirming Baptists, the Alli-

ance of Baptists, the Baptist Peace Fellowship, Cornerstone Church Network, and more. In many cases, these ties may be stronger than ABC ties. For other congregations, the local Council of Churches or Ministerial Association will be as significant as ABC membership.

Some may look at all of this with sadness, remembering wistfully the time when ABC churches had more of a common culture. But those days are long gone, and the ABC is not alone in this. Several years ago, Joe Coulter of Louisville Presbyterian Seminary described the Presbyterian ecology for nurturing the faith.² He noted those factors that were declining or no longer significant in faith formation for Presbyterians. Blue laws, public schools, Wednesday Bible study and worship, men’s groups, Sabbath observance, and family devotions were no longer significant, he said. Youth ministry, Synod Schools, church publications, church camps, church-related colleges, campus ministry, Sunday School, and women’s groups were declining in significance.

All of this and more would be true of the ABC. We have not had a denominational hymnal since a 1970 joint hymnal with the Disciples, and our diversity (not to mention the move away from hymnals in many churches) makes another American Baptist hymnal extremely unlikely. Only a small percentage of ABC Sunday School classes use ABC-produced Sunday School materials, and this becomes a vicious circle – we can’t produce materials if they are not purchased. *The American Baptist* ceased publication several years ago. I am not arguing that this is good or bad, but simply stating the reality that many of the common experiences that once helped to mold ABC identity no longer exist. You might also notice that none of these factors have to do with polity or structure.

Religious life is changing rapidly in our culture, but there will continue to be an important role for denominations as communities of support and belonging, a way to do mission, a provider of resources and theological education, a network of shared ministry, and a theological tradition on which one stands. In this post-denominational age, however, denominations are not the only place for churches and clergy to fill such needs. Structure is not the most important thing, but a more loosely connected and more streamlined ABC structure fits the times in which we live.

¹ Marty, *Where the Spirit Leads: American Denominations Today* (Atlanta: John Knox Press, 1980), 232.

² Joe Coulter, "The Presbyterian Ecology for Nurturing the Faith." Handout provided by Ed White of Alban Institute, 1996.

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Minister

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Mission

The Ministers Council is the professional association of ministerial leaders within the American Baptist Churches. We are colleagues working together to:

- Connect colleagues through Together in Ministry collegial covenant groups
- Establish and maintain professional and ethical standards of the Christian ministry
- Give support to the members of this body and be an advocate for them in their professional associations
- Resource ministry through www.ministerscouncil.org
- Interpret the appropriate roles of professional ministerial leadership to the constituent parts of our denomination and to the local American Baptist Churches
- Encourage the recruitment and nurture of candidates for the various church vocations
- Provide a means for expression and debate by members of this body on issues that affect the professional ministerial leadership of the American Baptist Churches in the USA
- Cooperate with the appropriate units of the American Baptist Churches in the USA in matters of mutual interest and concern, including: recruitment, placement, compensation, continuing education, and counseling