

American Baptists face breakup threats: Homosexuality debate could shatter fragile unity

by [John Dart](#) in the [June 28, 2005](#) issue

In an appeal to American Baptists last November, the denomination's top official said he suffered "many sleepless nights" worrying whether controversies over homosexuality would shatter the fragile unity of the denomination. "I agonize over the fact that many feel a split is inevitable," wrote A. Roy Medley, general secretary of American Baptist Churches in the U.S.A.

"As feelings rise to a fever-pitch, I worry because I see a tendency to shift from discernment to power moves," said Medley in urging American Baptists instead to be "bridge people in a world of wall builders."

Medley's outlook has not changed during this month's run-up to the biennial meeting of the ABCUSA in Denver July 1-4, according to Richard Schramm, deputy general secretary and director of communications. Medley declined to be interviewed due to a heavy schedule at American Baptist headquarters in Valley Forge, Pennsylvania.

Even more crucial than the biennial convention, which may draw up to 2,000 delegates, is the preceding four-day meeting—also in Denver—of the ABCUSA's general board. Schramm said the board will take up a petition from the Indiana-Kentucky region to amend standing rules.

If the proposal is adopted, opponents say, conservative leaders will have achieved an important first step toward ousting all congregations that openly affirm and welcome gay and lesbian Christians.

At least three American Baptist regions have warned the national church that they may terminate their donations or affiliation if little change occurs:

- The southern California-based Pacific Southwest board declared May 12 that it would withhold contributions to the national offices “if the issues regarding homosexuality are not biblically dealt with” by July 4.
- The Michigan region’s board announced on its Web site that—in light of ongoing debates over homosexuality that have “sidetracked, if not hijacked,” other ministry efforts—a task force will explore withdrawal from ABCUSA by the 2007 biennial meeting if there is no action at the national level. Its “statement of concern,” adopted overwhelmingly May 23, also recommended that the general board and office of the general secretary be “dissolved” in favor of a more decentralized structure.
- A reported 64 congregations in the West Virginia Baptist Convention have called on the denomination “to resolve the issue of homosexuality by the end of June or they will leave,” according to Bill Nicoson, executive director of the American Baptist Evangelicals, a national conservative renewal group.

Nicoson, based in Westminster, California, said he traveled 80,000 miles last year on behalf of the evangelical network. The ABE, which had fewer than 100 affiliated churches five years ago, has more than 530 now, he said. “We are trying to keep everyone from breaking away, although from my perspective [the new proposals] are too little, too late.”

Even if the ABC general board this month were to adopt the self-definitions and disfellowship procedures favored by conservatives, people on both sides of the issue note that the legal process could not be completed until 2007.

In a nutshell, many conservative churches are seeking rules “with teeth” that would rid the ABCUSA of congregations that welcome gay and lesbian participants, sometimes ordaining gay pastors and celebrating same-sex unions. Many liberal-to-moderate churches hope to retain organizational havens for disfellowshipped congregations in keeping with Baptist traditions of “soul freedom” and aversion to creeds.

Some American Baptists apparently felt that tensions were eased when four gay-friendly congregations in the San Francisco Bay area were expelled by their region, the ABC of the West, in 1999.

Those actions had followed a general board statement in 1991 that said “the practice of homosexuality is incompatible with Christian teaching.” The general board in the next year adopted a resolution calling for continuing dialogue on all aspects of human sexuality amid a variety of opinions in the ABCUSA. A board policy statement on family life, Schramm said, calls for monogamous, lifelong marriage between a man and a woman.

In 1999 the general board amended its rules so that a congregation at odds with, or ousted by, its geographical region could affiliate with a willing region outside of its area.

That option gives some recourse to the gay rights-oriented Association of Welcoming and Affirming Baptists (AWAB), now 12 years old with 54 congregations on record as members, according to its interim director, Daniel Pryfogle of Cary, North Carolina. “Our largest numbers are in New York and Massachusetts,” said Pryfogle, “but we are seeing growth in the South by former Southern Baptist churches.”

Delegates to the 2005 biennial meeting will be asked to vote on a “statement of concern” that asks American Baptists to “recognize the diversity that exists” and “that not all members are alike.” It will also encourage regions to cooperate with churches “by allowing a variety of ways to work together.” Such resolutions, however, are not binding on member churches.

The resolution illustrates “how much energy denominational officials have given over the last decade to hold this family together,” Pryfogle said. Yet, he added, “for welcoming Baptists, we increasingly feel that the emphasis on unity comes at the expense of integrity.”

AWAB churches and their allies are looking for relationships that are more giving, he said. “Folks on both sides are asking, ‘Is the battle worth it?’” Pryfogle said that many young church leaders “will not be in Denver” and that many progressives are attracted to the Alliance of Baptists, a National Council of Churches member composed mostly of ex-Southern Baptist churches.

One of those “unwilling to walk away without fighting” is Susan Johnson, pastor of Hyde Park Union Church in Chicago and a onetime general board member. Johnson was a leader in gathering signatures for a counterpetition opposing the petition from the Indiana-Kentucky region. The counterpetition seeks to institute standing rules

that would allow an appeals process for churches kicked out of regional associations.

The impetus for the counterpetition appeared to come from a February meeting in Rochester, New York. A consensus statement from a group of 158 American Baptists from 14 states affirmed in part, "We uphold freedom of religious expression, expect no conformity to any creed or binding confession, and strive for justice within all human relationships."

Alan Newton, executive minister of the Rochester-Genesee region, said that even congregations that become AWAB members "write their own statements on what that means to them." Still, Newton said, "it is fair to say that generally those churches have the idea of a fuller ministry to gays and lesbians."

Newton said that after the upcoming meetings in Denver "clearly there will be loss of some churches, possibly of some regions, judging by what I am reading on Web sites and whatnot."

American Baptist officials reported having 5,436 churches in 2003, slightly fewer than the number in the United Church of Christ. ABCUSA reported having 1.43 million members then, compared to the UCC's 1.29 million.

Despite the denomination's size, it is rare that ABCUSA news releases or any official American Baptist publication describes new developments on divisive issues. That may reflect a cautious stance at headquarters. "We are not a governing body," said Schramm. "The implementation of policy is at the local and regional level."

But without internal explanatory journalism, "there are rumors galore, and it's up to everyone to search the news for themselves," said Newton. "Another part of the problem is that the progressive end of the denomination has been represented by multiple groups that have not communicated well together," he said.