

## JOURNEY OF THE MINISTERS COUNCIL

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Now the LORD said to Abram, “Go from your country and your kindred and your father’s house to the land that I will show you. I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you, and make your name great, so that you will be a blessing. I will bless those who bless you, and the one who curses you I will curse; and in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed.”

So Abram went, as the LORD had told him; and Lot went with him. Abram was seventy-five years old when he departed from Haran. Abram took his wife Sarai and his brother’s son Lot, and all the possessions that they had gathered, and the persons whom they had acquired in Haran; and they set forth to go to the land of Canaan. When they had come to the land of Canaan,

Abram passed through the land to the place at Shechem, to the oak of Moreh. At that time the Canaanites were in the land. Then the LORD appeared to Abram, and said, “To your offspring I will give this land.” So he built there an altar to the LORD, who had appeared to him. From there he moved on to the hill country on the east of Bethel, and pitched his tent, with Bethel on the west and Ai on the east; and there he built an altar to the LORD and invoked the name of the LORD. And Abram journeyed on by stages toward the Negeb.

~Genesis 12:1-9

**Abraham Joshua Heschel once said that the Bible can be summarized in just one word: REMEMBER.**

That is the theme of this Ministers Council Senate 2008. Not just **REMEMBER** but **RE-MEMBER**. Recall what has been not simply from sentimental nostalgia but in order to be rooted in the present, so that we incarnate in our very own time through our very own beings the principles that brought the Ministers Council into existence in the first place. **RE-MEMBER** who we are.

We understand where we are in any given moment only when we know where we have journeyed before, and how God has been faithful there. Is that not the point of the Abraham saga? The original Abraham for whom Heschel was named was called out to a new place and already in the very first verses that tell the story of his long, long journey, here is what we have seen as he made the journey **by stages** – as the text says.

In Shechem at the oak of Moreh Abram built an altar to the Lord after the Lord appeared to him and promised land to his offspring; at Bethel Abram built yet another altar and there he invoked the name of the Lord; in other words, on the basis of the evidence of the former Abram took the initiative in the latter because already he knew that God was faithful to promises. Already he perceived that he journeyed not alone. Still later at Hebron he built a third altar, and finally at

Moriah where he was called to sacrifice his son Isaac he built a fourth. The God who had called him on the journey was with him every step, and each altar was the sign of covenantal faithfulness along the way. Furthermore, and this has huge implications for us, as Abraham journeyed **by stages** each altar signified Abraham's deepened understanding of how God's purposes were being worked out.

This is not just Abraham's story; it is ours as well. We must remember where we came from in order both to discern where we are going and to trust enough to take the next step in the journey. Vitality is linked with memory of where we have been and who has been with us there. We too journey by stages toward comprehension of what God is up to in this world through us.

Now as pastoral leaders and simply as people, we know how tragic it is when persons cannot remember, for example when Alzheimer's Disease strikes. We know the loss not just to the individual but to the whole web of relationships and indeed to all of society when a single person is stricken by the loss of memory and is consequently unable to function.

Perhaps we might say how much more so if an organization shaped to fulfill the purposes of Jesus Christ were to suffer loss of memory. If we did not know why in the mind of God and in the minds of our forebears the Ministers Council was summoned into being in the first place; if we did not know the mutuality of faithfulness along the way –

we would not be rooted in the present nor would we know how to discern our way into the future and have the confidence to take the next steps.

Lest we forget: let me remember with you our story.

In 1935 our forebears in ministry were compelled by a growing sense of need in their ministry journeys to create a professional association that they named the Ministers Council. Their reasons for coming together as professional pastoral leaders are ours:

- To deepen spiritual journeys
- To sharpen professional effectiveness
- To develop collegial relationships

The Ministers Council journey by stages since our founding can be tracked through historical records that prove to us two things: in this life you will have change, and at every step of the way the Lord will provide for each new day:

- From the 1934 *Northern Baptist Convention Yearbook*, p. 121: “We suggest that ministers and missionaries can and will set standards for their high and holy vocation which will be mutually satisfactory; and that their problems can best be solved by themselves.” In 1937 the Ministers Council adopted a Covenant and Code of Ethics.
- From the 1940 *Northern Baptist Convention Yearbook*, pp. 370-371: “The Council has accepted with appreciation the invitation

- of the General Council of the Northern Baptist Convention to become an Associated Organization. We pray and hope that the Ministers Council will become increasingly more helpful to the Northern Baptist Convention and its various boards and societies in all their work.”
- From the 1944 *Northern Baptist Convention Yearbook*, pp. 111-112: “We (Ministers Council) covet increased support for the only organization within the setup of our denomination which exists for ministers and missionaries, which is divorced from convention control and free from theological controversy, seeking only to help Baptist ministers to be good ministers of Jesus Christ.”
  - From the Ministers Council report to the annual convention, 1960: “In this administrative relationship with M and M (sic) the autonomy of the Ministers Council is fully preserved.”
  - From Dean Wright, M&M’s 1962 report, *American Baptist Convention Yearbook*, p. 135: “The Ministers Council in 1961 became administratively related to the Board (M&M)... The Board in no way attempts to influence the actions or program of the Council. The Council is a fraternal organization of American Baptist Convention ministers.”
  - From the 1972 Study Commission on Denominational Structure (SCODS): definition of the manner in which all the “national voluntary and professional organizations” (ABM, ABW, Ministers Council) would be connected to the denomination:

1. "...the responsibility for servicing national organizations of laity and ministers be assigned to the national Related Boards.
  2. The organizational life of an organization is for it to determine.
  3. The working relationship of the organization to the national Related Board is one to be mutually agreed upon.
  4. If such an organization should at any time feel it desirable to do so, it could request the General Board to consider some other kind of relationship."
- In 1994, in response to a 1991 task force recommendation, the Ministers Council moved from the M&M Benefit Board and entered into a covenantal administrative relationship with the Board of Educational Ministries. "The covenant between the Ministers Council and the Board of Educational Ministries is entered into in recognition of our historic family relationship within the American Baptist Churches, USA." In that transfer from the M & M Benefit Board an endowment to support the Ministers Council and the Women in Ministry program was also transferred, with the provision that in the first year 58% would support Women in Ministry and 42% would support the Ministers Council, with BEM authorized to "allocate the support as BEM shall determine, provided that in any fiscal year the support shall not be allocated more than 50% to The Ministers Council or less than 50% to Women in Ministry, and the change in allocation from year to year shall not exceed 2%" (A

*Covenant of Administrative Relationship Between The Ministers Council and the Board of Educational Ministries, American Baptist Churches, USA, April 26, 1994).*

- In 2004 the Ministers Council officially became an Associated Ministry Organization related to ABCUSA/Office of the General Secretary: “This covenant affirms our spirit of cooperation to work together, to provide ministries that reflect these beliefs (that God has blessed us with many gifts and talents and we have been asked to use these gifts and talents responsibly), and our support for each other and our love for Jesus Christ. [Ephesians 2:11-22]. This covenant relationship recognizes that Associated Ministry Organizations are independent, unique and have their own autonomy while supporting the statements of purpose of the Bylaws of the ABCUSA” (*Covenant Between American Baptist Churches in the U.S.A. and ABC Associated Ministry Organizations*, voted by the General Board in its November 21, 2004 meeting; *nota bene*, scheduled for covenanting partners review and update in the year 2010).
- From “*THE FUTURE IS BRIGHT!*” report on restructure to the General Board, June 2008, for vote at 2009 Biennial: “Approximately every 35 years, or once every generation, American Baptists have significantly reshaped our denominational life to more adequately respond to the challenges of a new era. Each has built upon the past while also significantly diverging from it. In this first part of the 21<sup>st</sup> Century, the GEC is making its best recommendation to the General Board and the Biennial for a structure that builds upon

the best of SCODS while also offering significant changes to create a more nimble and streamlined structure. We believe it offers several significant advances over our current system.” Precisely how we shall relate to ABCUSA in all the particulars will be worked out as we continue our journey by stages.

This is our story: the Ministers Council is the professional association of pastoral leaders in the ABC, as we say, "*The only group solely committed to the well-being of the clergy person,*" or as our predecessors said in 1944, "the only organization within the setup of our denomination which exists for ministers and missionaries, which is divorced from convention control and free from theological controversy, seeking only to help Baptist ministers to be good ministers of Jesus Christ." Okay, maybe not always so "free from theological controversy," but definitely always "seeking only to help Baptist ministers to be good ministers of Jesus Christ." The Ministers Council has always been an organization associated with the ABCUSA, with a history of being autonomous in governance and responsible for our own revenue stream. We have been on a long journey through steps of transition since 1935, we are still here, we are still blessed, and we still anticipate that God will travel with us in the next stage of our never-ending journey.

Along the way the Ministers Council has always been leading the way in the resourcing of pastoral leaders. Consider how as we have journeyed by stages certain themes and emphases recur. In the early years the Council responded to demands for ordination standards as



well as a code of ethics to establish standards to which all American Baptist pastoral leaders aspire. Book clubs were established to share wisdom from readings and also the books themselves, a dynamic even now among us through the Together in Ministry collegial covenant group project for sharing wisdom and resources to strengthen pastoral leaders. Initial work on pulpit committee resourcing ultimately led to the development of American Baptist Personnel Services to assist congregations and pastoral leaders in the search process. The desire for an accessible listing of position openings resulted in Ministry Opportunities Listing, currently available online. Similarly, the quest for a means to provide a service for reflection on ministry development eventuated in the establishment of the Centers on the Ministry. The Ministers Council advocated for women in ministry and engaged in a Study on Women in the Ministry (SWIM), which brought into being an office to support and advocate for women in ministry. Essential resources have been developed in multiple iterations on pastoral relations committees, compensation and conflict mediation. The early practice of pre-convention programs continues in pre-Biennial events, continuing in 2009 Leonard Sweet on Evangelism in Postmodernity. The New Humanity Task Force anticipated and prepared for the new thing God is doing in the ABCUSA through multi-cultural awareness. Communications have been an essential component of our work from the beginning, through newsletters and Minister Magazine, and now through a rich and deep website [www.ministerscouncil.com](http://www.ministerscouncil.com) to equip both pastoral leaders and congregations. Now the Ministers Council has become a 501(c)3 nonprofit corporation able to seek grants to underwrite its work on

behalf of ministry, fulfilling a mandate already evident in the 1930s notation of its first financial support solicited and received from the Northern Baptist Convention.

Our future remains in our founding purposes:

Research data from the comprehensive 2002 Pulpit & Pew Research on Pastoral Leadership project indicate that the reasons for which the Ministers Council was formed and continues to exist, to enhance spiritual development, professional effectiveness and collegial relationships, remain the primary concerns of ministerial leaders in this country today, along with compensation. The Ministers Council believes that its spiritual reality in the mind of God has been and remains to serve needs relevant to the lives and ministries of colleagues.

The Ministers Council mission and organization are shaped accordingly, as a member-owned organization comprised of constituent Councils of dues-paying members. The Councils elect representatives who meet together annually as a Senate to conduct business and to choose a national executive committee, which meets twice annually and conducts the business of the Senate in between sessions. The Senate is comprised of five working committees: membership and constituency; spiritual and personal wholeness; professional effectiveness; denominational relationships; and communications. Through your service on one of those committees, each of you plays a vital role in the mission of the Ministers Council.

My journey joined that of the Ministers Council in the late 1970s when I entered pastoral ministry. In 1981 I was elected by Rhode Island colleagues to serve on the Senate and filled various roles there for a number of years. In 1995 I was called from the pastorate and from the position of ABC vice president to the position of Ministers Council executive director, for sake of working toward God's call to us for the next stage of our journey. The Ministers Council had been in turmoil, worse than I really comprehended, through the involuntary termination of my predecessor and the challenges of charges of racism.

Those two dynamics describe the dual trajectories pulling at the ABC, do they not? Consummation or chaos – which path shall we travel?

My deepest spiritual intuition is that God yearns for humanity to become a poster of heaven people, every nation, tribe, people and language encircling the throne of God and the Lamb Jesus Christ, as imaged in the book of Revelation. Since the way of a circle means that the closer we come to God at the center the closer we are to the sisters and brothers alongside, that goal invites us to hold on to one another across all our differences as we wrestle with how the Bible informs us in this new day as it draws us toward that center.

The first stage of my work with pastoral leaders across the United States focused on a top-down approach to that circle. During my tenure the Ministers Council has interfaced with ABC on behalf of pastoral leaders in various ways, including:

- 1998-99 Conversations with ABC president Jim Johnson
- General Board Task Force on Care of Ministry Report
- General Board 2003 Ministerial Care Unit Task Force

The Ministers Council has also worked for ABC wholeness through:

- Planning and implementing 1996 and 2000 national and regional staff gatherings
- Pre-millennium shift Jubilee emphasis to heal and renew the ground of our common life for the seed of new things God seeks to grow among us; 1999 Biennial designed on that theme

In the miraculous synchronicity of God's ways with us, my perspective was transformed through the generous gift of a 2001 sabbatical as a Merrill Fellow at Harvard Divinity School, funded by the Ministers Council, the Louisville Institute and Harvard Divinity School. That time was dedicated to reflection on the covenantal implications of quantum physics and the work of the Spirit through the human relational web. Those three months so radically shifted my approach to pastoral excellence from top-down to bottom-up that my work since January 2002 has been shaped by that angle of vision. Precisely where pastoral leaders live and move and have our being is where relationships are forged that will transform the whole web.

We developed a three-part Ministers Council strategy with scope and frequency variables to enhance the relational web:

- Face-to-face collegial covenant groups that meet monthly
- Strong constituent Councils with exciting programs

- Biennial pattern of national conferences
  - 2004 Strong in the Lord conference
  - 2006 Wait on the Lord conference
  - 2008 New Covenant Baptists event and Fanning the Flame conference participation
  - 2010 Rejoice in the Lord?

Along the way circumstances called us to engage in the Jerusalem Council 2004-2005 project for local dialogue and discernment on differences of biblical interpretation on homosexuality (out of which came the very same resolution words adopted as the General Executive Council Tucson covenant in April 2007): “The Ministers Council urges our constituent councils to give due consideration to all the policies, resolutions, and statements of concern of the ABC/USA when electing representatives to the Ministers Council Senate”). I believe that in the struggle we were faithful to God’s calling and out of our struggle we blessed the larger family with an immediate way forward together.

Since 1995 the Ministers Council has funded much of its work beyond business as usual through grants for special projects sought from outside denominational sources: a video on biblical interpretation and homosexuality; a facilitated Common Ground meeting with the executive committees of American Baptist Evangelicals and the Association of Welcoming and Affirming Baptists; an updating of the *Compensation* workbook; a training video for pastoral relations

committees and a companion workbook; an expanded website for disseminating of resources; the Jerusalem Council project.

Two extra-denominational grant competitions have yielded further funding: two grants from the Valparaiso Project have funded 2002-03 and 2006-07 faith practices series on “The Body Honors the Body” and on “Testimony” for the Valley Forge Ministers Council; two grants from the Lilly Endowment Inc. totaling nearly \$3 million are funding Together in Ministry, the encouragement and the development of collegial covenant groups where the web of the Spirit might bind colleagues for wellness, strength, effectiveness and accountability, as well as financial support for national ministers’ conferences. A gift from a donor has provided seed money of \$200,000 to begin with the Office of the General Secretary an endowment for future conferences.

As always the future is a road lying before us that we do not travel alone. Now Joe Kutter has been called to serve as acting executive director, beginning on September 1. Part of his work will be leading the 2009-2010 Lilly-funded project for organizational capacity building through resourcing and strengthening constituent Council leadership. Part of it will be focus on the work we have begun with niche networks or affinity groups: clergy couples, young clergy, ethnic councils such as the new New Jersey Latino Ministers Council. Yet another part will be the quest for donations to build up the endowment. Money is not the be-all and end-all of our work together, but, as I have discovered along the way, it is one means of God’s

provision for the journey. Joe's work is not to make all these things happen but to lead you there.

We trust that God who called us to this journey in the first place continues to accompany the Ministers Council and will continue to bless us in ever new days and as yet unexplored terrains. I thank God and I thank you for your faithfulness as we seek to **RE-MEMBER** who we are every step and every stage of the way.

Remembering is one essential asset for the journey. Another is a sense of joy and the ability to laugh together. That sounds like a cue for Phin Marr, Vice President and Chair of the Professional Effectiveness Committee, and Ministers Council jester par excellence.