

On gays, American Baptists keep 'paradox' Maintaining an open stance: Maintaining an open stance

by [John Dart](#) in the [July 26, 2005](#) issue

Resisting efforts to eliminate organizational havens for congregations that welcome gays, American Baptist leaders and delegates meeting in Denver maintained an open stance on homosexuality—even if that means living with a “paradox,” as it was put by the denomination’s top executive.

A. Roy Medley, general secretary of the 1.4-million-member American Baptist Churches in the U.S.A., told delegates July 1 that his stance has been constant through the churches’ fights over gay and lesbian concerns.

“I am still traditional in matters of human sexuality, and I do not want to be separated from those who in Christian conscience differ from me on the issue of homosexuality,” Medley said in his address at the four-day biennial meeting. “We have been a family where I have been granted the privilege of living in that paradox.”

Later, delegates affirmed, by a vote of 940 to 356, a statement that endorses the right of congregations to join another geographical region or association of ABCUSA churches by mutual consent. The practical, unstated effect of the statement was to permit churches to stay in the ABC fold if their local association disfellowships them because they had declared themselves open to gays’ involvement in church life.

That “statement of concern,” or resolution, noted that American Baptist churches witness to the fact that “not all members are alike, and that each member is necessary for the healthy functioning of the church.”

More traditional, socially conservative churches and regions have said that providing such refuge is harmful to churches’ biblical witness by tolerating sinful behavior and that national leaders will be judged accordingly.

However, a conservative proposal that went before the American Baptists' General Board, which met prior to the biennial assembly, was only partially successful.

The board accepted for a second reading in November one part of the petition, which referred to "an inconsistent and confusing message to the world about what American Baptists profess to believe and what is actually practiced" in light of a 1992 resolution that declared "the practice of homosexuality is incompatible with Christian teaching."

The proposal, circulated by the Indiana-Kentucky region and garnering letters of support from 523 churches, would amend a statement describing American Baptists. The added wording would say they "submit to the teaching of scripture that God's design for sexual intimacy places it within the context of marriage between one man and one woman, and acknowledge that the practice of homosexuality is incompatible with biblical teaching."

However, the other half of the petition, which sought to prohibit disfellowshipped churches from being reinstated by other church associations, was referred by the board to its standing rules committee because "the wording was too vague and needed to focus on specific action," said Richard Schramm, communications director.

Susan Johnson, a Chicago pastor who has spearheaded a counter petition-gathering effort to provide an appeals process for disfellowshipped churches, said she hopes that that proposal will be ready for the General Board in November.

Another proposal, calling for respectful engagement in controversial issues affecting the American Baptist "family of churches," was brought by the Mid-American region based in Des Moines, Iowa, and was given its first reading by the board.

In weeks before the General Board met, conservative leaders in southern California, Michigan, Ohio and West Virginia indicated that they would consider various forms of disengagement from the denomination, depending on actions taken in Denver.

According to Bill Nicoson, executive director of American Baptist Evangelicals (ABE), which has more than 530 affiliated churches, many in the movement believe that Medley and the General Board have made "a clear decision that they plan to do nothing about implementing the denominational policy on homosexuality."

Medley, who is based at ABCUSA offices in Valley Forge, Pennsylvania, reported to the board June 25 that the denomination is experiencing vitality. He said that there have been nearly 400,000 baptisms since 1998, including a 14 percent increase in 2004 over totals in 2003. He said 257 new congregations have been “planted” as a part of goals set for 2010.

In an e-mail, Nicoson claimed that “most of the baptisms, a large percentage of dollars given to the denomination and church plants come from ABE churches.” The ABE-aligned churches may start to show their displeasure as soon as late September, said Nicoson, who lives in California’s Orange County. “The ABC will never be the same after Denver.”