

From Central Baptist Church in Wayne, PA. A welcoming and affirming Baptist congregation.

### An Alarming Change in Store for American Baptist Churches

At the upcoming Biennial, American Baptist Churches USA will be voting on a new structure for the denomination. As you might expect, this will involve a lot of institutional reshuffling that is generally uninteresting, and on the surface it all seems to have little impact on the life of a congregation. However, there are some important and potentially troublesome implications of the new structure for the local American Baptist congregation, and for welcoming and affirming churches in particular. Here is a very basic summary of the changes that will come with the new structure.

The main governing body for the denomination will be the “Board of General Ministries.” This will replace the former “General Board” with some important changes. The new Board of General Ministries will be much smaller – only 45 people. There will be one representative from each of the 33 regions, and a scattering of other institutional positions. It is important to realize, however, that there will need to be intentional lines of communication between the Board of General Ministries regional representatives and local congregations for a church to have knowledge of and input into denominational decisions.

Another big change that will be enacted by the new structure is the release of International Ministries and National Ministries as quasi-autonomous mission societies. They each will appoint their own Boards of Directors, set their own rules and policies, and will maintain complete control of their own endowments. This means that these two mission agencies will not have direct accountability to either the national or regional governing bodies. One likely implication of this change is that International and National Ministries will be increasingly soliciting their own funding directly from churches; and this will likely draw significant income out of the United Mission giving stream. Regional ministries are almost entirely dependent on United Mission giving (roughly 65% of every United Mission dollar goes back to the region), so any significant reduction in United Mission income will severely undercut the ability of regions to provide meaningful support to congregations. With only a few exceptions, ABC regions across the US have been cutting staff, programs, and congregational support. Some are on the verge of insolvency. The new structure could lead to the collapse of regional infrastructures.

Welcoming and affirming churches have some very specific reasons to be concerned about the new structure. Most welcoming and affirming churches know that in 1992 the General Board of the ABCUSA adopted a resolution which states, “We affirm that the practice of homosexuality is incompatible with Christian teaching.” You may not know that in 2005 the General Board voted to add the following sentence to the official document entitled “*We Are American Baptists*”: “A Biblical People: Who submit to the teaching of Scripture that God's design for sexual intimacy places it within the context of marriage between one man and one woman, and acknowledge that the practice of

homosexuality is incompatible with Biblical teaching.” This document is posted on the ABCUSA web-site as our “Identity Statement.” Many American Baptists have decried the presence of such a “creedal statement” as a dangerous departure from the core Baptist principles of “anti-creedalism”, soul liberty, and the autonomy of the local congregation.

If the new structure is enacted, all existing resolutions and policy statements will automatically become “public witness statements” of the ABC. However, the new structure sets a higher bar to rescind past resolutions and policy statements than to rescind future public witness statements. A motion to rescind the '92 resolution would have to be initiated by the Board of General Ministries, and then it would be voted on individually by each of the 33 regional boards, and the national boards (Board of General Ministries, International Ministries, and National Ministries). Three-quarters of these boards must vote to rescind (even though it only took a 2/3 majority to enact the '92 resolution!). This means that it is highly unlikely that the '92 resolution will ever be rescinded once the new structure takes effect.

There is one more note of alarm. The new by-laws do not explicitly affirm the freedom of congregations to seek membership in a non-geographical region (this is most important when a congregation is “dis-fellowshipped” by their region). That is allowed at present through a standing rule. In the new structure, however, that standing rule could be changed at any time by a simple majority vote by the Board of General Ministries. If that were to occur, an individual welcoming and affirming church may not know about it until after the action was completed.

Central Baptist Church will have at least 4 delegates at the Biennial, who will likely be voting against the new structure. Unless a coalition of concern arises, and churches send delegates to the Biennial, it is unlikely that the new structure will be voted down. Hold the delegates and the leadership of the ABC in your prayers. There is a lot at stake – perhaps the very future of the Baptist integrity of the ABC!

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