

Dear Colleagues in Ministry:

Over the next year you will hear a lot about the proposed restructure of our national structure. This will involve some major adjustments for what we hope will be a more missionally focused structure. This is the product of a 3 year conversation within and among the General Executive Council, the ABC officers, and the General Board.

Let me begin by outlining the process for consideration:

1) The General Board, which has been in dialogue with the GEC as the work has progressed, has received the final proposal. The proposed structure will be fully reviewed and discussed in plenary session this June. Implementing bylaws (which are technically what need to be approved) will have a first reading by the General Board at this meeting. A first reading is “for clarification, to point out areas of potential reservation, or to suggest to the sponsor such modifications in writing (within 30 days) that may remove reservations at the time of the Second Reading.”

2) The materials received by the General Board will be made available to congregations for their study and discussion. This will include a power point presentation. Every region is being urged to offer information forums since this is a product of the GEC of which the Executive Ministers are members. General Board members will also be asked to make sure information is disseminated.

2) In November the General Board has a Second Reading of the proposed implementing bylaws. At this session they will vote whether to recommend these bylaws to the 2009 Biennial delegates. Only biennial delegates in session “have the authority to add to, amend or repeal the ABCUSA bylaws.”

3) If approved, the bylaws will be officially forwarded to every congregation for action by delegates at the 2009 Biennial in Pasadena. From June through the Biennial, ongoing education will be provided congregations.

What do we hope to achieve?

1) To get ABC out of the bind we have been in when our structure has been interpreted as hierarchical with the General Board having authority over national boards, regions and local congregations. This has been especially difficult when the General Board has been expected to legislate binding answers to difficult issues.

2) To clarify the primary focus of national board members by having them wear one hat. General Board members now serve on the General Board as representatives of their congregations. They are also the directors for ABCUSA and the members of the national program board corporations. They may also be elected a director for one of the program boards whose directors can only come from General Board membership. Are you confused already – then, you get the picture! This structure at times makes for a conflict of interest. It also means that very little attention has been given to the direct work and

responsibilities of ABCUSA because most of the General Board meetings consist of moving in and out of other corporate meetings. In the proposed new structure there will not be a General Board whose members serve with multiple hats. It will be replaced by a Board of General Ministries that will oversee the work of the Office of General Secretary. Board members will serve one board as a director with primary responsibility to oversee the functions of that board and its staff: National Ministries, International Ministries, or General Ministries. The boards will be interrelated but not interlocking. MMBB's board structure will remain as it is now.

3) To become more missional in the national structure we will focus on the church's mission at the mission summit at Biennials and the Mission Table afterwards. The Mission Summit will be a way of doing the Biennial that will prioritize: learning about the task of mission in today's context, training constituents, and hearing from the churches. The Mission Table will be a gathering of ABC mission partners – national, regional, local churches from every region, colleges/seminaries, Ministers Council, ABW Ministries, ABEC and others – that occurs after every biennial. Its purpose is to be a mission think tank for the denomination. It will survey the world landscape as to important mission challenges; hear our churches' perspectives; and network ABC mission partners around common mission priorities.

4) The National Leadership Council (replacing the GEC) will further focus on how the seminal thinking of the Mission Table is translated into practical programs and applications that enable the fulfillment of the charter goals of the mission boards and our ABC focus statement: "American Baptist Churches are healthy missional churches that nurture devoted disciples of Jesus Christ who live their lives in mission and ministry for the healing of the world through the love of God." In addition to the self-evaluations done by every mission partner, the National Leadership Council will review how well we are doing overall in meeting denominational priorities.

5) The delegates in session at the Biennial will still have the final word concerning the bylaws of the Board of General Ministries. Likewise, no board can propose changes in its bylaws affecting its relationship to ABC without the approval of the Board of General Ministries or, in the instance of the Board of General Ministries, the vote of the other boards and the biennial delegates.

6) Diversity and representation remain key values. Across the boards and in the Mission Table we will have the breadth of our denomination represented. We will continue the rotation in the election of ABC officers. While each board will be smaller in number than now, when each board is counted and one adds in the church representatives at the Mission Table, there is an increase in local church presence.

7) While our current system has delivered on representation, we have not always had specific skills present for the optimum functioning of our boards. Board members have generally been chosen on the basis of "who can represent our churches, association, area, or region?" rather than on the basis of "what skills are needed to enable our mission

boards to best accomplish their tasks?” The new structure will enable the boards to seek within ABC membership the skills needed for their ministries while maintaining our commitment to reflecting the many faces within the denomination.

8) We have also hopefully struck a healthy balance between American Baptists never being able to say anything and the need for greater consensus on ABC social statements. The GEC is suggesting that for any new Social Witness Statement (notice it is not called a policy statement) to be an ABC statement it must be approved by $\frac{3}{4}$ of the covenanting regional and national boards (excluding MMBB).

All in all, it is our hope that this new structure will capture the best of what the last structure brought us (diversity, representation, and coordination) while also correcting some of its flaws (board members with multiple hats, focus on legislation, high costs).