

Southwest region severs ABC ties; loyal churches organize: Not all churches to leave denomination

News in the [May 30, 2006](#) issue

After years of conflict centering mainly on the issue of homosexuality, a large, southern California-based regional body of the American Baptist Churches U.S.A. has voted to continue the process of separating itself from the denomination.

The Pacific Southwest region voted 1,125 to 209—without discussion—in a telephone-conducted referendum coordinated from First Baptist Church in Pomona, California, on April 29 to terminate its relationship with the ABCUSA. Those participating at Pomona and at six other locations from Hawaii to Arizona represented just over half of the congregations in the Pacific Southwest region.

The ABCUSA, a 1.4-million-member denomination based in Valley Forge, Pennsylvania, learned that the region's board of directors voted unanimously May 11 to withdraw, effective in November 1. Dale Salico, the region's executive minister, has repeatedly characterized its differences with national leadership as irreconcilable.

Not all Pacific Southwest churches will leave the denomination, officials on both sides agree. The fledgling Association of American Baptist churches in the Pacific Southwest will be led by Samuel Chetti, executive minister of the Los Angeles Baptist City Mission Society.

"There will be no clear winners in this split," Joe DeRoulhac, pastor of First Baptist Church of Redlands, California, told the Century prior to the late April vote. At least for a few years, DeRoulhac said, "I believe most churches are going to take their time before voting to leave the ABCUSA [because] pastor and congregational leaders do not want to split their own churches over this issue even if they personally want to leave" the denomination.

Most denominational leaders have emphasized congregational and individual autonomy of conscience. But conservative leaders around the country have felt that an oft-cited American Baptist resolution stating that “the practice of homosexuality is incompatible with Christian teaching” needs to be implemented with meaningful legislation—prohibiting persons involved in or condoning homosexual intimacy from holding positions of national leadership, for example.

The freedom of biblical interpretation among American Baptists has been nurtured over many centuries, says David M. Scholer, a self-described “strong evangelical committed to biblical authority” who is on the Fuller Seminary faculty. Scholer said he joined the denomination in 1966 because some disagreements “pale in light of the commitment to love, integrity, soul freedom and biblical authority.”

Those disagreements—over behavior that conservatives in the ABCUSA and other mainline denominations consider plainly sinful in their reading of the Bible—have hampered enthusiasm and financial support for missions, according to Salico.

On the region’s Web site, Salico called the ABCUSA “a church in hibernation . . . for a decade.” Congregations planning to sever ties will be briefed over the next 14 months on financial and legal issues “related to this important decision.”