

August 3, 2004

Larry Coffman
Committee Chairperson
Judson Association
PO Box 401
Hepzibah, WV 26369

Dear Mr. Coffman:

I received your letter when I returned from a conference this past week. I welcome the opportunity to dialogue about issues of faith and practice. However, the tone of your letter does not seem to welcome dialogue as much as it welcomes conversion. It seems as though you have already made up your mind about me and my church, even though to my knowledge we have never met.

So, allow me to introduce our church. We are a faithful American Baptist congregation that has been serving Jesus Christ and His world since 1850. We have a long history of American Baptist Mission work. A former president of the denomination was our student minister and we have a sister church in Leon, Nicaragua. Our church ministry seeks to embody Christ's compassion as described in Matthew 25. Our church building houses an alternative school, two other congregations, an adoption agency and numerous musical opportunities in and around the University of Minnesota. In the next two weeks we will be sponsoring a Burmese Baptist refugee family as they resettle in the Twin Cities. These are the same Baptists who were originally evangelized by the Judsons. We are a partner congregation of the Baptist Peace Fellowship of North America and a founding member of the Association of Welcoming and Affirming Baptists. As you can see, our affiliation with AWAB is a small part of a much bigger whole.

We have studied the scriptures as we confront many contemporary issues, including sexuality. We do not seek to rewrite God's standards. Rather our serious and thorough study has revealed that the Bible is silent about homosexuality as we know it today. The scriptures that you cite on your letterhead when read in context do not refer to the mutual love two people of the same power level who are of the same gender have for each other and the expression of such love. We disagree with your statement, "There is no denying that the OT and NT describes and condemns practices that the association of Welcoming and Affirming Baptist Churches "count as sacred"". While our beliefs may not represent a majority of American Baptists, we believe in the Baptist right and responsibility to respect and defend the rights of the minority.

As Baptists, we respect the right and the responsibility of each individual to make up their own minds about the interpretation of Holy Scripture with the Holy Spirit as the guide and the community as the sounding board. We fully realize that there will be differences of opinion around interpretation of scripture and the way we conduct each of our churches. We respect your right to differ from us and we expect you to hold to the

Baptist tenets of soul freedom, local church autonomy and Biblical freedom. I truly believe that dialogue about our differences should not divide us, but should bring us closer together as brothers and sisters in Christ.

You pointed out the 1992 resolution which states, “We affirm that the practice of homosexuality is incompatible with Christian teaching”. I would like to point out the 1993 resolution calling for dialogue on matters of human sexuality. For your convenience, here is the resolution’s language:

8201:3/93

AMERICAN BAPTIST RESOLUTION CALLING FOR DIALOGUE ON HUMAN SEXUALITY

Since our founding days, we American Baptists have heralded the Bible as central to our lives. Individuals have the right and responsibility to interpret Scripture under the guidance of the Holy Spirit within the community of faith. We have also come together to seek the mind of Christ on contemporary issues, knowing that none of our corporate statements claims to speak for all of us. The time has come for our churches, Regions, National Boards, and the General Board of the American Baptist Churches, USA to consider prayerfully the mind of Christ regarding human sexuality.

Therefore, 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.

Both of these resolutions hold the same weight in our denomination. I would like to encourage you to hold to the dialogue resolution. We would welcome the opportunity to

dialogue with you and your congregations. When we do so, I believe we model Christ's compassion and mercy.

The Baptist Peace Fellowship and the Alliance of Baptists have published a fine resource for congregations who are interested in dialogue on homosexuality. If you have not seen it yet, I encourage you and your committee to read *Rightly Dividing the Word of Truth: A Resource for Congregations in Dialogue on Sexual Orientation*.

Let me be clear. We have no plans to remove ourselves from the Association of Welcoming and Affirming Baptists. We believe that calling for such removal is in itself unBaptist. I find it surprising that an Association of Baptist churches would call upon us to sacrifice our soul freedom and local church autonomy in the name of conformity. This is the kind of creeping creedalism that our forbearers fought against.

We appreciate your prayers for us. We will reciprocate and pray for you. May God bless you and keep you. May we find some work for Christ's church in which we can find unity. I believe Christ calls us to that.

Sincerely,

The Rev. Douglas M. Donley
Pastor
University Baptist Church
Minneapolis, MN