

The organization honors the need for some individuals (both sexual minorities and their supporters) to remain anonymous.

ABConcerned was the “birthing organization” for the Association of Welcoming & Affirming Baptists. AWAB was a natural outgrowth of the ministry of ABConcerned’s as some individuals and congregations began to feel comfortable publicly stating their sexual orientation and/or their support of sexual minority persons. AWAB came into being officially in 1993, to provide an organization for individuals and congregations who wanted to state openly that they welcomed and affirmed persons of all sexual orientations. These people and congregations were not making a political statement. It was more like a family putting a decal on their front window to let children passing by know that this was a safe home to which they could go if they felt endangered. By being a part of AWAB a congregation says, “We are a safe church home for all persons.” Individuals in the association say, “I am a safe pastor/counselor/friend for all persons.”

At first the organizations were united, and AWAB later became a separate entity. AWAB emphasizes the participation of congregations in its ministries. ABConcerned focuses more on ministries by and with individuals. The two organizations share a warm relationship, and sometimes do projects together. At this year’s Biennial, they engaged in a united response to the General Board’s ousting of four churches. Many people who are members of one are also members of the other. The leadership of the two groups are often in contact with one another. They are complementary organizations, each one supportive the others goals.

Sometimes people are confused about whether a particular project was done by ABConcerned or AWAB. Which organization gets credit (or blame?) is not nearly so important as the fact that both groups are working hard to care for American Baptists of all orientations, and to promote justice within the denomination.



*Co-chairs Gary Harris and Lynne Kelley share this column in Voice of the Turtle*

## ABC Regions Appeal Churches Dismissal

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West attempted to justify its disfellowshipping of the four churches by claiming that the churches did not meet criteria one – “supporting the work and mission of the ABC/USA and the Region.” The four churches disputed this claim as not only false but also as a claim that was not raised or discussed in the disfellowshipping debate.

Despite this conflict between the ABC of the West Covenant and that of the ABC/USA, no action was taken to require the Region to remove the additional criterion to the regional Covenant or to reinstate the churches. The four churches then appealed the Region’s decision to the General Board, claiming that the ABC of the West unjustly dismissed them.

First Baptist Church of Granville, Ohio, which had months earlier been disfellowshipped from the Columbus Baptist Association and the American Baptist Churches of Ohio because of its membership in the Association of Welcoming & Affirming Baptists also filed an appeal.

The appeals of all the disfellowshipped churches went through an extensive review process before being heard by the General Board. During this process the denomination continued to view the churches as being in good standing, but without a Region. During the two years, the General Board commissioned a report on denominational unity. The approved report reaffirmed that a violation of one of the five Common Criteria was the only grounds for disfellowshipping a church. The Executive Committee of the General Board recommended 10-3 that the appeals of the churches be sustained and that they be allowed to remain cooperating churches, while at the same time encouraging the churches to join another Region.

On June 20, the General Board met to consider the appeals of the churches. They first considered the appeal of First Baptist Church of Granville, Ohio. Although the discussion strayed to the churches affirmation of homosexual members, the debate of the appeal stayed fairly focused on the Common Criteria. The General Board voted to sustain the appeal of the Granville congregation (79 yes, 73 no). After taking a dinner break, the Board reconvened to consider the appeal of First Baptist Church of Berkeley. The debate at this time switched to an increased

emphasis of First Berkeley’s inclusion of sexual minority people fully in the life of the church and on the fact that it participated in gay pride parades and such. The focus had begun to move further away from the Common Criteria, the matter that the General Board was charged to consider. First Berkeley’s appeal was not sustained by one vote, (76 yes, 77 no). When the appeal of Lakeshore Avenue Baptist Church was heard, the debate focused even more on some Board members’ views that the churches inclusion of homosexuals in membership and leadership was wrong. Lakeshore, it was pointed out had ordained a gay man. The violation of the Common Criteria as the only grounds for dismissing a church had been further lost, and the debate had instead focused on homosexuality. Lakeshore lost its appeal (70 yes, 83 no).

The debate continued on June 21. The General Board met to consider the appeals of New Community of Faith and San Leandro Community Church. The discussion maintained its ending focus of the night before on homosexuality, rather than the Common Criteria. New Community of Faith lost its appeal (71 yes, 83 no). When it was time to discuss the San Leandro congregation, the Board voted not to discuss the appeal at all and just voted to deny the appeal (72 yes, 82 no).

The General Board was quite divided on the issue of dismissing the churches. Many within the General Board and the ABC/USA believe the process of dismissing churches on theological grounds sets a dangerous precedent for American Baptists. This practice undermines a polity that believes in the autonomy of the local church and that matters of scriptural interpretation should not be dictated to individuals or congregations by ecclesiastical authorities.

The adjudication process that has been begun may take a year or more. The four California congregations, concerned churches and Regions, and many individuals are considering various other options to allow the dismissed churches to continue their long tradition as American Baptist churches in the event that the decision of the adjudicator is not in favor of the appealing Regions ▼