

On the Public Witness of American Baptists

We Delegates have come to this Biennial Convention facing again the perennial question of how to structure our denomination. Our free-church polity gives us a nimbleness in the face of historical change, empowering and requiring frequent reevaluation, finding a new structure that addresses new challenges with the abiding truths of the Gospel according to the basic tenets of free church polity. The new structure before us responds creatively to the complex challenges of pastoral ministry, evangelism, and prophetic engagement in our nation and world at the dawn of this new century. We acknowledge also that this new structure emerges from the shadow of the strife and dissention in our denominational life over the past few decades. We have disagreed with one another over a variety of interconnected doctrinal issues, including: ordination; evangelism; the authority of scripture; human sexuality; the tensions of inclusiveness; the independence and mutual accountability of local churches, regions, and national bodies; and the nature of church health and outreach. Our disagreements have, as they often do in our tradition, been taken up in public debate, and on occasion have erupted into bitterness. Feelings have been hurt by and on every side of every issue, by hard and heavy words spoken from the dais, and the unity of our body has been strained by uncharitable and intemperate words in open debate. As happens in our proudly democratic tradition, which assumes every believer to have something of worth to offer, our recent public debates have sometimes shed more infernal heat than gospel light.

To some degree, every restructuring “fights the last war,” so to speak, and so every restructuring risks over-compensating for the difficulties of its recent history. Our last restructuring (1970s) over-compensated for its own recent past by vesting great authority for policy in the General Board, diminishing the role of the Biennial Convention in debating the major issues. Unfortunately, the bylaws under consideration at this convention likewise over-compensate in their provisions for “Public Witness Statements”. Under these new provisions, statements about important issues of faith, identity, evangelism, and justice are voted on region-by-region, requiring a supermajority of three quarters of the region and national program boards to pass (27 out of 36 boards). *These Public Witness Statements will never be discussed or debated at the Biennial Convention or in any other single forum where all of us are represented,* depriving us all of the wisdom of our sisters and brothers and of the opportunity to forge a denomination-wide agreement. Worse still, the voices of the minority are silenced utterly: there is no provision under this system for minority opinions to be aired or their votes to be recorded. As Biennial Delegates, we believe this to weaken our common life.

Our recent strife has not obviated our need for a public arena. Like the public squares of old, where many of our forbears on their soap boxes evangelized individuals and called princes and principalities to account, American Baptists need a place where we can all gather to hear news from other precincts, to be comforted by a strange word of grace and to be challenged by a new prophetic voice. We need a common way to address the most important questions of our day, at least provisionally, for that current moment. We need to hear together the clear wisdom in the voice of the majority, as well as the important dissent of some minority that may in the long run be proven right. We need a way to discern together what we stand for in response to the new call of the Spirit from the still, small voice, from the ancient words of Scripture and tradition, and from the deep cries of the least of these, our brothers and sisters. At our best, our public debate has testified boldly to the prophetic and transformative Gospel of Jesus Christ, in which we are commanded both to assert the claims of conscience and to love each other more deeply than mere agreement. At our best, this is how we forge the general outlines of our common life together.

Although we are weary of our recent theological disputes, half deafened by a public clamor too loud with contention and too meek in celebration, we also acknowledge this inescapable lesson of our history: denominational challenges requiring a broad response, forged in the open by the raised voices of the whole, will surely again arise. In such a moment, it is a necessary privilege to reason together to discern the mind of Christ for the denomination. Though mindful of the risks of open debate, we recognize this as our way, the way we forge resolution and move forward. Therefore, we delegates to this Biennial Convention of 2009 challenge ourselves and our denominational leaders going forward to reevaluate the provisions under the new structure for Public Witness Statements, making space for the public registration of minority dissent and finding ways to extend discernment about these matters beyond the regional level back to the Biennial Conventions, where they ultimately belong.