

## An Open Letter to the Regional Executive Ministers Council

January 17, 2005

[The following is an open letter from the Council of the Association of Welcoming & Affirming Baptists to the Regional Executive Ministers Council of the American Baptist Churches USA, which issued a "pastoral letter" November 20, 2004, by a vote of 20 yes, 3 no, and 3 abstentions. The REMC letter is available online at: <http://www.abc-usa.org/news/20041202a.htm>.]

Dear Brothers and Sisters in Christ:

We write to protest in the strongest possible terms your November 20th "Pastoral Letter," its misleading form, and its predictably divisive effects. We praise God for those among you with the clarity and savvy to vote against this Trojan horse, when others seem to have simply and disastrously failed to read the signs of the times. And we are grateful for those who, by absence or abstention, prevented the affirmative vote from being even higher. Despite its moderate overtures, we fear this letter provides an ideal foundation, whether intended or not, for an impending effort to dismiss all Welcoming and Affirming Baptists from the ABC.

The letter appears to have been written in a spirit of moderation and concession. We appreciate that spirit whenever we find it, and we do not judge your hearts, for clearly some of you intended a moderate peace. But this makes the letter's damage all the more tragic. You should be the stewards of our peace and our polity. And yet, in seeking to address a perceived problem, you have naively or intentionally introduced a real one, a concrete "next step" down the road to wholesale denominational purge and takeover. The pastoral letter is organized around a number of statements and assumptions that are dangerously misleading, and its pacifying tone is belied at every turn.

The clearest example of the letter's misleading content is the way it covers the normalizing of discrimination in commitments #1 ("Refrain from recommending or approving persons who are practicing homosexuals") and #2 ("Refrain from conducting or participating in marriage ceremonies for same-sex couples") with the whitewash of commitment #3 ("Refrain from making stereotypical statements about homosexuals, participating in homophobic behavior, making uninformed assumptions about homosexuals"). Your commitment to refrain from bigotry in the third point is already violated by the first two, which establish a second-class citizenship. To refrain from recommending qualified individuals on the basis of sexual orientation, to refrain from extending the ceremonies and ordinances of the church to ALL of those who follow Christ, is already to participate in homophobic behavior. And so the letter is inherently homophobic, misleadingly so.

The second example is better veiled. The document seeks to portray itself as a kind of "cease fire," making concessions to all sides. The concession offered to the W&A churches, beyond the hollow promise of point #3, is found in point #4 ("Refrain from making threats of withdrawal of resources and threats of withdrawal of fellowship"). Of course, this is not a "concession" to be granted; it is your job. Each of you is entrusted with the stewardship of the health of the body of Christ. When you offer to resist the exclusionary impulse of those urging dismissal as if it is a concession, it misleads.

In fact, these thinly veiled threats continue unrestrained. Regions are soliciting support for a sweeping array of changes to fundamental denominational documents, changes which would a) institute a creedal litmus test requiring an affirmation that the practice of homosexuality is incompatible with Christian teaching for denominational membership; and b) deny dismissed churches a right of appeal or an opportunity to join a different region. These changes are being pushed in the name of our fund raising, crippled because "The controversy over homosexuality has consumed our agenda, our discussion time, and our energy." If the suggestion that we will not raise money until the "homosexual issue" is settled according to the proposals now circulating is not a threat to withhold mission giving, it is difficult to know what would be.

Of course, the irony here is that the people who scream the loudest about the distraction of the "homosexual issue" are the ones themselves causing the distraction. No W&A church has ever tried to impose its beliefs about homosexuality on anyone; neither have we as an association ever argued that the denomination must adopt our biblical interpretation, as dearly as we would like for that to happen. Our work has been to ensure that there are some places within our denomination that are indeed affirming, not that every place is. The distractions have come when others have tried inappropriately to impose their anti-gay theology on others and on the broader body. Strictly speaking, the distraction has not been the "homosexual issue" but the issue of the hatred of homosexuality. From this alone have come our major distractions, from the extraordinary and undemocratic mail-in General Board resolution and the dismissal of good churches and the resulting adjudications to this latest travesty.

The most pernicious example of misleading language is the slippery use of the phrase, "We will voluntarily refrain." It implies that you who voted to ratify this letter have made commitments that are merely personal in your individual ministries, rather than set policy for your regions or the denomination as a whole. It is the height of naiveté to believe that the letter's use will be so restricted. Those who seek to appoint themselves as purifiers and usurpers of God's judgment have never hesitated to twist and misconstrue every provision of polity into a cudgel. They are like the Pharisees, who believe man was made for the Sabbath and let Jesus' followers go hungry, so passionately do they seek to create a new law where the new heaven and the new earth ought to be. Even those of you who truly wished for something moderate have delivered a prod into the hands of people who would drive you to take sides. You will surely be approached, "lovingly," "in the name of Christ," and be held accountable for every jot and tittle of this discriminatory statement you have signed.

Perhaps the most subtly misleading phrase is the claim that "The prevailing view among American Baptists is that "the practice of homosexuality is incompatible with Christian teachings." This misleads twice: once in implying that such data exists, and again in implying that the Gospel is somehow to be decided by majority vote. When the letter says, with a tone of magnanimity, that "American Baptist polity allows for respectful dissent," it misleads again, implying that this is some kind of favor we do for the minority. We defend the rights of minorities so strongly in the ABC because we have learned better than most that sometimes the minority is right. Time and again, the broad public consensus is that it is too early to make a decision about questions of Welcome and Affirmation: some constitutional amendments have passed, and some have failed, and while some churches demonize this particular minority, much of America is increasingly committed to extending full civil and human rights. Like the general public, the people of our denomination have consistently made a similar statement: it is too soon to tell what God is doing here. What if we had subjected the ordination of women or racial equality to a premature majority vote? When has there been a single moment of history when the reigning majority did not perpetrate crimes against Christ's followers? We prefer the reign of Christ. It is a reign in which minorities are welcomed, not merely tolerated; and affirmed, not merely endured just so long as they know their place, far from "regional and national levels."

Which brings us to the final example of misleading, that ensconced most clearly in point #5 ("Pray and work constructively to embrace our unity in Jesus Christ and promote our fidelity to his teachings"). The implication that someone can somehow derive discrimination and bigotry from the teachings of Christ is an outrage to all who would live a Christ-like life. Although Scripture sometimes portrays Jesus as harsh toward women or people of a different tribe, we would all deny that Christ stands for sexism or racism. How much harder it is to infer a hatred of homosexuality from his teachings on the topic of homosexuality! Jesus said nothing about it!

What Jesus did teach was to love our neighbors as ourselves: what kind of love is shown in offering LGBT Christians a second-class citizenship? He taught us to do unto others as we would have them do unto us: what kind of mutuality is shown by points #1 and 2? Even if we are seen as weeds in the denomination, is Christ's commandment not to allow the weeds and the wheat to grow together? The point of that commandment is that we humans have neither the wisdom nor the right to judge each other; such judgment belongs to God. It is this kind of humility, which says not "God, I thank you that I am not like other people" but rather "God, be merciful to me, a sinner," that forms the core of Christ's teachings.

We always strive to study and promote the teachings of Christ; we urge you to do the same.

We write with uncharacteristic stridency. We have always approached our detractors with goodwill and love, and have worked tirelessly for the preservation of the unity of this denomination. But ultimately, our passion about this offense does not derive from our passion for this denomination. Our passion is for the Good News of God's love, proclaimed in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ. We write because we believe the letter is wrong and unchristian, and will become a tool for the powers and principalities in dismantling the capacity of the ABC to proclaim this Good News. By means of misleading tools like this, the powers may well "win," insofar as they succeed in dismissing all who believe that Christ's love is also for God's lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, questioning, and allied children. But they will be like soldiers at the foot of the cross, gambling over Christ's clothes: such will be the meager spoils of their victory. For us, and our households, of whatever blessed configuration ordained by God, we will serve the Lord.

We implore all American Baptists to reject the moderate-seeming but utterly divisive content of your letter, and to insist again that we will have no creed, no litmus test, and no purge in our denomination. Instead, let us affirm again, that God has called us - ALL of us - together for a mission and a purpose, and let us take up that work.

In the name of Christ,

The Council of the Association of Welcoming & Affirming Baptists