



The Association of Welcoming & Affirming Baptists

Associational

A Ongoing eNewsletter from the Executive Director

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Associational is published monthly by the Association of Welcoming & Affirming Baptists, an organization of churches, groups and individuals that advocate for the full inclusion of lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender persons with Baptist churches.

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Responses to the General Secretary's Recent Call For American Baptists to Live Lives of High Moral and Ethical Responsibility From:

From the Executive Director

Dear Brothers and Sisters in Christ,

On July 17, 2006, ABC General Secretary Roy Medley posted "A Call for American Baptists to Live Lives of High Moral and Ethical Responsibility" on www.abc-usa.org. To read Roy's letter, scroll down to the bottom of this newsletter (page 13).

When I read Roy's letter, I felt the same pain as I did in 1998 when a Baptist pastor who had just learned I was gay said, "You're not welcome in this congregation. Please don't ever come back."

My hunch is that all 65 of our AWAB congregations will experience extreme moral outrage by Roy's letter. I have a file full of letters sent to AWAB very similar to the one Roy posted--letters identifying homosexuals with sexual abusers, sexual predators, and moral infidels, and letters calling me and AWAB congregations to repentance. But I am particularly shocked by Roy's letter because this is the first time any such letter filled with exclusionism, elitism, and judgmentalism came to me from the General Secretary of my beloved denomination.

For the first time, I have been "called" by the General Secretary not to ministry, but to acts of exclusion, as he cites the ABC's "official position" (the 1992 *resolution* which states that "the practice of homosexuality is incompatible with Christian teaching") as an absolute criterion for three crucial ministry areas in the ABC: 1) the admission of official exhibitors at the ABCUSA Biennial, 2) chaplain endorsements, and 3) the staffing practices of the staff accountable to him.

I've urged Roy and all American Baptists to repent of this kind of exclusion of God's Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Allied people, and 1) to welcome the Association of Welcoming and Affirming Baptists as an official exhibitor at the 2007 ABCUSA Biennial; 2) to endorse qualified LGBT-Allied chaplains; and 3) to joyfully hire qualified LGBT-Allied people on his immediate staff. Also, I've urged Roy to retract his letter and to confess his lapse in judgment in posting it.

I have been greatly encouraged by the letters circulating in our welcoming and affirming movement (written mostly by straight allies) in response to Roy Medley's letter. Tons of great insight and wisdom in the letters which follow. I hope you'll read them all!

With love,
Rev. Ken Pennings
Executive Director

From Rev. H. James Hopkins

Dear Dr. Medley,

It is with some trepidation that I articulate my uneasiness with your heartfelt pastoral call to high moral and ethical responsibility. Nevertheless, while respecting your pastoral desire for unity in our denomination and for effective public witness, I confess that I find the unity and morality you call for to be flawed in several significant ways. I am responding to you publicly in that your call to us was made in public.

While you do not use the following verbiage, if I interpret your words correctly, you are saying to us that in order to be one, in order to let the world see the way we love one another, in order to live lives that are beyond reproach, we must all give something up. Our more conservative members must give up gay bashing, we more liberal members must give up our inflammatory affirmation of homosexuals, and homosexuals must give up their sexual identity, at least publicly. My question is, if we all must give something up, what must the centrists, the audience you are likely trying to appeal to, give up? I'm not sure I see them included in your call for sacrifice in matters pertaining to the current debate.

Further, my admittedly hurried power analysis of your call finds it to be a classic case of a representative of a powerful majority (in this case the heterosexual persons) telling the less powerful minority (in this case gay and lesbian persons) that they must sacrifice something precious (in this case their God given sexual identities) in order to achieve the greater goods of harmony, unity, effective witness and ethical living. If the roles were somehow reversed, if the homosexuals were the majority and the heterosexuals were the minority, how would you respond to being urged to give up your sexual expression for the greater good? I suspect that you might respond "This is not just."

Finally, you seem to equate sexual identity with sexual sin. If not unjust this equation is at least unfair and unwarranted. Human sexual identities are intricate matters of genetics and life experience, of nature and nurture. Science is still unfolding their mystery and complexity. Further, God's intent for any given identity is not always easily discernable. Thus, it seems that withholding judgment on the sinfulness of a sexual identity is more appropriate than rendering judgment prematurely.

In many ways you are on the right track. We must strive to live lives, both corporately and individually, of high moral and ethical responsibility. We must

recognize that others matter and that we are bound together in ways we do not fully comprehend. Such is the mystery of life and the mystery of the church. Still I am not convinced that we fulfill our moral call, our ethical responsibilities or our spiritual imperatives by beginning with assumptions that are inherently unjust. I do thank you for this opportunity to talk about the tensions in our family and to respectfully disagree.

Peace,
Jim Hopkins,
Lakeshore Avenue Baptist Church, Oakland, CA

From Richard Fairly

I second Jim (*Hopkins*)' concerns that the "official position" of the General Board has some grave ethical problems, not just for the LBGQTQ-allies but for all unmarried persons (and therefore, for all of us). Either we agree to treat each other as adults and grant each other the trust and respect that we deserve, or we descend into a morass of innuendo and inquisition.

These are the questions that I included in my letter to Dr. Medley: "Concerning the official exhibitors at the ABCUSA Biennial, what must they do to demonstrate that they are qualified under the General Board's official position? I realize that there are various methods that might be used, such as signing a doctrinal statement, or checking off a check box. If either of these is used, would you please forward the language of the relevant statement to me? On the other hand, if it is adequate for the exhibitor to refrain from mentioning the practice of homosexuality, or refrain from claiming that the practice of homosexuality is compatible with Christian teaching, I would appreciate knowing the procedure by which this is enforced. If the General Board's position is being implemented in a different way, I would be interested in knowing the details of that other method.

"Concerning chaplains who request endorsement by ABCUSA, is there a general procedure by which the applicant is deemed qualified to receive such an endorsement? Is this something included in an interview, or is the applicant possibly asked to write about it in a paper? If the applicant is satisfied that he or she can practice with an endorsement from a denomination that promotes such an official position, is that adequate, or is more required? If a chaplain receives an endorsement and subsequently has a change of heart to question whether the practice of homosexuality is indeed incompatible with Christian teaching, does your office ever withdraw an

endorsement? Would there be an official method for providing your office with information that a chaplain has had such a change of heart?

"Concerning staff who are accountable to you, I would be surprised if you had a special section of the interview process for unmarried individuals, inquiring into their personal lives, but it is not beyond the realm of possibility. Are there special procedures that you have adopted in order to implement the General Board's official position? Have you identified specific behaviors that fall under the "practice of homosexuality", for instance, and are those covered in an interview? Knowing that there are individuals of the same sex who are called to live together and minister in partnership for a period of time (consider Paul and Silas or Barnabas or Timothy), are there questions that your office includes in the interview process that can distinguish between the practice of homosexuality and the act of living together in a commitment to each other and to the ministry of Christ's gospel? If such a living situation does arise for a member of your staff, would that throw suspicion on the staff member's commitment to the General Board's official position? Would such a change give rise to an official inquiry?"

Roy stated in his letter that our culture is obsessed with sex. He has an opportunity to move away from that obsession in his office and in the people he hires and endorses. In his implementation of the General Board's official position, I wonder if he is taking that opportunity. I can only hope that in his implementation he has not decided to exclude the flamboyant or effeminate or butch or androgynous.

Peace,
Richard Fairly, Berkeley, California

From Rev. Steve Hammond

This is indeed a disturbing message and offers, I think, a rather important clue to where things are headed for the ABCUSA, or where a significant faction would like to see them headed. There are restructuring proposals being discussed by the General Executive Committee and other groups in ABC life. There is, naturally, a concern to keep from losing more conservative congregations and Regions so attempts will be made to find a way of restructuring that will soothe some of their concerns. The General Secretary's message affirming the anti-gay stance of the denomination will not totally allay the fears of many of the more conservative people in the denomination, but it doesn't hurt.

I think our larger concern is how are the rest of us going to help reshape the denomination and Baptist life in general. There are going to be major changes in this, and most, denominations in the coming years. And rightly so. I think all of us on all sides of the issue, will find that the denomination will take on less and less meaning for us. There are other formal and informal alliances, associations, and fellowships that will take on larger meaning for us. In fact, this is already a reality for many of us, no matter where we are on the theological spectrum of American Baptist life.

I know that the Alliance of Baptists and the Rochester Summit have both held Baptist Without Borders gatherings. These are folk who are thinking about where Baptist life is at present, and where we might be headed. I think, though, that it is time for Baptist Without Borders to kick into high gear. I'm not content to wait and see what happens in Baptist life in the coming years. I want progressive Baptists to see what we can make happen. I don't know how we do that, but we need leaders to help us figure it out.

So as distressing as the General Secretary's message is, and its implications, all of our eggs don't any longer need to be in that one basket. We need to help shape life in that basket the best we can, but it is also time to weave another basket or two. Any Baptist basket makers out there?

Steve Hammond
Peace Community Church, Oberlin, Ohio

From Rev. Dr. JoAnne Juett

I am extremely disturbed by it (*Roy's letter*), on several levels.

I find it offensive that the tone of the letter speaks from an assumed authority to make his (*Roy's*) pronouncements--something quite contrary to the Baptist principles I adhere to. And, I'm sure that others will grant him such authority--freely and willingly because of the subject matter--which is even more offensive as a Baptist.

I am most troubled, though, by the third paragraph, where the following "issues" are lumped into one:

We live in a culture obsessed with sex. We see evidence of sexual abuse every day. We are stunned at the reports of sexual impropriety by persons in caring professions (1 Corinthians 6:18). Many persons have been victims of these abuses. The result is an environment of deep suspicion

regarding the sexual integrity of persons in authority. In this context, the matter of homosexual practices continues to divide American Baptists.

There is no acceptable or understandable reason why a Christian leader, especially of the ABC, would link the concepts of sexual obsession, sexual abuse, and sexual impropriety with homosexuality. Whether intentional or not, I find this nearly unforgivable. Whether intentional or not, Roy has now forged this link among all readers--it runs as a not-so-subtle subtext to his entire letter.

I am reminded of the words of Dr. Medley at our last biennial:

I was asked by the General Board before my election, "Where do you stand on the issue of homosexuality?" I replied, "I am conservative in matters related to human sexuality AND I do not want to be separated from those who differ from me. So, I want you to hear me clearly tonight: I am STILL traditional in matters of human sexuality AND I do not want to be separated from those who in Christian conscience differ from me on the issue of homosexuality. We have been a family where I have been granted the privilege of living in that paradox. With all my heart that is where I believe I have been called to be, where we have been called to be.>

I believe that Dr. Medley has moved out of the "paradox", onto firmer ground for himself, but leaving many of the rest of us stranded. Perhaps he never really was in the paradox himself. I don't understand his reasons for the letter, and I would like to. That doesn't change what he has done, however, so it is now up to the rest of us to move ahead.

May God bless us with a new heart and new spirit in whatever arises from these ashes.
Blessing and Peace,

Rev. Dr. JoAnne C. Juett,
Eau Claire, WI.

From Rev. Mindi Welton-Mitchell

Dear Roy Medley,

I have met you a few times and have heard you speak on numerous occasions. As a young American Baptist pastor in Massachusetts, I have listened to what you have said in the past regarding the issues surrounding homosexuality in our denomination. I was most impressed at your Biennial speech in 2005 where you said you were conservative on the matters of human sexuality but

did not want to be alienated from those who disagreed with you.

I have to say I am most disappointed with your letter posted on our denomination's website on Monday, because it seems to be the exact opposite of what you said at the Biennial meeting in 2005 and at the Conference of Baptist Ministers in Massachusetts' convocation in September 2006. Your letter offers no room for those who disagree with you. You state that this is our denomination's policy on homosexuality (I'd be interested if you'd write a letter stating our policy on abortion and on the Iraq war as well and post them on the front page of our website as well) and offer no room for disagreement or dissention, which is very un-Baptist. In fact, this is a most un-Baptist letter from a General Secretary.

What I find hurtful about your letter is that in the second paragraph, you speak of sexual impropriety and abuse, and seem to equate homosexuality with sexual abuse. This is just plain wrong. Being involved in our Region's commission on ordained ministry, I can tell you that the cases of sexual misconduct I have heard of have almost all been among heterosexual clergy, and that sexual orientation has nothing to do with abuse. It is wrong of you to place homosexuality in this category.

While I respect and even support your right to state your own opinion on your view of homosexuality in general, to state that this is the policy of ABC-USA is a misuse of your power as General Secretary, in my opinion.

What I find amusing about your letter is that the same passage in Ephesians (chapter 5) has been quoted by my more conservative relatives as to why I should not be a pastor, because I am a woman. Don't get me wrong--I really enjoy the letter to the Ephesians and in fact am preaching on the lectionary text this Sunday from 2:11-22, about being one in Christ and that "Christ has broken down the dividing wall, that is, the hostility between us" (vs. 14). But to use one verse to state that this is what the Scriptures say about marriage, well, then you might as well say that women should not be pastors as well, based on that same chapter, because I must submit to my husband (who is, by the way, a seminary student). However, even though I have family members who still feel I should not be a pastor, they still came to my ordination service and have said that if I believe Christ is working in me, then who can be against me? I would say the same to you of my gay and lesbian brothers and sisters in the ministry. I would invite you to sit in the pew of a Welcoming and Affirming church, hear a sermon from our gay and lesbian pastors, hear the testimony of lives saved by Christ and transformed by God's love.

Most of all, I am dissatisfied that you decided to post this letter on our website without sending it out to the churches first. Many of our churches that don't have internet access won't find out about this letter for a while, and maybe that was your intention--to do this quietly. I wish you had been more open on this. I feel misled by your previous comments at the Biennial and at the Conference of Baptist Ministers gathering in Massachusetts last fall. I feel betrayed, and I'm not the only one.

I will continue to pray for you and to pray for our denomination. I am a fifth generation ordained American Baptist pastor, and I have no plans to leave our denomination.

Blessings, Rev. Mindi Welton-Mitchell, First Baptist Church, Framingham, MA

From Rev. Paul Hayes

Dear Roy,

I read your recent letter with dismay. As you know, I have the highest regard for you and have appreciated the hard and difficult place you have been in over the last several years. I have admired your leadership and courage in taking on the difficult challenges of the denomination and the harsh attacks directed toward you personally. For that reason, I have defended you on many occasions.

My dismay comes from the fact that you must know that you have, willingly or unwillingly, played into the hands of those who seek to disfellowship AWAB churches, such as mine.

Although never have we in Noank sought to impose our beliefs or emphases in ministry upon anyone (we have recognized our minority status), we have continually felt imposed upon by those who have no notion of the autonomy of the local church. We, like many AWAB churches, receive letters of harassment on occasion, which we have simply chosen to ignore (largely since all of them come from folks in other regions many miles away). We have not reacted to them, nor sought to have them brought up on morally "unChristian" acts of prejudice and judgment against us. We have simply followed the principles conveyed by the Apostle Paul in Romans 14:22--"The faith that you have, have as your own conviction before God. Blessed are those who have no reason to condemn themselves because of what they approve."

My dismay comes from the realization that you have endorsed a means by which churches who choose to affirm the LGBT communities will now be disfellowshipped by you and the leadership of ABCUSA. As I interpret your "call," since we recognize that same-sex partnerships are valid and, especially, if we bless couples in their relationships through civil union ceremonies or even, in some states, marriages, we will be in violation of what now constitutes an American Baptist Church.

You and I may agree that this is your personal opinion and the policies of the General Board that actually have no final bearing on the local church, but that is splitting hairs, since this endorsement from your office will be very persuasive to those who believe that the General Secretary possesses ecclesiastical and moral authority. In effect, you will now be in the position to disfellowship AWAB churches and our allies because it will be your endorsement that will be used to validate our attackers' zeal.

I am also dismayed that you chose to lump all those who are gay with those who are lacking integrity. Promiscuity, sexual abuse, misconduct, molestation, etc. etc., is not an "orientation"--it is an abuse of power. To associate those who have, in fact, established credibility and integrity in their lives by recognizing their homosexual orientation (usually at a huge cost) is a terrible moral and social error on your part.

If you spoke out of ignorance or for rhetorical purposes, that may explain it, but it does not excuse this terrible offense directed toward many fine people. Why you chose to let yourself take this stand after your many previous courageous stands to protect minority rights is hard for me to fathom.

I don't know what to make of the ABCUSA at this point. Will there now be a more zealous "witch-hunt" based on General Board policy and OGS positions? I never expected that you would position yourself against minorities. In any case, maybe you will have served your purposes in a more "Christ-like" and "compassionate" way had you simply asked us to leave the denomination, rather than marginalize us even more than we've felt before.

AWAB churches are not going to stop being who we are and so the only logical course is that we will voluntarily leave a denomination that now officially wants nothing to do with us, or we will wait until we are forced to leave. You have eliminated our place at the table in the ABCUSA. I am sorry that this has happened. I had hoped for something better. Still, I consider you a friend and so I know this letter will bring grief, not joy, to you. For that reason, I respect

your position and thank you for your committed service to this denomination and wish you continued blessings in your role as General Secretary. Blessings,
Paul Hayes, Noank Baptist Church, Noank, CT

From Rev. Paul Hardwick

Roy Medley Speaks – Twice, or DoubleSpeak

General Secretary Roy Medley's recent "Call for American Baptists to Live Lives of High Moral and Ethical Responsibility," centers on a matter that he admits is "not the most important discipleship issue in the New Testament, nor our highest priority of ministry lest we focus on one set of sins above others." Yet he goes on to make it his most important issue.

Ignoring one of the denominational resolutions that acknowledges differences of understanding related to homosexuality, he selected another that he asserts is his responsibility to implement. His call goes on to infer that those who are gay and lesbian cannot "live exemplary lives of the highest ethical responsibility."

This statement has been received by many people as divisive, and they have responded with pain, anger, and sense of betrayal. In one local church earlier this month, the preacher praised Roy Medley's leadership at last year's Biennial for affirming a radical and inclusive love.

We are now a year from the 2005 Biennial gathering of American Baptists in Denver when General Secretary Roy Medley addressed assembled delegates and visitors regarding the "difficult season" in which we live as a denomination.

He said the issue of homosexuality was the one that "has brought us as a denomination to a cross-road in our life together. One road will lead to separation. The other path will lead us to shared ministry and mission in all the theological and ethnic richness that has come to make us the unique denomination we are."

He went on to describe his personal position on the matter and outline the way he would act as leader of the denomination: "I am conservative in matters related to human sexuality AND I do not want to be separated from those who differ from me. So, I want you to hear me clearly tonight: I am STILL traditional in matters of human sexuality AND I do not want to be separated from those who in Christian conscience differ from me on the issue of homosexuality. We have been a family where I have been granted the

privilege of living in that paradox. With all my heart that is where I believe I have been called to be, where we have been called to be."

After listing sixteen ways American Baptists are immersed in Scripture and centered in Christ, he said: "I believe that the heart of our Baptist life is a call to radical personal discipleship lived in a community with a missional vocation. Our missional vocation is to embody and proclaim God's reign of grace to all the world that they might see in us, by the power of the Spirit, the life of Christ which has broken down the dividing wall of hostility between us and made us the new humanity, the beachhead of God's inbreaking reign."

He underscored the importance of a personal faith in the Baptist tradition and the need and the importance of soul liberty as a guarantor of respect for personal faith. He said: "As early Baptists read scripture they saw that God's call is a personal call addressed to each one, a call that requires a personal response. Birth into a Christian tradition or culture cannot substitute for the response required of each one as we stand in the awesome solitude of Christ's invitation to follow him. Baptists knew that only in freedom could one give one's heart and life in discipleship; that only in freedom could one appropriate the witness of scripture through the Spirit; that only in freedom did scripture have authority. For only truth freely found and freely embraced stands in the court of conscience. American Baptists, don't ever forget, 'For freedom Christ has set you free.'"

He affirmed his commitment to biblical authority and soul freedom when he declared: "Our commitment to biblical authority through soul freedom has been precious to us. And it is precious to us now! It doesn't make our life together easier, but it is essential for radical personal discipleship. That is why American Baptists grant the majority the right to say, 'This is what we believe' and also protect the right to speak a minority point of view."

He acknowledged that all this was "hard work," that we "owe one another stormy loyalty," and he aligned himself with the likes of Billy Graham who affirmed an "inclusive" ministry.

As he drew his thoughts to a close, he said: the world needs the witness of a people bound together in love, committed to the difficult task of walking with one another in the midst of strong differences. We stand at a crossroads. In our world, the path of radical discipleship, the path of radical love is the road less taken. We dare not choose another. We dare not choose the wrong road...the road that leads to separation. That choice will certainly unite you with like-minded people, but will give you small souls, and

make you comfortable Christians. The radical call of Jesus doesn't make us comfortable. Take the road-less-traveled - the rich road of love of one another and service for Christ in the midst of our differences."

Our General Secretary's statement was a bold talk in the midst of hard times. It offered his perspective, and it affirmed that he was aware of the hard times in which we are living. In spite of personal differences in matters of faith, he declared that our denomination and tradition was an inclusive gathering of Christians who respect one another and live with one another.

Now we have received this communication from our General Secretary. In words of his Biennial address, he appears to have chosen not to walk the path that leads us to shared ministry and mission in all the theological and ethnic richness that has come to make us the unique denomination we are, to have given up on living in paradox, to have lesser respect for the personal discipleship of some, and to have adopted a willingness to build the dividing wall.

It is well known that the so-called Resolution on which the General Secretary bases his "Call" does not fit the denominations' own definition of a Resolution. ("RESOLUTIONS - Adopted by a 2/3 majority vote of the General Board of American Baptist Churches, a resolution represents the position of the ABC on a specific issue and calls for some type implementing action. All resolutions must be based on a policy statement.") This so-called Resolution is based on no Policy Statement, includes no implementing action, and was adopted 110 Yes, 64 No, 5 Abstain by a post card ballot in October, 1992.

The personal call to each one is now judged by a majority of that post card ballot of General Board members more than a decade ago. Again, the road chosen appears not to be the road-less-traveled – the rich road of love of one another and service for Christ in the midst of our differences. And all because of a decision to change course and emphasize an issue that is admittedly "not the most important discipleship issue in the New Testament, nor our highest priority of ministry lest we focus on one set of sins above others."

Paul Hardwick, Association Minister
Pacific Coast Baptist Association,
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From Rev. Keith H Wimmersberger

The recent "Call" from our General Secretary might offer words of admonition and comfort to some but to

me it strikes several notes of sadness and concern. On the positive side, I do like to hear from my denominational leaders an occasional call to "moral and ethical responsibility". I am troubled by the complete moral irresponsibility of those within our economic system who destroy individual lives through unethical business practice and whose policies contribute to the death of our planet. These are justice issues which the likes of Amos and Brother Jesus would want to address. There are issues regarding the sustenance of our God's own creation which could well use a clarion call from those who lead us in the Lord. Any biblical call to personal and ethical morality is vital to the people of God, yet whenever I feel bombarded by a profusion of biblical texts - I suspect there is agenda about to be unloaded upon me. I suppose I must abandon my suspicions. It both perplexes and distresses me that this particular call was framed in the context of an issue which, in my mind at least, cannot achieve any united consensus of God's people on earth - unless of course we exclude every other denomination dealing with this issue from being a part of God's people.

It is true, that we live in a culture obsessed with sex. We live in a culture which hasn't quite decided that women are human beings deserving of both moral equality and respect. We are a culture obsessed with "using sex to make a sale" in everything from nourishment to our obsession with the combustible engine. We are a culture obsessed with other people's human sexuality paying scarce attention to our own! The prove of this obsession lies in our current obsession with the issue of same gendered sexuality. It is certainly true that as clergy we need to be living "exemplary lives of the highest ethical responsibility in all matters, including matters of sexuality". It is also true that clergy need to live lives of justice and wholeness and integrity in relationship to their own perceived authority which is the root of much evil in our world.

I have been an American Baptist clergy person for over 30 years. I have known the engaging, truth telling, integrity of our General Secretary for over half of that time. I shared his pain and distress as he spoke at our Biennial meeting in Denver addressing these issues. I have been living in fruitful harmony and respect with our ABC family for many years and like Roy: "I do not want to be separated from those who differ from me". I too want to guard our historic ancestry of "soul liberty". I too see what Roger Williams called "the liberty of the religious conscience" as a "guarantor of respect for personal faith". Like our General Secretary I want to "protect the right to speak a minority point of view."

It is difficult "living in that paradox" of prophetic

witness. It is difficult for many of us to live with resolutions of both respect and exclusion in our denominational family. It must be even more difficult for our denominational leaders who live and experience a social and political culture which thrives on division, dissent and exclusion. It is difficult to stand up and say a word about the inclusive ministry of Jesus in these times.

In my preaching on the Book of Acts in the season after Easter I couldn't help but notice the difficulties faced by the early church in its efforts to break down the barriers of exclusivity on the issue of inclusion in regard to people like you and me - the gentiles. There was Phillip baptizing, without the express written consent of the major league apostolic association. There was that disturbing dream of Peter's which the New Testament repeats so often that the message must have been difficult to hear. According to Paul, Peter renounced his own principles in order keep order in the church. It probably took 200 years for the early church to settle the matter about what is clean and unclean among living human beings. Of course there are those who still would impose upon all an ancient holiness code.

I continue to be in prayer for our General Secretary and those who lead our denomination. We may well be at a cross-roads in our life together but it is my hope that we will continue to celebrate the diversity of our spiritual journey together as Baptists and continue to build bridges rather than walls in our denominational life.

Keith H Wimmersberger, Tully United Community Church, Tully, NY

From Rev. Alan Newton

After reading so many of responses to the most recent post of our General Secretary's call to live lives of high moral and ethical responsibility and hearing your pain over this I feel that it is important to speak pastorally to those of you who have been a part of this two year Rochester Summit journey.

Many of you wonder why this statement and why now?

My sense is that this is a response to pressure from the more conservative elements of our ABCUSA family. This letter came without any forewarning to Regional Executives which has been the established pattern of recent years. It is as much a surprise for me as it is for most of you. My intuition about the

reason is confirmed by the quick and vocal delight being expressed by my more conservative brothers.

In some respects this letter says nothing new. The 1992 Statement on Homosexuality and the 1984 Resolution on Family Life are known to us all. Most of us have heard them so many times that we can practically cite them chapter and verse.

We have also been aware of the responsibility of the General Secretary to enforce all General Board policy statements and resolutions. Perhaps not all of us were aware of the scope and limits of his authority but generally this is not new information.

We have heard denominational leaders decry sexual orientation as a sin among sins before.

I believe this to be a sincere honest statement of Roy Medley's beliefs and a clear articulation of the limit of his authority given him by the General Board. This is not anything radically new. Roy has told us many times where he stands.

However, this is the first time I have heard a General Secretary issue a call which leaves no room for persons who hold a different world view from the majority. This is the first time I find the line in the sand drawn in such a way that there is no room for me and so many like me. There have been many other pastors and denominational leaders who have been drawing lines of exclusion but this is the first time such words have come from the mouth of the General Secretary.

There are troubling inferences in this letter which perhaps were not intended but which are nevertheless present: that homosexuality is abusive, that it is without integrity, that it is immoral, unethical and irresponsible. These inferences intended or not have been very hurtful to many in our American Baptist family. I have not heard our General Secretary speak in a way which has been so hurtful to so many before this point in time.

I have shared with Roy that I cannot honor his call. To honor this call would be to turn my back on Christ which is something I will not do for any person. In my early years of youth I experienced such a profound affirmation of me, "just as I am" with all my faults and sins, that I cannot be anything but affirming of my GLBT brothers and sisters; to all my sisters and brothers. Jesus convinced me at an early age that my charge and mission was to love and not judge. It became clear to me that it was not up to me to determine who is inside or outside of the family of God. That was God's work. My response to that is THANK GOD! God put me in charge of my life and not that of my sisters and brothers. It has been my

understanding that as a Christian I am to follow Jesus and the example he has set for me has been one of radical love and radical inclusion.

I confess, I did not come to this place I stand easily without strain and struggle. Nor did I join this path toward affirmation of my own volition. I had to be convinced and God has been very convincing.

I don't know fully know what to make of or do with this letter. I know that I will pray about it. I know that I will pray for Roy Medley. I hope that Roy and I will have opportunity to talk about this letter and to hear what his intentions in writing this letter were and how he sees us moving forward into the future.

But I want you good folks to know that I will not give up. I will continue to bring your concerns, hopes and ideals to the table. I will continue to voice the ideals and principles which have formed and shaped who we are as Baptists. I will continue to hold before the body the Gospel of love, given to us by God, whose very nature is love.

Alan Newton, Executive Minister, Rochester-Genessee Region ABC-USA

From Rev. Mark Clinger

Last week, Rev. Dr. A. Roy Medley, General Secretary of the American Baptist Churches USA issued "A Call for American Baptists to Live Lives of High Moral and Ethical Responsibility". While we might imagine a call issued under such a title could focus on a host of moral matters, it did not. Dr. Medley proceeded to speak of a culture obsessed with sex and of sexual abuse. Having established this as the context of his remarks, Medley then proceed to address homosexuality by restating the position of the General Board of the American Baptist Churches "that homosexuality is incompatible with Christian teaching."

I was astonished by this statement and deeply disappointed in Dr. Medley for making it. These remarks were totally out of character given the soaring speech he made but a year ago at our biennial when he said ". . . I do not want to be separated from those who in Christian conscience differ from me on the issue of homosexuality." Now, he chooses to speak to only one General Board statement while remaining silent to the Board's second and later statement that calls for dialogue on the matter of homosexuality. He further retreats from

his biennial remarks, separating himself from those of conscience who differ, by placing homosexuality in the context of sexual abuse. Nothing could be a greater distortion of homosexuality or more divisive than to place this issue in a context of sexual abuse.

His "Call" raises many questions. Why would this statement be issued? Why in issuing a call to moral and ethical responsibility would he focus so narrowly on but one statement of the General Board's many statements relating to matters of personal responsibility? Why would he ignore and even subvert the Board's call for dialogue? In his biennial remarks he said, "For only truth freely found and freely embraced stands in the court of conscience." Why does he now issue this "call", without defending the freedom of conscience he once so eloquently espoused?

In peace,
Mark Clinger, First Baptist Church, Madison, WI

From Rev. Sandi John

Dear Dr. Medley,

I have taken a week to respond to your letter of July 17 because I felt so sad and angry when I read it that I felt speechless to reply. I have been praying like Paul "with groanings too deep for words" as I considered my comments.

I was born and reared in an ABC family, educated at the American Baptist Seminary of the West, ordained in an ABC church, endorsed as a pastoral counselor and institutional chaplain by the BNM ABC, have held pastoral roles including associate, interim, and senior pastor in four ABC churches. I serve on the Council of the Association of Welcoming and Affirming Baptists as a straight ally. I respect you as the pastor and leader of our denomination. I do not mean anything I say in this letter to be disrespectful to you. And there is so much in your letter that stuns me by its misinformation.

I am appalled at your linking of homosexual practices to sexual impropriety, lack of sexual integrity, and abuse. I have many glbt spiritual friends and colleagues. My prayer partner is a lesbian woman ordained in the Christian Church Disciples of Christ who has been in a faithful monogamous partnership for 20 plus years. My ministry partner at one of the churches I pastored was a gay man and one of the most deeply spiritual persons I have known and worked with over the years who helped me grow tremendously in my faith. In my many years as a pastoral counselor I have sadly worked with many

heterosexual men who violated the trust of female congregants and clients by sexual misconduct. I know from experience that both heterosexual and homosexual relationships can be marked by love, faithfulness, and integrity, or be exploitative and abusive. So for you to say, "in the context" of sexual integrity, sexual impropriety, and abuse, you raise the matter of homosexual practice is truly lacking in accuracy.

You cite as the "official" ABC position the board resolution of October 1992, that "the practice of homosexuality is incompatible with Christian teaching." The board resolution of June 1993 acknowledging the "variety of understandings" within the denomination and calling for dialogue on human sexuality is equally "official". I reviewed them both and found that they passed by about the same margin. Furthermore, the former was a mail ballot while the latter had the benefit of much more discussion and refinement. It also comes later chronologically. So again it seems less than accurate to call the 1992 resolution the official position.

Again, I intend no disrespect, but I am dumbfounded that you with your education and in your position of authority devote your letter to proof-texting rather than acknowledging the interpretation of Scripture in its historical context and open to the ongoing revelation of the Spirit.

Finally, I know you acknowledge in your letter that there are many discipleship issues in the Scriptures that deserve our attention. However, the ABC seems bent at this time in spending most of our resources and energy in this family struggle over the issue of sexuality. If I were to write a significant pastoral letter from your office at this time, I would call on all American Baptists to intensify our work as peacemakers in a world deeply wounded by fear, hate, and destruction of persons and groups of persons whom we find different from ourselves culturally, racially, religiously, sexually, or in any other way.

My hope is that you will reconsider what you have written and issue a more accurate letter. I, too, pray to live a life of integrity, prayer, purpose, and passion and to bear witness to Jesus the Christ.

Sincerely,
The Rev. Sandi John, 1607 Park Overlook Dr.,
Reston, VA 20190

From Rev. Lou Drew

Dear Dr. Medley,

I am very upset at the implications I sense in your letter, recently sent to American Baptists. You, I believe, imply that homosexual people lack both "moral integrity" and are more likely to be guilty of being sexual abusers. This is outrageous.

So, you're going to enforce and implement some sort of witch hunt on exhibitors at the Biennial and on staff. Shame, Dr. Medley! But I guess you sense which way the wind is blowing and are just bowing to the majority - perhaps you've heard about what happened in my region, ABCVNH, vis-a-vis the elections we recently held. I wonder, though, if you heard about the direct personal attacks on my integrity which were made in the plenary business meeting there. Yes, you've sensed which way the wind is blowing, but be assured, "It's an ill wind which blows nobody good." (Hope I've quoted that correctly.)

Keeping the ABC enterprise afloat as it is currently constituted is not worth selling out an active and vital group of God's people. As the saying goes, "I'm straight, but not narrow." It grieves me to see my beloved ABCUSA becoming so narrow because of homophobia and our leadership caving in to those who would force their theological/social opinions on others. Mark my words, those of us who are divorced are next...

Peace,
Rev. Lou Drew, First Baptist Church, Plaistow, NH,
General Board Representative, ABCVNH (2001-2006
inclusive)

From Rev. Dale Edmondson

Dear Roy,

I write quite aware that you face disturbing challenges in giving leadership to American Baptists Churches, USA—and that you attempt to face these challenges with great reliance on prayer and soul-searching.

At the same time, I am personally confused about what you intend in your pastoral letter of July 17. In it, I read your timely statement about the sin of sexual abuse within our society, its tragic consequences, the compounded tragedy of its being perpetrated by some within the caring professions, and the resulting "environment of deep suspicion regarding the sexual

integrity of persons in authority." Your letter then proceeds, in the same paragraph, to speak of "homosexual practices." Do you intend, by this, to add "homosexual practices" to the list, showing it as a sin connected to the enumerated abuses of others? Or do you intend merely to acknowledge that homosexual practices (as you state) "continue to divide American Baptists"? One can easily deduce you intend the former, given the context of your letter, especially when it states only one of two official positions on this matter. If this is so, I can understand the deep hurt many readers of your letter feel and their belief that you have rescinded the strong, prophetic (and very Baptist) affirmation you gave at the Denver Biennial concerning freedom of Biblical interpretation and the importance of inclusiveness within our fellowship.

Because I have viewed you as a person of consistency and integrity, I should like to believe that you continue to embrace your Denver affirmation and without equivocation. If this is the case, I hold the ambiguity of your letter on this point is unfortunate and hope for a way in which this can be rectified and an inclusive fellowship fostered. To this end, I would suggest our constituency be reminded that we have also an official position calling for dialogue among ourselves on this issue and that it calls on us to "respect and defend the individual integrity of all persons within our denomination and their Christian commitment as we engage the issue of human sexuality."

Behind and beneath it all, the concluding call of your letter is beyond contention—i.e., that "we must pray with and for one another, share our purpose in Christ, and practice passionate care and regard for one another."

Yours sincerely,
Dale K. Edmondson, San Leandro, CA

From Robin Lunn

Dear Mr. Medley,

I must say I am stunned but not surprised by the letter issued from your office on July 17. After having read this several times over, and having pondered the statements and assertions you make, I wish to ask some clarifying questions.

You assert that you "strive to live a life centered in Christ". If this is so, why are no words of Jesus quoted in your letter? As a fellow follower of Jesus who also strives to live a life centered in Christ I know

that the life and ministry of Jesus, his words and deeds, are the highest moral and ethical example and that all other scripture must be interpreted through this precious lens. Since your letter quotes Paul and Pauline authorities solely I must assume that you believe, as the General Secretary for the ABCUSA, that the dispensation of Jesus has passed and that Paul and the Church now stand above Jesus.

As a member of the ABCUSA I need to know your theological perspective on these matters as it effects all aspects of our institutional life together. If, as our vision statement declares, we are "a Christ-centered, biblically grounded, ethnically diverse people called to radical personal discipleship in Christ Jesus," then I would ask you where does Jesus come into your letter of July 17?

Secondly, I find, once again, the statement that the ABCUSA has an "official position" on the issue of human sexuality disingenuous. While there are many who wish the ABCUSA were more dictatorial in nature, the historic principles that continue to be affirmed in our identity statements that "We accept no humanly devised confession or creed as binding" apply to the resolutions passed by the General Board, at least the last time I checked. And while there is the statement (confession?) specifically concerning homosexuality (10/92), passed without proper procedural protocols I would add, it is not the only statement on the matter of human sexuality on the books. And if you wish to be parliamentary about the matter, the later resolution adopted in 1993 by the General Board should trump the earlier resolution due to purely procedural adherence. Additionally, this later resolution was adopted following the covenanted procedures as laid out in the ABCUSA Bylaws for the adoptions of any Statement or Resolution by the General Board. So, please explain to me why you believe the "official position" of the ABCUSA (if there can ever be one) is the 1992 statement as opposed to the 1993/98 statement?

Additionally, I realize that as General Secretary you may be responsible for implementing all General Board policy decisions and for coordinating the implementation of American Baptist Policy Statements and Resolutions. But when there is conflict between resolutions, on what basis do you determine the coordinating of said Statements and Resolutions? It seems capricious and against the democratic principles of this institution that you would select a subordinate statement to implement when it is your duty and responsibility to seek a way toward unity and reconciliation being inclusive of all dissenting positions. Does not the Policy Statement on Denominational Inclusiveness adopted in 1993 not specifically address the issue of our diversities and

call us to seek unity (not homogeneity!) in our diversity? As the Policy Statement says in closing, Having made these promises, we face the future with confidence, knowing ". . . that the one who began a good work among [us] will bring it to completion by the day of Jesus Christ" (Philippians 1:6).

Is this not the very ground of our beings as Baptists?

I am not so foolish as to hope that there is any chance of changing the course of the ABCUSA in these days of fundamentalism and witch-hunts. However, I feel it is critical that you be clear about your position on these above matters, as the Body must know from what impulse the head moves it. If you are of the mind that "radical personal discipleship in Christ Jesus" can only be expressed in heterosexual persons, and preferably married types, then what do you do with all of the Biblical witness that varies from this? What do you do with Jesus himself, since he never revealed what his marital or sexual preferences were? What do you do with the witness that proclaims; when we are baptized into Christ we are a new creation and that the walls between us are torn down, as the writer of Ephesians so beautifully puts it -

²¹⁴For he is our peace; in his flesh he has made both groups into one and has broken down the dividing wall, that is, the hostility between us. ¹⁵He has abolished the law with its commandments and ordinances, that he might create in himself one new humanity in place of the two, thus making peace, ¹⁶and might reconcile both groups to God in one body through the cross, thus putting to death that hostility through it.

And as our 1993/98 Resolution affirms,
... we call on American Baptists to:

1. Testify that Jesus Christ is the unifying presence in our denomination.
2. Explore the biblical and theological issues of human sexuality.
3. Consider using the resources identified and gathered by the ABC Commission on Resources on Human Sexuality.
4. Acknowledge that there exists a variety of understandings throughout our denomination on issues of human sexuality such as homosexuality and engage in dialogue concerning these issues.
5. Respect and defend the individual integrity of all persons within our denomination and their Christian commitment as we engage the issue of human sexuality.
6. Pray fervently that as we honestly address these concerns we may seek unity and avoid divisiveness as we grow in our common mission for Jesus Christ.

As I said in my opening, I am not surprised by your letter. Stunned and saddened, but not surprised. I have watched over these past five years as the iceberg of human sexuality was allowed to rip a hole in the side of the ABCUSA. Or perhaps a more apt metaphor, I have watched as more and more bricks were demanded for the building of Pharaoh's city, and now the straw has been taken away and more bricks are demanded still.

I, for one, am willing to leave Egypt and follow God's pillar of fire into the desert where new things always happen! I do not seek houses made of cedar, or bricks and mortar, but rather, the living tabernacle that is Christ Jesus, where all dividing walls are torn down and where we are able to live in the paradox of lion and lamb, snake and small child, Pharisee, Sadducee and heretic alike.

I will await your response to my above questions and will continue to wait on the Lord for what is not yet fully revealed.

Waiting in the Lord,
Robin Lunn, 846 Upper Dummerston Road,
Brattleboro, VT 05301

Robin's comments to AWAB members: As a lesbian in ministry, I am sick and tired of being the "issue"! If we continue to play in the sick system that is the ABCUSA I, and my fellow lgbtq peers, will never be anything other than an "issue" to be dealt with. There is nothing in this for me or for any of us who feel called to follow Jesus except a continued thrashing over our sentimental attachments to an institution that is clearly not committed to the historic baptist covenants.

I, for one, desire to follow Jesus in ways and through institutions that don't feel the need to make my sexuality the end-all and be-all of life as we know it. I want to be a part of a movement and institutions that see Welcome as more than just an issue of who a person sleeps with. I want to be a part of the radical inclusive love of Christ that demands we acknowledge where our privilege, both personal and corporate, denies access to others.

None of us are free if one of us is chained. I believe that God is calling us out of Egypt and into the desert where we can set a course to a new Promised Land. I pray that we are willing and able to learn from the past and to make haste in humility to that radical inclusive love of Christ for, God knows, our world surely needs us now.

Peace - Robin Lunn

Rev. Dr. Roy Medley's Letter

Posted on www.abc-usa.org on July 17, 2006

Dear American Baptist:

The following call is being issued as a continuing part of our implementation of policies adopted by the General Board. I call it to your prayerful attention.

A Call for American Baptists to Live Lives of High Moral and Ethical Responsibility

I, therefore, the prisoner of the Lord, beseech you to walk worthy of the calling with which you were called... (Ephesians 4:1). A life centered in Christ makes Christ the model and is worthy of replication (Philippians 3:10). There are many dimensions to the Christ-centered life including—but not limited to—integrity, stewardship, compassion, spiritual practices, and sexual discipline (Ephesians 6:13). In various times and ways American Baptists have spoken to these aspects of the life of discipleship.

While not the most important discipleship issue in the New Testament, nor our highest priority of ministry lest we focus on one set of sins above others that afflict us such as racism, greed, sexism and gluttony, nonetheless, sexual concerns increasingly dominate our attention (Romans 1:28). We live in a culture obsessed with sex. We see evidence of sexual abuse every day. We are stunned at the reports of sexual impropriety by persons in caring professions (1 Corinthians 6:18). Many persons have been victims of these abuses. The result is an environment of deep suspicion regarding the sexual integrity of persons in authority. In this context, the matter of homosexual practices continues to divide American Baptists.

The official position of American Baptist Churches USA is that "the practice of homosexuality is incompatible with Christian teaching" and that marriage is intended to be "between a woman and a man" (Ephesians 5:31). This is my personal belief, as the General Secretary of ABCUSA, but more so, it is my responsibility to uphold this as the official position of the General Board of ABCUSA. This has been implemented in the admission of official exhibitors at the ABCUSA Biennial, chaplain endorsements, and in the staffing practices of the staff accountable to me.

Not only do I strive to live a life centered in Christ with moral integrity, I expect the same from my staff, and I call upon all American Baptists to live exemplary lives of the highest ethical responsibility in all matters, including matters of sexuality.

Further, I call upon all American Baptists to practice Christ-like compassion (Colossians 3:12) and care for all of God's people in our families, our communities, and our churches. The redeeming love of Jesus Christ must be extended to all persons, and there is no place for hate, violence, or injustice (Philippians 4:8).

Finally, I call upon all American Baptists to practice a life of prayer, purpose (Philippians 1:21) and passion (Philippians 3:13) in our lives together. We must pray with and for one another, share our purpose in Christ, and practice passionate care and regard for one another. In this way we bear witness to Jesus Christ (Philippians 2:1-11).

Yours in Christ,
Rev. Dr. A. Roy Medley, General Secretary

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Associational is a periodic e-newsletter of the Association of Welcoming & Affirming Baptists, a network of 63 churches and hundreds of individuals who have joined together to advocate for the full inclusion of lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender persons within Baptist communities of faith. Please forward this e-newsletter to interested friends. Copy relevant information into your organization's bulletin and newsletter. To subscribe, send an e-mail to subscribe@wabaptists.org with SUBSCRIBE in the subject line. To be removed from this list, send an e-mail to unsubscribe@wabaptists.org with REMOVE in the subject line. To read back issues of Associational, go to: www.wabaptists.org/associational.htm.

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