



American Baptist Churches of the Great Rivers Region

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Friends,

Last night I returned from meetings of the General Board (GB), Regional Executive Ministers Council (REMC), and the Biennial in Pasadena. This is my initial report of the highlights of those meetings.

In addition to hearing reports, the General Board re-elected Dr. Roy Medley to another four-year term as General Secretary. Dr. Michael Kinnamon (a Disciples of Christ minister and General Secretary for the National Council of Churches) addressed the closing session of the General Board. The Board also endorsed the encouragement of American Baptists to work for an equitable, sustainable health care system.

While I left Pasadena before the third and final session of the Biennial, everything I attended was wonderful. The churches in the Region of Los Angeles were gracious hosts. My friend, Dr. Sam Chetti, the Executive Minister of LA, was relentless to insure that this was a memorable Biennial. The setting and facilities were beautiful. The worship sessions were powerful. I wish everyone could have experienced them. It was good to connect with old friends and to see several GRR delegates.

Attendance was low (600 or 700 delegates, about 1200 total -- based on verbal reports), and I think there were several reasons for that. Certainly the costs and the economic climate contributed to it. But I also fear that there has been persistent, progressive disengagement from the national denomination since the Biennial in Denver (2005). Some of that disengagement is a cultural shift. Some is intentional.

In terms of business, the most significant action during the Biennial was the rejection of the reorganization proposal that the General Board has been working on for about three years. While the vote was a solid majority, it fell short (barely) of the two-thirds required. I can visualize a number of scenarios in which the requisite handful of votes could have swung the other way. But even then I am faced with 30% of the delegates rejecting the proposal. In addition, less than 20% of our churches were represented at the Biennial (a recurring problem when it comes to doing serious business that purports to speak for the entire denomination).

Two related questions immediately come to mind: "What happened?" and "What now?" There are no simple answers, but I will try to give my perspective.

In terms of "what happened," we have to consider both process and proposal.

Bylaws are not easy reading, and the issues are incredibly complex. I would find it difficult to catalog and explain all the compromises that went into the final proposal. It certainly cannot be done in twenty-five words or less. I have come to believe that the process we used led us to the least objectionable proposal--not necessarily the best or the most creative. I hope that my coolness for the proposal and my determination to be clear about reality and focused in my critique did not get interpreted as opposition. Given who we are, our competing interests, and our incommensurate values, I still believe it was the best we could do at the time.

The complexity of the proposal demanded an intentional, proactive process to educate delegates so they could make an informed decision. I am not saying that every one who voted against (or for!) the proposal was uninformed, but it became clear that a significant number felt inadequately prepared. In a culture of suspicion, that is problematic. Some may have abstained; some may have voted "No."

While online communication is quick and cost effective, it has (at least) two glaring shortcomings. First, it has been shown that electronic communication is a both a class and generational divide (I suspect it is a cultural one also, but I have not seen data on that). Second, it does not allow for good conversations among multiple participants around complex issues.

We did not provide accurate, complete, timely information during the process (by that I mean both prior to and during the deliberations). Most delegates arrived expecting more and felt the discussion was inadequate.

In particular, I repeatedly heard the complaint that we did not have Bylaw proposals for either National Ministries or International Ministries in hand. Speaking only for myself, I did not find the superficial verbal explanations of what they intended to do adequate for an informed decision.

Our environment of suspicion (both warranted and unwarranted) and the absence of information (both real and perceived) became a deadly combination for many.

On the other hand, some delegates were well-informed and objected to the proposal for substantive reasons. These objections must be verified and considered as we move forward.

Recurring objections I heard (in no particular order) included: (1) the loss of a proportionately representative process, (2) the "uncoupling" of National Ministries and International Ministries from the General Board, and (3) uncertainty about our ability to be and do things together in a unified way. There was also some objection around the

changes in Public Witness Statements (in my opinion, a specific example of #3). While that was passionate, I do not believe it rivaled the significance of other objections.

Since the simultaneous move away from a proportionately representative system and the uncoupling of the program boards from the General Board were the heart of the proposal, sufficient objection to either of these were, in fact, a rejection of the proposal. I would argue that everything else in the proposal is a consequence of or compromise because of these two movements. Based on the results in Pasadena, the compelling case for these monumental changes was missing.

I do not believe this is merely an information, communication, or presentation issue. Proportionate representation and denominational unity focused through an integrated General Board (even if it is more perception than reality) is so integral to who we are, that conversion (true metanoia) is required. Forty years ago we became something different when SCODS/SCOR was implemented. The Pasadena Proposal asked us to become something different yet again. In that difference there were new things we could do, but there were also familiar, beloved things that we could no longer do.

We underplayed the magnitude of this paradigm shift. We stressed continuity and comfort when we should have been more transparent about discontinuity and possibility. We were asking this denomination to become something different. Delegates sensed this and a significant number recoiled at the thought.

Lastly, I wonder if the passage of this proposal by the General Board and its subsequent rejection by delegates of constituent churches and regions at the Biennial further exposes the disconnect between the General Board and its constituents.

In terms of "what now," both short-term and long-term actions must be considered.

There are immediate consequences to the failure of the Pasadena Proposal. If there were not serious consequences, the case that "we do not need to change" would have proven true. We are left with a system that not only does not work (and has not for a long time), but also a system that we cannot afford. The financial stress that drove us to this point was not eliminated by the vote in Pasadena.

While I am certain that there will be other financial cuts, and consequent changes in programs and services, the General Board has been reduced once again by action during the second business session in Pasadena. That will, in turn, negatively impact representation on both National Ministries and International Ministries. The irony is that those who voted against the Pasadena Proposal because they objected to the loss of representation, have unintentionally created a situation in which representation is reduced even further, but the functions and authority of the General Board have not been reduced concomitantly. This reduced General Board must exercise extraordinary restraint or it risks further alienating constituent congregations and regions.

At the same time, it is not fair that the cost of our system be laid entirely at the doorstep

of representation. According to the audit that was distributed for the General Board meeting, the total cost of General Board operations, services, personnel, etc. was about \$8 million. The cost of the "representative process" was only \$400,000 of that. It is true that there have already been serious cuts to operations and services under the auspices of the General Board, but there must be more--and it will be painful. Barring a financial windfall, there will be loss of General Board visibility and activity. Once again, the irony is that those who were seeking to preserve those beloved, traditional (at least since 1970) functions will, in fact, lose them.

The Pasadena Proposal was built on the understanding that we absolutely must reduce the cost of the entire system. We can debate whether or not we actually accomplished that, but those of us in the room understood it. Many of the compromises were the result of moving to a system of governance that was no longer proportionately representative. It would be problematic for such a system to presume to act and speak on behalf of 5000+ churches. Neither is the Biennial representative. That is even less true today than it was 40 years ago when SCODS documented it.

Long term, we still must face intentional, proactive reorganization or submit to the piecemeal, uncoordinated, unfocused restructuring of the body over time. The patient could very well die.

Another round of Bylaw changes cannot be considered until 2011. Two years seems like a long time (it may be an eternity in our financial environment). But it took three years to assemble the Pasadena Proposal. More than that, I am uncertain where to turn at this point. This is the third time we have tried and failed to reorganize in 10 years. The first attempt was a large, costly, intentionally diverse commission of key persons from across the entire denomination. The second was a select task force of General Board representatives and denominational staff. The third (this one) was birthed by the General Executive Council (all denominational staff) through the General Board. The proposals were different--radical from one extreme to the other. One was died in the General Board, another died at the Biennial, the other was simply permitted to die.

Yes, the context has changed. But I wonder about underlying, unmentionable issues. We clearly are not of one mind when it comes to what this denomination should be or become. I wonder if we can do the hard work to come to such an agreement.

One thing at the Biennial really caught my attention. It was a sign posted in the Amtrak booth outside the Hilton. "Amtrak patrons: Due to traffic congestion, buses to Bakersfield serving this stop are sometimes as much as 30 minutes late! Don't give up!"

