

American Baptists take delight in diversity: May be most diverse mainline Protestant denomination

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The American Baptist Churches USA convention this summer was typical of many church gatherings in displaying ethnic and racial diversity. But many ABC leaders think that their denomination may be the most diverse among mainline Protestant churches.

Worship services and other events at the June 25-28 biennial convention in Pasadena, California, featured traditional hymns, mariachi bands, gospel choirs and even Hawaii's first African-American hula dance troupe. Delegates enjoyed Latin and Asian cuisine at a reception called "We Are ABC: A Multi-Cultural Family Fest."

Small-group caucuses included those for African-American, Asian, Hispanic, Haitian and Portuguese-speaking churches and ministers. Baptist Burmese refugees held their first-ever caucus.

Backstage during the closing-day ceremony David Coffey of Great Britain, president of the Baptist World Alliance, told Roy Medley, general secretary of the ABC, "I love the diversity in this denomination," adding that the degree of cultural mixture was rare.

Two years hence, the ABC convention will meet in Puerto Rico.

The church region that played host this year is exceptional: "We are 62 percent immigrant congregations. The gospel is preached in 48 languages in American Baptist Churches of Los Angeles," said Samuel Chetti, the executive minister of ABC of Los Angeles and Congregations of the Southwest and Hawaii.

"I'd say 30 percent or so are purely multiethnic congregations; they have everybody," said Chetti. Once predominantly Anglo churches have become multi ethnic. "I can't imagine one church that's truly Anglo."

But the very reason Chetti's region exists in its present form points to theological and social conflicts that sometimes accompany such broad diversity.

Formerly a local association of churches in Los Angeles and its immediate suburbs, Chetti's region ended up taking in liberal and centrist churches from the reconfigured ABC of the Pacific Southwest.

The 2006 denominational breakup in the region started after dozens of conservative churches in the area split from the national church, mainly over their perception that the ABC was insufficiently resolute in denouncing homosexuality and excluding gay-friendly congregations.

Of seven mainline denominations polled in 2007 in Pew's U.S. Religious Landscape Survey, American Baptists had the lowest percentage of members, 40 percent, who said that homosexuality is a way of life that should be accepted by society.

[Chetti told the Century in June that out of 280 congregations in the old region, nearly 100 conservative ones joined a new group, Transforming Ministries. "The rest stayed with the ABC at some level," Chetti said, "although many congregations may take another 12 to 18 months to make a decision."

[The Baptist tradition of autonomous congregations only loosely tied together creates some imprecision in counting membership levels and the number of affiliated congregations. ABCUSA has 1.3 million members and 5,558 congregations, according to lists at church headquarters in Pennsylvania. Speakers in Pasadena, however, spoke regularly of 5,200 congregations. Medley explained that some of the additional 300 churches on official ABC rolls are "new church starts that are not yet chartered and voted in as full-member churches."]

Some continuing tensions over sexuality and other issues were reflected in the delegates' rejection June 29 of a massive restructuring proposal, which fell short of a required two-thirds majority. American Baptist officials had worked two years on the cost-cutting proposal, which would have turned two agencies into semiautonomous bodies.

But progressive American Baptist leaders and some others expressed serious misgivings about the plan, with some claiming that the restructuring would make it harder to advance social justice issues in churchwide policy statements and resolutions.

Chetti acknowledged that conservative evangelical views are common in many ethnic groups in the ABC. “For example, we have here the Armenian Evangelical Baptist Church in Glendale,” he said. The pastor “is from [the country of] Georgia, and they are traditional Baptists—men on one side [of the church], women on one side,” he said. “Very orthodox—very orthodox scripturally . . . and hierarchical.

“On the other hand, you have much more egalitarian Anglo and African-American congregations. So, it’s both sides.”

For Tim Bonney, pastor of First Baptist Church of Greater Des Moines, Iowa, the denomination’s diversity can be cumbersome, but rewarding. “I don’t think American Baptists have generally felt like there has to be a majority group in the denomination,” he said.

“It doesn’t mean that we have to agree on all these other finer points of theology and issues of politics,” said Bonney. “My congregation also is politically diverse, theologically diverse; we like that.

“It’s both our greatest strength and greatest weakness,” the pastor said. “It certainly would be easier if we all agreed with each other, but I’ve always found that kind of diversity to be very refreshing.” *-Associated Baptist Press*