

American Baptist progressives nix restructuring: Proposal falls just short of two-thirds needed

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While celebrating the denomination's broad ethnic, regional and linguistic diversity at their biennial meeting June 26-28, members of the American Baptist Churches USA also exhibited their ideological diversity.

Delegates, meeting in Pasadena, California, torpedoed a major restructuring that had been backed by denominational officials but criticized by many progressive leaders and churches.

The 377-217 tally in favor of the bylaws changes failed by a handful of votes to reach the two-thirds majority required to pass them.

The revisions would have spun off the denomination's two mission boards into quasi-autonomous entities, altered the form of representation on ABCUSA's main governing board and changed the method by which American Baptists approve policy statements and resolutions.

ABC general secretary Roy Medley, reelected earlier in a 65-11 vote by General Board members to a third four-year term as the church's top executive, said that he would meet with ABC leaders to consider a new restructuring proposal. "We have received feedback that our efforts need further work," he said.

Progressive congregations and organizations said they feared that the changes would further marginalize their voice within the denomination and make it more difficult to rescind past ABC statements condemning homosexuality.

Grant Ward, a delegate from Wayne, Pennsylvania, read a statement that his Central Baptist Church had approved opposing the bylaws revision. It declared that the changes would make it more difficult to rescind official ABC actions with which the congregation disagrees, including a 1992 ABC General Board statement on

homosexuality, which says: “We affirm that the practice of homosexuality is incompatible with Christian teaching.”

In addition, the Association of Welcoming and Affirming Baptists voiced concern that the proposal contained no explicit affirmation that a church can choose to affiliate with a regional group outside the geographical area in which it is located.

In the last 20 years, a handful of pro-gay American Baptist congregations have been expelled from regional ABC groups. Many of them have affiliated with more progressive regional groups outside their area—the only way for a local church to continue its affiliation with the national denomination.

The rule allowing churches to affiliate with so-called nongeographic regions was not part of the new bylaws but would have been a standing rule of the proposed Board of General Ministries. The board would have been able, at any time, to undo that rule by a simple majority vote.

June Totten, a delegate from River side Baptist Church in Washington, D.C., objected to another aspect of the proposed bylaws. The change would have required that public policy statements be initiated and approved by the boards in the denomination’s regions and agencies rather than by local congregations or by delegates to biennial meetings.

“Under these bylaws we will not have a unified voice; Babel comes to mind,” she said. “We will have many voices not needing to communicate with each other.”

Some delegates objected to the proposal to decouple the denomination’s two major mission boards—the Board of National Ministries and the Board of International Ministries—from the ABC General Board. Currently, their membership is picked from among members of the General Board.

The proposal would have made the mission boards self-perpetuating, allowing them to set their own policy and create new governing documents.

Heads of those agencies argued before delegates that the proposed spin-offs would help their boards function more effectively, efficiently and freely. “People will be on a single board, rather than on two boards,” said Annie Marie Lebarbour, current chair of the board of directors of ABC National Ministries.

However, she said, the agency “has no desire to be freed from the denomination; this is who we are; it’s our DNA; it’s in our bloodstream—it’s in our very work. We wish to and intend to remain firmly American Baptist.”

With the failure of the bylaws changes, ABC leaders will now regroup and decide how to present a more palatable restructuring proposal to the 2011 biennial meeting, set to gather in Puerto Rico.

In the meantime, General Secretary Medley said that American Baptists can begin implementing some nonformal parts of the restructuring—such as increased participation by the denomination’s several ethnic caucus groups at General Board meetings. *—Robert Marus, Associated Baptist Press*