

AMERICAN BAPTIST CHURCHES USA

*Rev. Dr. A. Roy Medley
General Secretary*

May 14, 2010

Dear Brothers and Sisters in Christ,

On May 6, at the invitation of our General Secretary, we, the undersigned, gathered at the Mission Center to begin a conversation on how we, as American Baptists, might engage the issue of immigration and immigration reform. We write to report on our discussion and invite you into our continuing dialogue – in the spirit of Hebrews 10:24: “Let us consider how to stir up one another to love and good works.”

At the outset, allow us to be transparent: we do not claim any superior understanding of the issue or what the Gospel demands of us. We know there are differing perspectives in our denominational family. One of our purposes in writing you, in fact, is to encourage brothers and sisters in the faith to share those different perspectives so that our conversation and our responses in word and deed can be richer and more representative.

Those of us who sign this letter gathered not because we are all of one mind on every aspect of immigration reform. We know that any reform must consider such widespread concerns as national security, appropriate means of border control, and the impact on our economic and social welfare systems.

At the same time we recognize there is broad agreement among Protestant leaders (including those represented in the National Association of Evangelicals, the National Council of Churches, Sojourners and Church World Service) that immigration reform in our country must reflect mercy and justice rooted in God’s love through “immigration reform legislation that is consistent with humanitarian values, supports families, provides a pathway to citizenship for immigrant workers already in the U.S., expands legal avenues for workers to enter the U.S. with their rights and due process fully protected, and examines solutions to address the root causes of migration.” (quoted by Evangelicals for Social Action from Christians for Comprehensive Immigration Reform-Sojourners) This moral framework is shared by Roman Catholic and Orthodox faith leaders as well.

When American Baptist congregations discuss the issue of immigration reform, we believe it is important that we frame such dialogue through the Scriptures in light of God’s revelation in Christ Jesus “for the love of Christ urges us on, because we are convinced that one has died for all.” (II Corinthians 5:14)

From the Old Testament our discussion is shaped by God’s constant admonition to Israel as to how she is to treat the stranger in her midst: “The alien who resides with you shall be to you as the citizen among you; you shall love the alien as yourself, for you were aliens in the land of Egypt: I am the LORD your God” (Leviticus 19:34). Furthermore, we are reminded of Micah 6:8 which says, “He has told you, O mortal, what is good; and what does the LORD require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God?” (Micah 6:8)

In the New Testament, the greeting of Christ, “Fear not,” (Matt 10:31, Luke 12:32, John 14:27b) is a powerful antidote to the fear that so often marks conversations such as this with any number of viewpoints. Likewise the story of the Good Samaritan and Jesus’ description of the final judgment are critical to our perspective.

'And when did we see thee a stranger and welcome thee, or naked and clothe thee?'³⁹ And when did we see thee sick or in prison and visit thee?'⁴⁰ And the King will answer them, 'Truly, I say to you, as you did it to one of the least of these my brethren, you did it to me.' (Matt 25:38-40)

Indeed, we believe these are texts that challenge us in the current reality regarding immigration, and further, we believe they ask us to search deeply what it means to hear James when he writes to Christian communities, "If you really fulfill the royal law according to the scripture, 'You shall love your neighbor as yourself,' you do well." (James 2:8)

We also believe that dialogues about immigration reform in our churches ought also to be framed by who we are as American Baptist Christians and our missional DNA. A report on our history notes:

The Christian Friendliness program had been launched [by the Woman's American Baptist Home Mission Society] in 1919 as a Christian Americanization program for immigrants. It was known for its goal of changing fear and hostility toward strangers into understanding and friendship. ("American Baptist Women: The Violet Rudd Years, 1951-1976," by Doris Anne Younger)

Since the turn of the twentieth century, American Baptists have been in the forefront of welcoming immigrants into our country and into our churches. As a result we have been profoundly reshaped by God in our makeup. No one racial/ethnic group holds majority membership any longer in the American Baptist Churches, USA. God has woven us into a coat of many colors. Consequently, in congregation after congregation, we have undocumented persons worshipping with us as beloved brothers and sisters in Christ. This very personal face of the undocumented in our midst reminds us that they are part of the dialogue and not just an object of it.

In addition to framing the conversation scripturally, we believe how one structures the conversation is also important. The Evangelical Lutheran Church in America has proposed some basic ground rules for conversation for discussing tough social issues that we would commend to you. The resource is noted in the attached resource list which we hope is a help to you.

Again, we greet you all in the name of Christ. Grace and peace be with you.

Sincerely and in Christ,

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**(Not able to participate in the May 6 Family Conversation on Immigration)*

cc: Mr. Frank Christine, Jr., President
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