



American Baptist Churches of the Great Rivers Region

Mailing Address:
P.O. Box 3786
Springfield, IL 62708-3786

Phone: 217/726-7366
Fax: 217/726-7566
E-Mail: grrabc@abc-grr.org

Physical Address:
3940 Pintail Drive
Springfield, IL 62707

J. Dwight Stinnett, Ph.D., *Regional Executive Minister*

web site: www.abc-grr.org

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Dear Sisters and Brothers in the Ministry,

Life together (*koinonia*) is not easy. Neither is it optional. Much of the advice that the Apostle Paul wrote in his letters was directed to this high calling. *Be careful that the exercise of your freedom does not become a stumbling block to the weak.* (1 Corinthians 8:9) *Carry each other's burdens, and in this way you will fulfill the law of Christ.* (Galatians 6:2) *Submit to one another out of reverence for Christ.* (Ephesians 5:21) *If your brother is distressed because of what you eat, you are no longer acting in love. Do not by your eating destroy your brother for whom Christ died.* (Romans 14:15) I could go on, but I am confident that you know your Bible well.

The point is that our life together as American Baptists is being sorely tested. As 2005 came to close, that "testing" became apparent in the internal life of the Great Rivers Region. Many churches and pastors sent formal communications to the GRR Regional Ministry Board pleading for action. Even further, it was evident that the suspicion that many had for our national life together was now impacting the Board, Staff and programs of the Great Rivers Region. These are faithful churches and pastors appropriately expressing their concerns through petition.

The GRR Regional Ministry Board (RMB) is the legal entity of the Great Rivers Region and is composed of your elected representatives. (I and the other GRR staff work for that Board.) The GRR Board is obligated to respond to our churches. As an act of faithfulness to that reality, the RMB called for a Task Force to prepare a common response to the issues that had been raised. In the meantime, the RMB released an "interim" communication (GRR RMB 0602.5.g) in order to make clear our position and practices with our constituents. The Task Force presented its report to the RMB at its regular meeting on 28 April 2006 as directed. That report was unanimously adopted by the Board. It is included with this letter (GRR RMB 0604.7). I am assuming my prerogative to speak with you concerning that action.

GRR RMB 0604.7 identifies five general categories of concerns expressed in all the petitions, resolutions, and letters received from our churches and pastors. Identifying those concerns was essential for the Task Force to do its work. Identifying concerns does not imply that the Task Force agreed with the concern – the Task Force was

agreeing that the concern was being expressed. The proposed Actions (as adopted by the RMB) addressed those concerns. Sometimes the concern was addressed in ways very similar to what had been suggested in some of the petitions. Sometimes the concern was addressed in a way the Task Force prayerfully proposed on its own. Sometimes the concern was found to be the result of misinformation, and the Task Force sought to educate in its response. Sometimes the Task Force addressed the concern by reconfirming present policies, etc.

The Action section of GRR RMB 0604.7 speaks to the General Board of ABCUSA (and its staff), the Covenant Partners of ABCUSA, and to itself and the staff of the Great Rivers Region. Five actions are directed to the General Board of ABCUSA (and its staff). Three actions are directed to the Covenant Partners of ABCUSA. Five actions are directed to the Regional Ministry Board of the Great Rivers Region (and its staff). Actions range from very general to highly specific. In the concluding action, the RMB committed itself “to prayer and to revisit this issue, with a full status report from the Regional Executive Minister, at our regular February 2007 Board meeting.”

I need to comment on Actions 6 and 7. In Action 6 the RMB reaffirmed that GRR RMB 0602.5.g is the “defining summary of already existing regional policies and expectations regarding the issue of homosexuality.” It goes on to affirm the Board’s expectations for compliance by staff, programs, etc. There is nothing new here. The relevant policies and practices have been in place long before I arrived here – they have not been violated. Further, I am committed by law, Board policy, and personal integrity to faithfully interpret and apply the express intent of the Board. I have affirmed repeatedly that in those areas where I have authority, the will of the Board is being enforced. I will not apologize for that; the Board has the final word when it comes to my role as Executive Minister.

Unfortunately, our procedures to maintain appropriate confidentiality (not secrecy) when it comes to clergy discipline leaves some with the impression that there is no discipline. Others (usually outside the Great Rivers Region) suspect that we are obsessively and singularly concerned with homosexual ministers and are engaged in some kind of witch-hunt.

There are existing policies and procedures for clergy discipline and those are being followed. The Ministerial Code of Ethics is the guideline (not a legal document) concerning clergy behavior. The Council on Ministerial Standing and Ordination (COMSAO) is responsible for exercising discipline and is directly answerable to the GRR Regional Ministry Board. Only the Board has the authority for establishing policies concerning clergy discipline. Already in 2006 two GRR clergy persons have surrendered their credentials. That has been duly reported to the appropriate authorities. However, we do not create a media circus in the process. Disciplined clergy (as well as victims and churches) are treated with respect and care. Counseling is

encouraged and financial aid for that counseling is offered. Clergy do not always choose to take advantage of the offer. It is true that there have been no instances of discipline exercised with regard to homosexual practices. No such charges have ever been made. I am not aware of anyone in the Great Rivers Region who would be susceptible to such charges. We do not go looking for moral indiscretions of any kind; we do not have a police force. However, when competent charges have been made we respond.

In discussions regarding homosexuality, I have tried to focus on RMB polices and their impact for my actions. I have not initiated conversations regarding human sexuality from a biblical, theological, or ecclesiastical perspective. However, as a follow-up to this document I feel the need to speak with you personally as a pastor.

I believe the consistent trajectory of biblical teaching regarding sexuality is that the only appropriate place for its practice is in marriage between a man and a woman. While we can dig around and find exceptions to that model in the Bible (usually ancient stories in the Old Testament), I cannot find those exceptions affirmed or endorsed by Jesus Christ or his New Testament interpreters. I have found no biblical, theological, sociological, psychological, or biological arguments to the contrary persuasive.

At the same time, I do not believe sexual sins are the chief or unforgivable sins. I am struck by the behaviors that are included in those catalogs of sins we find scattered across the New Testament. I am absolutely certain that those other sins are no more easily dismissed than sexual sins.

Jesus did not dismiss sin, but was still able to eat and drink with sinners. It seems to be a logical inconsistency. Consequently, some of those who insist that we cannot dismiss sin refuse to eat and drink with sinners; and some of those who insist that we must eat and drink with sinners end up dismissing sin. I cannot affirm either extreme.

Growing up Baptist, one of those early hymns I remember (seldom heard today because of its language problems; it is not even in the hymnal I now have) was "Christ Receiveth Sinful Men." I remember only fragments of the song now. Some of those fragments include: "Christ receiveth sinful men, even me with all my sin," and the chorus "Sing it o'er and o'er again, Christ receiveth sinful men."

Another hymn from that same childhood was "Take Time to Be Holy" (also seldom heard today). One fragment I remember from that hymn is "By looking to Jesus, Like Him thou shalt be; Thy friends in thy conduct His likeness shall see."

Those two hymns – together – form the foundation of my Christian understanding. Jesus calls to each one of us as a sinner AND Jesus never leaves us there. I cannot turn loose of either hymn. I fear that some churches are so zealous in the pursuit of holiness

that they cannot acknowledge or accept sinners. If that is true, I wonder who will be left in the church? I also fear that some churches are so zealous in their pursuit of “receiving” that they have an uncertain voice (or even no voice) about sin and the call to both individual and communal holiness. If that is true, I wonder if the church becomes merely a reflection of the human condition and not the divine call?

My prayer for each of the churches in the Great Rivers Region is that, having been clear about who we are and what we expect from one another, that we can now get on with preaching, teaching, and living the whole Gospel. We are sinners, accepted and forgiven, but called to maturity in Jesus Christ, a maturity that includes the practice of *koinonia*. It is a mystery – even a treasure.

Therefore, since through God’s mercy we have this ministry, we do not lose heart. Rather, we have renounced secret and shameful ways; we do not use deception, nor do we distort the Word of God. On the contrary, by setting the truth plainly we commend ourselves to every man’s conscience in the sight of God ... For we do not preach ourselves, but Jesus Christ as Lord, and ourselves as your servants for Jesus’ sake ... But we have this treasure in jars of clay to show that this all-surpassing power is from God, and not from us. (2 Corinthians 4:1-7)

Great Rivers Region Regional Ministry Board Action

(Report from Task Force RMB 0602)

Adopted by the GRR Regional Ministry Board 28 April 2006

GRR RMB 0604.7

Preface

Between the regular meetings of the GRR Regional Ministry Board (RMB) in October 2005 and February 2006, several legitimate resolutions from GRR churches were received regarding the present conflict across ABCUSA. These were presented to the RMB at its regular meeting in February 2006. While these resolutions calling for action by the RMB were not identical, the issues they addressed and the concerns they raised were similar enough that a common response seemed to be the most effect way for the RMB to act. Accordingly, the RMB, by unanimous consent, called upon the President to appoint a Task Force to compose a response that the Board would consider at its next regular meeting, 28 April 2006. Also at that February meeting the RMB unanimously adopted an "Interim Response" (**RMB 0602.5.g**) for distribution to all GRR churches. In addition, the GRR Executive Minister was instructed to inform covenant partners in ABCUSA regarding the action.

President Hilda Smith appointed the following persons to serve with her on the Task Force: Dr. Reginald Mills, Rev. Gerald Phillips, Rev. Hari Smith, and Ms. Henrietta Brown. Dr. Dwight Stinnett served as the non-voting secretary of the Task Force.

Since the action by the RMB in February, we continued to receive resolutions and petitions relevant to the same issues. All of these have been considered by the Task Force.

In addition, one of the covenant partners of ABCUSA, the Board of International Ministries, has responded to our action. That letter of response is attached to this report with the permission of Rev. Charles Jones, the Acting Executive Director of the Board of International Ministries.

Purpose

This Task Force was charged by the Regional Ministry Board with a limited purpose. In addition other realities impacted the scope of our work.

The Regional Ministry Board charged this Task Force to compose a single, comprehensive response to the issues raised by churches in their resolutions and petitions. The work of the Task Force was limited to the issues, proposals, requests, and demands of the resolutions and petitions that had been received. There was no charge or intent to address, interpret, instruct or debate regarding the presenting issue of homosexuality. We were not charged to prepare a Bible study or theological analysis. Therefore, **RMB 0602.5.g** was treated as the definitive policy statement of the GRR Regional Ministry Board regarding homosexuality and as the framework within which the Task Force was obligated to work. We did not add to nor take away from that document.

We are aware of the organizational peculiarities of the amalgam we call ABCUSA. While the dissatisfaction with the present state of affairs is widespread, we have tried to avoid requesting actions of the General Board that could not be taken. We believe that would only add to the mounting frustration. At the same time, we agree that there are things that could and should be done.

We are also aware that the General Executive Council (GEC) of ABCUSA is presently in the midst of an organizational study that involves the Covenant of Relationships.¹ Our report potentially intersects with that work on several points. However, we are not privy to the details of their conversations and we cannot wait for the completion of that work. Implementation could be two or three years away. At the same time we urge the GEC to give serious consideration to the issues we raise as they deliberate weighty questions regarding the future of ABCUSA.

It is also evident that there is no easy solution to this presenting issue. No position has been able to mount ultimately persuasive arguments. There is no reason to believe that it will simply go away. Neither do we have a unified view of what it means to be American Baptist. The five voting members of this Task Force are not infallible, and we are painfully aware that whatever we report someone will find objection.

Finally, the Task Force was constrained by time. We had only 12 weeks to complete our work. That time frame included Easter. We worked both individually and as a group. We had at our disposal all the resolutions and communications from GRR churches, the Commission on Denominational Unity Report, and all the organizing documents of ABCUSA.

Consistent with our purpose and confessing our limitations, the Task Force appointed by action of the Great Rivers Region Regional Ministry Board in February 2006 brings this proposal for consideration by the Board as the official action of the Board in response to numerous petitions and resolutions from GRR churches and pastors.

Concerns

In the broadest possible categories, we identified the following concerns in communications from GRR churches and pastors. **We are not stating here the identified concerns or implied priorities of the Task Force, of the Regional Ministry Board, or of individual members of either group, but accurately reporting what GRR churches and pastors have communicated to us.**

¹ The "Covenant of Relationships," as identified in Article VIII of the Bylaws for ABCUSA specifies the nature of the relationship (with both expectations and limits) among the various legally autonomous corporations that make up the denomination we know as "American Baptists." The "Covenant Partners" refers to those legally autonomous corporations that signed the Covenant of Relationships (the General Board of ABCUSA, the Board of International Ministries, the Board of National Ministries, the Ministers and Missionaries Benefit Board, and the 35 regional boards). The Covenant is a solemn promise, but it is not legally binding.

1. That there is profound dissatisfaction, frustration and mistrust with regard to the organizational practices of ABCUSA, the General Board of ABCUSA and its staff, which includes the Office of the General Secretary. Our organizational structure seems to block meaningful action, and the action or inaction of General Board staff seems to exacerbate the situation. Dissatisfaction, frustration and mistrust are evident in the specific issues that are raised and also impacts attitudes toward the Great Rivers Region and its staff.
2. That the consistency of General Board staff (Office of the General Secretary) and General Board programs/activities with General Board resolutions has been reduced to mere rhetoric. Such talk is used to placate, avoid, distract, and deceive while there is no visible evidence of compliance. The very integrity of the General Board with regard to its will to govern itself, its activities, and its staff is doubted.
3. That among the Covenant Partners of ABCUSA there is blatant disregard for the American Baptist Policy Statement on Family Life (7036:6/84) and ABCUSA resolution 8200:10/92 regarding the practice of homosexuality, especially when it comes to ordination. The intent, if not the letter, of the Covenant of Relationships is consistently and intentionally violated despite numerous objections. Covenant partners are clearly committed by the Covenant of Relationships to "implement ABC Policy Statements and Resolutions within the areas of their assigned functions, subject to General Board reviews."²
4. That GRR Bylaws, Standing Rules, policies and procedures do not adequately address the perceived or anticipated need to discipline GRR churches and/or clergy.
5. That in the absence of good faith progress toward the resolution of these concerns the Great Rivers Region should initiate withdrawal from the Covenant of Relationships (as provided for by Article VI of the Covenant of Relationships).

Again, we are not stating here the identified concerns or implied priorities of the Task Force, of the Regional Ministry Board, or of individual members of either group, but accurately reporting what GRR churches and pastors have communicated to us.

Actions

These are serious concerns, and the Task Force treated them seriously. We believe the enumeration of specific actions requested in the communications from churches is an indication of the growing lack of trust in many of our churches who feel they have been dismissed, disregarded, and devalued for their deep concern over moral issues that negatively impact their witness and identity. We have not found a logically sequential

² Covenant of Relationships, Agreement 6, item 9, and Agreement 7, item 20. From Article I of the Covenant of Relationships (The Biblical Expectation to be in Covenant with God and with Each Other) we read: "We find God's will in local congregations and in associational, regional, national, and world bodies as we receive from one another mutual counsel and correction within the Covenant."

way to present our proposals, many of which are interrelated, so we simply number them and emphasize that they must be read as a whole.

1. Concerns 1, 2 and 3, above, will be communicated directly, clearly, and emphatically to the General Board, the General Secretary, and the Covenant Partners of ABCUSA with the message that good faith progress toward resolution is essential to the Great Rivers Region. It has been nearly ten years since the report from the Commission on Denominational Unity and we have made no headway toward unity. Often it seems the intention is to avoid making progress. Repeated appeals to mission and ministry as a uniting theme have come to be seen as a strategy of avoidance, whether intended or not. The Executive Minister of the Great Rivers Region will deliver this communication personally at the meeting of the General Board of ABCUSA, if permitted.
2. There is a need for a “good faith” relationship within ABCUSA, paying particular attention to reestablishing the trust that has broken down at the national level. The RMB acknowledges that fractured relationships within the Body of Christ must be reconciled and that such action is appropriate “in order to accomplish common purposes related to the Gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ” as stated in the Covenant of Relationships. Therefore:
 - a. We call on all parties to prayerfully seek healing and the guidance of the Holy Spirit in dealing with these fractured relationships. This is not optional, because we have entered into a covenantal relationship (1) “believing that the strength of our fellowship lies in unity achieved through voluntary cooperation;” (2) having “pledge[d] [sic] to support one another in ... evaluating the ministries of our respective organizations;” and (3) agreeing “to receive from one another mutual counsel and correction within Covenant.”³ The Great Rivers Region RMB is committed to doing all that it can to assist in the process of reestablishing trust among all parties involved and to promoting “good faith” relationships within ABCUSA. We affirm that we are deeply troubled that ABCUSA has been fractured.
 - b. We call on the General Board to consider its contribution (whether intended or not) to our present state of fragmentation. We further call on the General Board to make good faith progress toward resolution, leaving the Board as much creative freedom as possible to pursue such resolution. We are not presenting a rigid checklist of items that must be satisfied to the letter. However, the present state of affairs is not acceptable and cannot continue. The GRR RMB pledges its support and desire to stand with the General Board in accordance with our Covenant of Relationships. We simply ask that the General Board stand in a place that we can claim.
 - c. We call on the General Board to exercise diligence in self-discipline. Board members have a moral (if not a legal) obligation in their official capacities to

³ All these quotes are from the opening article of the Covenant of Relationships described in footnote 1.

act and speak in ways consistent with the official purpose and policies of the Board whether they personally agree with them or not. The orientation and regular training of Board members should include the limit and extent of member obligations to organizational purpose, policies, etc. The content of that training should be generally available. While such discipline is difficult when applied to elected representatives, it becomes problematic in the case of nationally nominated representatives, where the Board, in effect, nominates members to itself. Many have come to suspect the outcome is ideologically driven. To avoid this appearance and as a matter of good faith, the General Board should diligently avoid the nomination of persons who would be offensive to large segments of our constituency. When a policy statement of the General Board declares that a specific behavior or lifestyle is inconsistent with biblical teaching, we call on members of the General Board to live and teach in ways consistent with that statement and to make decisions of the Board that are not inconsistent with that statement.

d. We call on the General Secretary to report to the General Board the ways in which the ABCUSA resolutions and policies identified in this report are being implemented within the scope of the authority of the General Secretary. If the report is unclear or unsatisfactory, we call on the General Board to provide the General Secretary with clear instructions as to the implementation of those resolutions and policies within the scope of the authority of the General Board. Especially programs, publications, and speakers under the auspices of the General Board should reflect consistency with the General Board purposes, policies, and resolutions. That same report should be sent to all the Covenant Partners. In particular, the Regional Ministry Board of the Great Rivers Region requests such a report prior to the meeting of the RMB in February 2007.

3. Associations and state conventions existed long before national groupings of Baptists or denominations. In 1670 four Rhode Island churches “associated” for the purpose of “setting in order things that are wanting,” and to “solve any difficulties that might arise.”⁴ Associations were established by churches in order to provide opportunity for relationships among churches within reasonable proximity to one another.⁵ That early associational principle is expanded in ABCUSA today through our Covenant of Relationships. Both the spirit and the letter of that Covenant have been strained over the last decade. Two situations have been particularly grievous.

While the Covenant of Relationships establishes division of labor and responsibilities among the Covenant Partners, they remain equal partners. The General Board is not superior over the other Covenant Partners collectively or individually. However, in

⁴ Everett Goodwin **Down by the Riverside** Judson: Valley Forge, 2002, p. 20.

⁵ For example, the pattern seen in the emergence of Baptist associations, as reported in Chapter 9 *The Associational Principle of Baptists of A Baptist Manual of Polity and Practice* by Norman H. Maring and Winthrop Hudson, published by Judson, 1991, demonstrates that the norm for Baptist associations was general geographic proximity, even when it was not explicitly stated.

the absence of previously specified authority, the General Board assumed such a superior status when it unilaterally established procedures for and subsequently admitted a new partner to the Covenant of Relationships. It is our opinion that the appropriate template for this action would have been the procedure for amending the Covenant of Relationships, as specified in that document.

The Covenant of Relationships was also strained when churches legally disciplined by one region were quickly readmitted to other regions at a great distance. While this was "legal" (because of the absence of prohibition), it was not good for the Body and did not demonstrate collegial regard for those regions that had duly exercised their disciplinary authority. We believe the analogous principle of regional reciprocity regarding clergy disciplinary action should apply.

By such actions the Covenant, and our very life together, has been endangered. Therefore:

- a. We call on all the Covenant Partners to be attentive to both the spirit and letter of our covenant life together, and to exercise due regard for one another in all our decisions. We especially ask regions to respect the disciplinary action of other regions. To act otherwise is a breach of faith. We may be legally autonomous, but we are covenantally interdependent.
 - b. We call on the General Board and all the Covenant Partners to make such changes in the Bylaws, Standing Rules, and Covenant of Relationships as may be necessary to clearly specify that all petitions for membership in the Covenant of Relationships are subject to approval by all the Covenant Partners through their legal boards.
 - c. We call on all the Covenant Partners to make such changes in the Covenant of Relationships as may be necessary to specify a fair procedure by which any Covenant Partner may be censured and/or disciplined.
4. We, *the GRR Regional Ministry Board*, reaffirm our commitment to (a) our current policies and procedures for the admission and dismissal of member churches, and (b) **RMB 0602.5.g** as applied to both processes. These are grassroots-based processes consistent with the "associational principle." The first step in an orderly process for a church to become a member of the Great Rivers Region is through action by the Area. Likewise, the first step in an orderly process for a church to be disciplined or dismissed from the Region is through action by the Area, for any reason.

There is a second process, limited to violations of the Common Criteria, by which the Regional Ministry Board may identify a church as "non-cooperating," which revokes voting privileges and apportioned delegates. This could result in dismissal if non-cooperation persists. (Standing Rule V.C)

In all cases, the action is completed by the Regional Ministry Board and is final. The process is found in Bylaws Article IV and Standing Rule V. There is no evidence that

this has failed and there is no compelling argument that it will fail. We see no reason to give the Regional Executive Minister authority to unilaterally discipline any church. Nor do we see a reason to institute automatic dismissal of churches without review and specific action by the Regional Ministry Board. For information purposes the relevant portions of GRR Bylaws and Standing Rules are included at the end of this report.

5. We, *the GRR Regional Ministry Board*, reaffirm our commitment to remain in covenant with ABCUSA at the same time that it admits that withdrawal from the Covenant of Relationships remains a possible last resort. While withdrawal must remain a viable option, we believe that it is premature to move toward withdrawal at this time.

Baptist identity and interdependency have historically depended on a good faith relationship. Interdependency has not been effectively coerced by any entity of church or state. The good faith basis of our interdependency requires of us certain considerations prior to any discussion of separation. The following are among those considerations:

Preparation for such a decision within a region of 260+ churches would be lengthy and time consuming. While it is legally possible for the RMB to make such a decision unilaterally, such a move would surely be seen as presumptuous and would have undesirable repercussions. To make such a decision in good faith would require extensive notification and information sharing, polling of congregations, decisions by congregations, and discussion sessions at many levels of regional life, etc.

Many churches in this region have been in the mainstream of Baptist life for nearly two centuries. Some were planted by John Mason Peck, and others were early “descendants” of his efforts. To ask these churches to summarily sever their ties with ABCUSA is to ask for a decision of enormous magnitude. Such a request requires a compelling cause and necessitates extraordinary effort to avoid.

Further, if GRR were to sever ties with ABCUSA, what would be the nature of this region of churches? Those churches that wished to stay ABC would be isolated and the associational principle for them would be essentially non-existent. Those churches that chose to stay involved with a new (non-ABC) GRR would have to decide how to pursue their mission efforts. Would the Region live independently (contrary to the associational principle) or align with another denomination? The cooperative mission of our churches would suffer in the resulting chaos and the Gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ would be hurt.

The negative impact on the work of the present ABC boards of International and National Ministries would also be significant. Further downsizing would assuredly result.

There are also legal implications. As individual churches make decisions about which way to go in such a decision, it is likely that some churches would find

themselves making decisions on a controversial and emotional issue by narrow vote. The result could easily be splits that damage both the churches and the communities. If there are such splits it would only be a matter of time until a group of “former ABC members” would sue in court for control of the church property and assets. A court would then be asked to decide how a reversionary clause would be interpreted. Also, those claiming to hold to the historic beliefs of American Baptists could claim to be the legitimate descendants of the founders and also ask for court decisions.

An action of such magnitude as withdrawal should be considered only as a last resort and not without careful examination of all the implications that surround such a move.

6. We, *the GRR Regional Ministry Board*, reaffirm that **RMB 0602.5.g** is a defining summary of already existing regional policies and expectations regarding the issue of homosexuality. All activities under the authority of the RMB (including staff, programs, publications, councils, area functions, etc.) will be conducted within the boundaries set by that document. Regional staff that knowingly and willfully violate or disregard regional policies and procedures, including this one, in the course of their regional duties are subject to disciplinary action as provided for in the existing personnel policies established by the RMB.
7. We, *the GRR Regional Ministry Board*, instruct the GRR Regional Executive Minister as our chief employee to (a) insure that all staff activities are consistent with these provisions, (b) faithfully and accurately represent the positions of the RMB when questions arise, (c) actively engage the Covenant Partners in pursuing resolution consistent with these provisions, (d) provide timely reports and interpretation to this Board and our constituent churches, and (e) communicate the final action of the RMB regarding this report and proposal to the President of ABCUSA, the General Secretary of ABCUSA, all the Covenant Partners, Great Rivers Region churches, and other relevant persons or parties.
8. Lastly, *the GRR Regional Ministry Board* commits itself to prayer and to revisit this issue, with a full status report from the Regional Executive Minister, at our regular February 2007 Board meeting.

Conclusion

Baptists were in southern Illinois 300 years ago. True to our tradition, they associated with one another. One of the early associational relationships of Baptists here was the Friends of Humanity – an association of Baptist churches that aggressively opposed the practice of slavery. However, the arrival of John Mason and Sallie Payne Peck (the first American Baptist “home missionaries”) in the early 1800’s signaled a new era of Baptist associationalism and missionary fervor in the Mississippi valley (both Missouri and Illinois). John Mason Peck would eventually settle on the Illinois side of the river and become a major force in the still-forming state of Illinois as well as a tireless organizer and mission promoter among Baptists. Several churches in this Region were organized

directly by John Mason Peck, or he played another important role in their early life. Organizationally, we trace the roots of the Great Rivers Region directly to the work of John Mason Peck.

Baptist churches in both Illinois and Missouri have a long history of cooperation and associationalism. Most of our churches predate even the Northern Baptist Convention. The point is that we have been faithful, cooperating, associational, missionary Baptists for a very long time. We have contributed leaders of national stature, sent out missionaries, and have been major financial supporters of the denomination through its various manifestations going all the way back to the Triennial Convention.

We are good American Baptists. We are not newcomers, neither are we ignorant of our heritage. We do not take our associations or the attendant responsibilities lightly. We take our covenant life together seriously; so seriously that it goes beyond the letter of the Covenant of Relationships. Consequently, we have not been quick to raise our voices. We have patiently waited, trusting our leaders to find a faithful place to stand in this current conflict—a place where we can gladly stand together. We have finally come to speak out of frustration and disappointment.

We are puzzled when other Baptists with whom we claim fellowship apparently have so little regard for their fellowship with us that they persist in practices that are known to be offensive (not merely dissenting) to the majority of us. While we are not withdrawing from ABCUSA at this time, we do consider our fellowship fractured. We beg those who are continuing to fracture our fellowship to consider their actions. The questions before us are serious: Will we live together as a denomination or not? If so, what kind of denomination will we be?

Lastly, we appeal to the churches and pastors of the Great Rivers Region. This Region has survived struggles over slavery, missions, Sunday School, communion, etc., etc. We have not only persisted we have flourished when we have worked together for our Lord Jesus Christ. We believe this is a time for courageous and consistent witness. Baptist polity is a strange thing. At times it seems divine. At other times it seems demonic. But it is merely human, with the same potential for both good and evil that attends all things human. One thing is certain. Those who leave forfeit the voice of witness to this fellowship. We intend for the voice of the Great Rivers Region to be heard.

Attachments: RMB 0602.5.g

Letter from Rev. Charles Jones

Portions of GRR Bylaws and Standing Rules

Adopted unanimously by the Regional Ministry Board of the Great Rivers Region during its regular meeting on 28 April 2006.

In the “Action” section of this document, the identification of *the GRR Regional Ministry Board* in italics is an editorial change from the Task Force report as a result of Board adoption.

Attachment to GRR RMB 0604.7

Great Rivers Region Regional Ministry Board Response to Churches GRR RMB 0602.5.g

Since the last meeting of the Regional Ministry Board (RMB) of the Great Rivers Region (GRR) we have received several legitimate resolutions from GRR churches in good standing that urge or demand various actions by the RMB concerning the present conflict within ABCUSA. In order to respond to those resolutions in a thoughtful, consistent way the GRR Board has appointed a special task force to propose actions to the Board and compose a single, comprehensive response to those churches and the General Board of ABCUSA. That task force is charged to bring its work to the regional board at the next scheduled meeting (28 April 2006). The full GRR Board will consider and act on the proposal at that time. However, in order to be faithful and prompt, this "interim" response was adopted by the GRR Regional Ministry Board. Speaking as that Board:

- We affirm the 1984 ABCUSA General Board **American Baptist Policy Statement on Family Life** (7036:6/84) that says, in part, "We affirm that God intends marriage to be a monogamous, life-long, one flesh union of a woman and a man, who in response to God's call leave father and mother and cleave to one another. We affirm God's blessing and active presence in marriage relationships so entered in response to God's call."
- We affirm the 1992 resolution adopted by the General Board of ABCUSA (8200:10/92), which says: "We affirm that the practice of homosexuality is incompatible with Christian teaching."
- We affirm the **Confession of Faith** adopted by the General Board of ABCUSA in 1998 and endorsed by the Regional Ministry Board of the Great Rivers Region as part of our "common criteria" specifying the qualifications for church membership in GRR. That Confession says, in part: "American Baptists proclaim the Good News of the atoning death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, knowing that salvation (forgiveness of sins, release from guilt and condemnation, reconciliation with God) and eternal life are granted in grace to all who trust in Jesus Christ as Savior and Lord. This Gospel is the central message of the Bible."

We further affirm the 2005 amendment to that **Confession** including the line: "[We are 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."

We further affirm that God's redemptive love in Jesus Christ is available to all persons, and it is the high calling of each and every church to preach, teach and minister in such a way that God's love for all persons is reflected.

- We affirm the **Covenant and Code of Ethics for Ministerial Leaders** adopted by the Ministers Council, which includes the promise: "I will maintain a disciplined ministry in such ways as keeping hours of prayer and devotion, endeavoring to maintain wholesome family relationships, sexual integrity, financial responsibility,

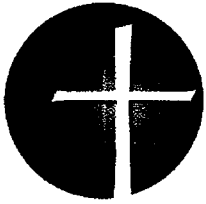
regularly engaging in educational and recreational activities for professional and personal development.”

- We affirm the 1976 Ministers Council Senate resolution, which says in part: “We believe that the practice and advocacy of homosexual activity to be incompatible with Christian principles and grounds for denial of ordination; we also affirm that past homosexual practices, when disavowed, should not be a barrier to ordination.” We also note that the Great Rivers Region Ministers Council endorsed that same resolution.
- We affirm that immoral behaviors, including sexual intimacy outside the bonds of marriage, are grounds for clergy discipline and for withdrawing recognition.
- We affirm our long-standing covenantal expectation that churches seeking membership in the Great Rivers Region “will not ordain or call as pastor a practicing homosexual.” Churches which choose to do so risk their fellowship with other churches in this Region.
- We affirm that all the staff and programs of the Great Rivers Region will be consistent with the expectations of the above positions.
- We affirm that our Executive Minister has diligently informed this Board and our churches of these issues. We further affirm that he has accurately and faithfully represented the positions of this Board. We further affirm that we expect him to accurately represent our positions with the covenant partners of ABCUSA, including the Office of the General Secretary, the President of ABCUSA, the presidents of the program Boards of ABCUSA, and other interested parties.

We affirm that we are a covenant people and are deeply troubled that ABCUSA has been fractured. We call on all parties to prayerfully seek healing and the guidance of the Holy Spirit in dealing with these fractured relationships.

Adopted unanimously by the Regional Ministry Board of the Great Rivers Region at the regular meeting on 3 February 2006.

The report of Task Force 0602 was unanimously adopted on 28 April 2006. As a result, this document (RMB 0602.5.g) was reaffirmed as the “defining summary of already existing regional policies and expectations regarding the issue of homosexuality. All activities under the authority of the RMB (including staff, programs, publications, councils, area functions, etc.) will be conducted within the boundaries set by that document. Regional staff that knowingly and willfully violate or disregard regional policies and procedures, including this one, in the course of their regional duties are subject to disciplinary action as provided for in the existing personnel policies established by the RMB.”



International Ministries

American Baptist Churches

P.O. Box 851, Valley Forge
PA 19482-0851
1-800-ABC-3USA, ext. 2195

March 15, 2006

Dr. J. Dwight Stinnett
Regional Executive Minister
ABC of the Great Rivers Region
PO Box 3786
Springfield, IL 62708-3786

Dear Dwight,

This acknowledges receipt of your letter of February 6, 2006 informing me of the action taken by your Regional Ministry Board as well as anticipated action at the next Board meeting (April 28, 2006).

I appreciate your thoughtfulness in sharing this information with me. Please note as a Program Board of ABCUSA, we affirm all of the General Board's resolutions. This means essentially that we would be in agreement with the affirmations of your Regional Ministry Board.

We are aware of the developing dissatisfaction surrounding the present conflict within ABCUSA, and we are praying that God would give you, your region leaders and Regional Ministry Board the wisdom and courage to make decisions that will glorify God and serve God's kingdom.

Please know that IM exists to serve all of our churches who are willing to work with us in ministry that glorifies God in all the earth by crossing cultural boundaries to make disciples of Jesus Christ.

We pray and anticipate that the churches of ABC of the Great River Region will continue with us in this partnership of the Gospel.

May we continue to follow God's guidance, relish God's grace, and live in God's peace.

Blessings,

Charles H. Jones

Charles H. Jones
Acting Executive Director

Attachment to GRR RMB 0604.7

GRR BYLAWS ARTICLE IV - MEMBERSHIP

Membership is open to Baptist churches within Illinois and Missouri. Consistent with the Bylaws and Standing Rules, the Board will establish and publish criteria and procedures for membership, discipline, and disaffiliation. Membership applications will be considered by the full Board, and, if approved, will be solemnized by a covenant. Disciplinary actions will also be reserved for the full Board.

GRR Standing Rule V. PROCEDURES FOR CHURCH AFFILIATION/DISAFFILIATION

Only the full Board, in a regular meeting, has the authority to act on matters of affiliation, disaffiliation, other discipline, or withdrawal regarding churches.

A. Criteria for Membership

Criteria for membership will include, but not be limited to:

1. Affirmation of the statement "We are American Baptists" (revised, 6/19/98) as descriptive of American Baptist faith and practice;
2. Affirmation of the mission/purpose of American Baptist Churches USA and of the Great Rivers Region;
3. Participation in the life and mission of American Baptist churches at local, regional, national, and international levels;
4. Contribution to the financial support of the mission and ministry of the Region at a responsible level;
5. Communication with the Region regarding the mission and ministry of the church through annual reports requested by the Region.

B. Affiliation Procedure

1. The interested church will request an informational packet and required forms from the Executive Minister.
2. When the information is in order, the Executive Minister will notify the staff minister assigned to the relevant Area, and will schedule a meeting between church leaders and Area leaders.
3. Area leaders will review the application, interview church leaders, and make a recommendation regarding affiliation, in writing, to the Executive Minister.
4. The Executive Minister will present the motion, along with relevant information at the next Board meeting.
5. A simple majority vote is needed to affiliate the church with the Region and ABC/USA. The Secretary will notify ABC/USA of the action.

C. Action Regarding Non-Cooperating Churches

The Board shall have the authority to identify a church as "non-cooperating," thereby revoking their voting privileges and canceling their apportioned delegates with regard to regional business (see V.A.). This action will be considered only after regional staff and leaders have made a reasonable effort to encourage the full participation of the church. The action will identify the specific cause(s) as well as remedial actions. Likewise, the Board may reinstate the voting and representation privileges

of a church when evidence of renewed cooperation is presented. Non-cooperation will serve as a required intermediate step to dismissal. The Board may adopt other procedures short of non-cooperation and disaffiliation. In all cases, both the church and relevant Area leaders will be informed of the action, its consequences, and its possible remediation in writing.

D. Disaffiliation Procedure

The Board may disaffiliate a church as follows:

1. The relevant Area must adopt a resolution requesting the disaffiliation of a church in a regular meeting of the Area. The request, documenting the reasons for the request, will be sent to the Executive Minister.
2. The Executive Minister will assure that procedures have been followed and all documents are in place, and then will notify the Board and the church of impending action at least 30 days prior to a regular meeting of the Board.
3. The Board will hear the motion by Area officers, and also the response of two representatives from the church (if the church so desires).
4. The Board will vote, and a two-thirds majority is required to adopt the motion of disaffiliation. The Executive Minister will report the action to ABC/USA.
5. While the disaffiliated church may appeal to ABC/USA for continuing national affiliation, there is no further appeal for regional affiliation.

E. Withdrawal or Closure Procedure

A church may request withdrawal from the Region and ABC/USA (or report its closure) as follows:

1. The church will notify the Executive Minister by notarized letter of the date and action of the church.
2. The Executive Minister will conduct an investigation to assure that the By-Laws of the church were followed; that there is no regional interest in the property; and, that there are no outstanding debts to the Region or ABC/USA.
3. Assuming there are no barriers to withdrawal (or closure), the Executive Minister will report the request at the next Board meeting.
4. A majority vote will validate the request to withdraw (or close). The Executive Minister will report the action to ABC/USA.