

## “STATE OF THE REGION”

American Baptist Churches of Wisconsin, October 10, 2020 Annual Meeting  
“Together Living Faithfully Through Christ Today” | Ephesians 3:18-19

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Preparing for the Annual Gathering (AG), and all that goes into it, is always a challenging season. With the AG being the only time in the year that is intentionally designed for the whole family—regionally as well as our national partners—there is a lot of listening to the Lord, planning, recruiting, relating, implementing, communicating, and reflecting that is involved. It is much more than logistical event planning. It is a holy season in which the movement of God’s Spirit is the driving and sustaining force.

This year 2020 has been particularly challenging. It is a year in which the whole world has been deeply impacted by, what many are calling, the twin pandemics—Covid-19 and racism—and humanity is at once trying to make sense of the spread of the former and the rootedness of the latter, while also trying feverishly to find their cures. The changes to human patterns due to Covid-19 has changed the look of church and our Annual Gathering, necessitating our first-ever virtual event. The rise of social awareness and moral convictions prompted by several high-exposure recent oppressions and violence against Black and Brown people, rooted in the undeniable presence of racial bias and injustice, has made the need for our multi-ethnic, multi-racial denominational family to come and work together that much more urgent, in my opinion.

With the blessing of a sabbatical, giving me respite from my duties from mid-June to mid-August, the Program Committee and other region staff and groups forged ahead in their work and set in motion the vision for this year’s 176<sup>th</sup> Annual Gathering. To me, this is already a sign of *transformation*, which is this year’s theme—chosen four years ago when we began the current quadrennium focused on rootedness, collaboration, growth, and transformation. Transformation, not only because of the new virtual format, but because I enter this, my last Annual Gathering as your REM, with a coming transition in my own ministerial journey (to serve in the Office of the General Secretary ABCUSA starting 2021). Transformation, not only because of the new format or my personal liminality, but also because I witnessed a wide group of people, veteran and new, take ownership of the Annual Gathering—in planning, promoting, and leading. It was a clear example of what can be envisioned and implemented when people remember and value joint ministries and mission, even in the most challenging times.

***Remember, value, envision, and implement joint ministries and mission:*** is this not at the heart of voluntary regional association, what we have been working toward anew for the past several years – Together Living Faithfully Through Christ Today? With this question in mind, following is an overview, from my vantage point as your REM, of the state of ABC Wisconsin’s purpose of ***supporting churches and ministers, providing camping and educational opportunities, pursuing innovative initiatives, strengthening the networks in which we work, and developing the administrative areas of communications, governance, staffing, financial health, and the regional office building.***

***How ABC/WI can best serve and support our member churches and affiliated ministers must continue to be discerned and defined by collaborative conversations among all stakeholders.*** Just as churches are challenged with new forms of being church, regional entities are also challenged to reinvent or redefine its purpose and value, with consideration to current resources of mission funds, volunteer engagement, and staff and leadership gifts and abilities. Though we are region of over 60 churches and over 200 affiliated ministers, not all participate in regional life. There is an opportunity to move, unapologetically, where the

Spirit is moving among those who are already engaging and collaborating; this is where growth and transformation can take root more deeply. And with those who are not engaging, relationship building and invitation to covenant can happen in multiple directions, not just from the region office outward. Over recent years, you can see the fruit of the relationships built—some are tangible (identified through presence, service, communication, collaboration); some fruit are not always tangible or visible but manifest in very personal ways (impact, learning, challenges to mindset, etc.).

**Camping and educational ministries** originally was started for and kept alive by our member churches and ministers. With waning numbers from within the ABC Wisconsin constituency relying on these ministries, at least in its current forms, this is another area in need of collaborative conversations about what these ministries need to be to remain vibrant and relevant. These ministries can also be positioned to serve beyond the ABC/WI family, and the region needs to discuss such opportunities and implications. **Camp Tamarack is in a transitional year**, having, for the first time in recent memory, to cancel camp programming due to COVID-19. This has given way to some capital improvements to John Gray (flooring and roofing), Tamarack (plumbing and HVAC), and staff house (heating). Though camp usage has been limited this year, we have been able to introduce new people to the beautiful property through our clergy sabbath, family retreat, and day visit options. Through a virtual camping program this summer, regular youth campers and families were able to at least stay connected and learn about Christ in “camp-style,” and camp staff made new connections with fellow ABC camp staff throughout the country. Lower camp revenue was offset by income from a sizeable red pine tree harvest completed 1<sup>st</sup> quarter 2020. You can learn more about the **current events in educational ministries of CENTRAL Wisconsin in John Jones’ report below**.

ABC Wisconsin has been **fertile ground for ministry innovation** – trying things in unconventional ways for the purpose of working toward different results! The **POST** started meeting weekly online via Zoom years before Zoom became everyday vernacular. Through the **Circuit Project** we have tried to live out the values of healthy and missional church and the priesthood of all believers seriously by encouraging and equipping for intentional discernment and self-study by congregations during pastoral transitions. Churches that journeyed in this way experienced first hand the weightiness of a search process and hopefully came out on the other side convinced that the goal is not just calling the next pastor but committing to a healthy and God-ordained pastor-people Christ-like relationship that has the unique call of that local church as a focus point and driving force. The region is positioned to continue to encourage the birth of new ministries through the **New Wineskins** Grant Program. The newest initiative this season is a **Co-Consultation on Race and Culture**, a space where region pastors can be equipped and encouraged in their leadership with one another, particularly as it relates to navigating the cross-racial and multi-cultural efforts for justice, mutual understanding, and Kingdom-actions, as well as receiving the gifts of the diverse ABC/WI fellowship.

ABC/WI has been present and engaged with several of our **in-state ministry and national partners**. We have several American Baptists serving on partner Boards and committees (Milwaukee Christian Center, Housing Ministries, campus ministries, Interfaith network, and more). More and more of our pastors are taking advantage of the programs offered by our national partners, such as the AB Home Mission Societies, MMBB, and others. In short, the networks in which those within the ABC/WI constituency are engaged are broadening and strengthening. It has been my goal to encourage direct connections, with the region office making initial introductions when necessary but resisting becoming a controlling hub, and gratefully I see this **is** happening. There are always more opportunities for networking, and our churches and ministers can again strengthen the

efforts of the region office by articulating what would be most helpful, because communicating opportunities and advancing networking is a considerable investment of staff time.

And lastly, undergirding the external ministry and mission efforts is an ***administrative system that needs consistent and intentional attention***. The Board of Managers, within our new governance structure, is at its strongest as it has been in the past six years. Marked by a respectable diversity, in regards to the representation of our diverse constituency, an active and transparent partnership between officers and region staff, and a roster of thoughtful directors who are less concerned about what is not happening and instead fueling conversations about what can be happening, the Board has a foundation upon which to provide clear leadership in the pending transition in the Regional Executive Minister position. Office administrative assistance and skilled communications staff are two areas that continue to be in flux. While we do have either temporary or contract assistance currently, the region will want to consider longer-term solutions to these areas, after some discernment about what the needs truly are. Mission funding is an area that compels us to consider a thorough theology of 'Jehovah Jireh,' [the Lord will provide] and faithful stewardship of the resources of money, talents (people), and time (purposeful effort). While this region has been blessed with many saints who have contributed over the years to endowments and investment accounts that in turn support ministry today, we have opportunity to do today for future generations what generations past has done for us.

***So, this is what I see. How do you see God's Holy Spirit moving in ABC Wisconsin and what are you discerning are its opportunities for the next chapter of mission and ministry?***

This year 2020 has been particularly challenging. Yet, just one year ago we were together celebrating God's faithfulness over the past 175 years to and through ABC Wisconsin. Surely this was not the first year in this time period during which society faced widespread threats, concerns, and challenges. I shared earlier this year and I share it again, "*for this, we have been baptized,*" and none other than Jesus Christ himself lays out an example of compassion for the marginalized, corrective challenge to the pious, boldness for peace and justice, purity of faithfulness, and sacrificial love for all – all within a the societal context of divided peoples, oppressive systems, inexplicable disease, and a yearning for a Godly reign. So...you got this!... ABC Wisconsin, so long as you love the Lord with all your heart, soul, mind, and strength, and love others as yourselves. My prayer will always be for you, that you may be filled with all the fullness of God.

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#### REGION NOTES:

Congregations and Pastors: *Completed:* Bonnie Bell—(Retirement from UMC); Patrick Roberts (Staff with CENTRAL WI|ABC/WI); Carolyn Dugan (Staff with Camp Tamarack|ABC/WI); Brian Butcher—Mauston, Community; Jason Mack—Madison, First, Staff Minister. *Beginning:* Don Iliff—La Crosse, First (Interim); Ron Zielinski—Sheboygan Falls, Community (Lay Minister); Jason Mack—Wauwatosa, Underwood.

New Churches: Milw, Siyin Chin Baptist Church, Suan Za Khai, Pastor

Disaffiliated Churches: Hudson, First Baptist Church (Living Vine Church), John Czech, Transitional Pastor

Milestone Celebrations: (communicated with the region office): *Church Anniversaries:* Milw, Evangelica—68<sup>th</sup>; Janesville, First – 175<sup>th</sup>; Milw, Calvary—125<sup>th</sup>; Wauwatosa, Underwood—175<sup>th</sup>; Racine, First – 180<sup>th</sup>

Organizations and Directors: *Beginning:* Pardeep Kaleka, Interfaith Conference of Greater Milwaukee; Jeanne M. Piccione, Tudor Oaks Senior Living Communities

In Memoriam (ABC/WI Clergy and Staff): Gene Bell (Dec'27; Beloit, WI); Pow Taw (Milw, Smyrna Karen)

**ROOTEDNESS – COLLABORATION – GROWTH – TRANSFORMATION**

The educational ministry efforts of the American Baptist Churches of Wisconsin continue to evolve as part of the Region ministry and our explicit values of ROOTEDNESS, COLLABORATION, GROWTH, and TRANSFORMATION that name and govern the Strategic Plan now drawing to a close.

In some ways, the COVID-19 pandemic has dramatically impacted the work of the CENTRAL Wisconsin Site. In some ways, it has not impacted the work at all. Because the M.Div. curriculum is now essentially all online, there was no significant change to teaching or to the experience of our students as a result of the shut-down in March. In fact, our site enrollment was up a bit this Easter Term (from an all-time low of 2) to 5 students. Ordinary (Fall term) we have 5 students again. That demonstrates some semblance of GROWTH. But in terms of student enrollment, our growth has stagnated.

The pandemic has certainly impacted the local activities and plans for the Seminary Site, particularly our ongoing and anticipated relationships of COLLABORATION. At the beginning of March, a more robust schedule of Teaching Pastors Forums (TPF) for 2020 was beginning to fall into place. This offering has been very well received as an opportunity for pastors to pause and to reflect together. Additionally, collaborative efforts toward the development of seminary collaborative sub-groups [stakeholders who have an opportunity to shape the direction of the site] and a basic Certificate in Theological Reflection were taking shape. Unfortunately, TPF efforts, the development of the collaboratives, and Certificate development have been on hiatus since the shutdown, as I have been resistant to make significant requests, or even to offer programming, to decision-fatigued pastors. The site did work in a supportive role to the Region for one COVID related offering – “Taking Inventory” – a May 21 webinar for pastors in collaboration with Midwest Ministry Development.

The most significant news regarding CENTRAL Wisconsin Seminary Site relates to the upcoming accreditation visit that Central Seminary will be having this fall. In the coming months, the Wisconsin site will no longer have “degree-granting status.” Functionally, not a great deal will change as that simply means that we will no longer be able to offer the full degree curriculum on site, and we have not been offering classes on site for 2+ years now. However, the relationship between the site and the Seminary will be transformed as a result of this reclassification. The nature of that TRANSFORMATION will be worked out in the coming months. But both partners in the relationship (Region and Seminary) see great value in maintaining the relationship, however it may be transformed.

Outside of site responsibilities, I have helped collect and collate information, plans and suggestions for response to the COVID-19 crisis. The resilience and creativity of our congregations and pastors inspires me. I continue to work with the Commission on Ministry and the Circuit Ministry team. I now serve as staff liaison to the Ministers Council. My awareness of Region work expanded through the period of Rev. Dr. Marie’s sabbatical as I was able to work with the Commission on Congregational Mission and the Program Committee and participate in judicatory and denominational conversations. I continue to work with the Nominating committee.

These many opportunities and responsibilities over the last several months, alongside the shifting status of the site, have challenged me to GROW in my own sense of ministry and responsibility. I take great joy in working with pastors and congregations more closely. I continue to be challenged to offer my gifts in different ways for this work, as our Region body lives out ROOTEDNESS, COLLABORATION, GROWTH and especially TRANSFORMATION in our efforts to remain faithful to the gospel call of Jesus Christ.