

## STATE OF THE REGION 2023

American Baptist Churches of Wisconsin—Annual Meeting October 13-15, 2023

“God’s Dominion is from Generation to Generation” – Daniel 4:3 KJV

When I look back at 2023, the word that comes immediately is “vision.” The Board of Managers began in January with a vision retreat held at First Baptist Church in Madison, in which we spent time together in a hybrid format discerning our values. From a list of over one hundred words, we narrowed it down to five: **Collaboration, Transformation, Integrity, Justice, and Resilience.**

From those five words, we crafted a Vision/Purpose statement for the region:

***To engage with churches, ministers, and ministries in collaborative and transformative work with our local and global communities by modeling integrity, pursuing justice, and fostering resilience while affirming the sacred worth of each person as beloved in Christ and by His church.***

In subsequent Board meetings, we discerned our supporting scripture of Romans 12:4-5:

**"For as in one body we have many members and not all the members have the same function, so we, who are many, are one body in Christ, and individually we are members one of another."** From our

scripture, values, and vision, we discerned our region motto: **“Diverse members, united in Christ.”**

The Board of Managers will use this visioning work as we discern our priorities for the region in the coming year.

The vision of having an Annual Gathering that was inclusive of our youth and young adults began as a seed last year with our focus on **Next Generation Ministries**. A study from Fuller Youth Institute shows that when churches focus on youth and young adults, everyone of all ages benefits. When we prioritize the needs of the upcoming generation, we recognize that **youth and young adults are not the future of the church; they are the church now**. We invited teens and young adults to serve on our Program Committee, and several of the workshops that we will participate in today are a result of their ideas and contributions. My goal is that this Annual Gathering is not the culmination, but the beginning of this vision work as I hope we begin both Youth Ministry and Young Adult Ministry collaboratives.

This theme of Next Generation Ministries is not limited to youth and young adults, for God is not through with any of us yet. What is God calling you to next? What might be the next generation of God’s work in your life?

Part of this vision work is happening under our Education ministries led by Rev. Dr. John Jones, as he develops a Leadership Training Academy. This is designed to help us grow in discipleship, personal study, leadership, and lay ministry. Another area of this work is happening through our Outdoor Ministries led by Rev. Carolyn Dugan, which includes camp, but also creation justice, collaboration with our Metro Chicago region, and learning how to grow Camp Tamarack as a safe and welcoming space for all campers, including those of diverse backgrounds. This includes all generations, including our Book Camp at the end of November!

Some of this visioning work is also reorienting the region as a **support for churches**. I often say that though I represent the institution, I am skeptical of the institution. The American Baptist Churches of Wisconsin does not exist as an entity for itself; **we are here to support you. Your mission giving helps all**

**fifty-eight churches in the region and Camp Tamarack, along with the various missions and ministries we partner in supporting together.** We are here to serve you and support your church. We've offered trainings on financial best practices for treasurers and finance committees, church boards and leadership, and conflict transformation.

However, the best way to know what church needs are is through relationship. I have visited 43 of our 58 churches and have had contact with pastors or leadership in three others. I've had the opportunity to learn from you all some of the challenges of aging buildings, limited resources, and the challenges of ministering in your community: whether it be engaging in hybrid ministry and the digital neighborhood, changing demographics, or seeking discernment as to what is next for your church, we are learning and growing together. Some of this work of resourcing churches involves our denominational partners such as the American Baptist Foundation in legacy and gift planning, and the American Baptist Home Mission Societies in intercultural ministries, Christian Education, and discipleship resources. Other times, resourcing involves connecting your church with partners such as International Ministries in our support for our global servants overseas, some of whom minister among the most vulnerable populations in our world including refugees fleeing religious and ethnic persecution. Sometimes that work is connecting our immigrant pastors with resources and attorneys to help with immigration here in the U.S.

Another area the region supports churches is through the Commission on Congregational Mission. This year they focused on resources for believers to connect to prayer and movement outdoors. They also continued a focus on hybrid ministry in how to engage more directly with the digital neighborhood of the congregation. A list of top five resources for digital ministry was published on our website (and with the announcement of our receiving the Palmer Grant, the region will be able to provide direct training and resources for congregations wishing to engage more with the digital community).

This is also part of the next generation of ministry: faith community is going to look different than it has in the past. It will engage both the physical and digital neighborhoods. It will pop up in places not usually associated with traditional church. It may not even meet on Sunday mornings. But we know that the Spirit is doing something new, just like the day of Pentecost long ago. If we are open to the Spirit, we can be open to where God is leading and look to support the ministry of Jesus Christ for now and generations to come.

We are even taking this to heart with the Region Office. Our current building was purchased in 1968 and has not had any major upgrades in that time. It also has 7 office spaces, a board room, a large conference room and a meeting room, plus a kitchenette and other spaces. In 2023, we simply do not need that much space as we are often on the road visiting our congregations and ministry partners. The Finance Committee and the Board of Managers are making decisions about our property, including selling the building, so that those funds could be used to support our ministries more effectively here in Wisconsin.

We cannot resource our faith communities without **supporting our ministers.** Through our partners in ABCUSA and beyond, we have provided interim ministry training, healthy conflict transformation, classes for renewal and continuing education, retreats at Camp Tamarack, and more. We are in the process of restarting our Ministers Council chapter—look for news of our first meeting in January 2024. We provide

opportunities for small gatherings of ministers to meet together online and in person, and I have met individually with many of our pastors. I cannot stress enough the importance of caring for our ministers. The weight of the survival of the church often weighs on their shoulders, along with the grief, conflict, and struggle. There is a deep joy in following Jesus and the call to ministry, but the reality is many members of the clergy are exiting ministry in recent years, and we must do what we can to support our clergy and ministerial leaders, especially as we navigate into a new era of ministry.

I am delighted to share that we have a seminary intern this year: Minister Bertha Yvette Morrow began in September as a shared intern between the Region Office and Memorial Baptist Church in Fond du Lac. Minister Yvette is a member of Metropolitan Missionary Baptist Church and a student at Berkeley School of Theology in California.

Going back to our theme of “God’s Dominion is from Generation to Generation,” I want to remember God’s faithfulness for 179 years and as we enter our one hundred eightieth year, **there is so much to celebrate and give thanks for. We often celebrate our diversity as American Baptist Churches, especially in Wisconsin.** Our Board of Managers in 2023 had more Generation X and Millennial members than other generations, and in 2024, should the nominating slate be approved, we will have Gen Z representatives on both the Board and the Nominating Committee. We are now 1/3 Euro-American, 1/3 African-American, and 1/3 Latino, Native American, and Asian (including Burmese, Karen, Chin, and other ethnic groups from Burma, along with Community Chinese Baptist Church). Three of our Euro-American congregations have pastors of color, and at least four of our congregations are intentionally working on becoming multicultural. Two of our congregations are officially Welcoming and Affirming of LGBTQ+ people. We are diverse theologically, and diverse in our locations of urban, suburban, small town and rural. Two of our congregations have lay ministers leading them and others are in the process of considering lay ministers for leadership.

We still have work to do. Our differences can easily divide us, if we are not careful to be rooted in our love of Christ and our Baptist principles. **We must move beyond celebrating diversity into engagement.** Our unity in Christ brings us back to the table, and it can be a table where some have a seat and others have to find room, or it can be a table where we make sure everyone has a place, even if we don’t agree with each other all the time.

We also have work to do in terms of raising up women in ministry. Out of our 58 churches, only 12 have senior or solo pastors who are women. We do have other women serving as associate ministers and chaplains, but we can do better. As we grow into our diversity in our Board of Managers representation, my hope is that our congregational leadership will also grow in representing God’s beloved community.

As we focus on next generation ministries and live out our vision “Diverse members, united in Christ,” may we work to build up this next generation of the American Baptist Churches of Wisconsin to find strength in our diversity, united in Christ, for the sake of the Gospel in this fast-changing world we live in.

Rev. Mindi Welton-Mitchell  
Executive Minister

## REGION NOTES

### **Pastoral Transitions:**

Rev. Juan Contreras retired from Iglesia Bautista El Calvario in November 2022, and is currently serving as an interim.

Rev. Brandyn Simmons began as Interim Pastor of First Baptist Church, Delavan, on February 1<sup>st</sup>, and will finish as of October 31<sup>st</sup>.

Rev. Brandle Morrow was called to First Baptist Church Jeffersontown, Louisville, Kentucky, resigning as Senior Pastor of Metropolitan Missionary Baptist Church (and also resigning as President of the Board of Managers of ABCWI) on March 31<sup>st</sup>. Rev. Rahdae Redd became Interim Pastor in August.

Rev. Kim Drost, serving as Interim Pastor at First Baptist Church of Ixonia, was called April 30<sup>th</sup> to become the settled Pastor.

Rev. Bonnie Bell was called as Consulting Pastor for Community Baptist Church, Honey Creek, May 1<sup>st</sup>.

Rev. Denise Kagoro resigned from Memorial Baptist Church, Fond du Lac, in May. Rev. Betsy Perkins was called as Interim Pastor beginning in June.

### **Congregational Transitions:**

Songs of Life Church in Milwaukee was declared officially closed in March.

Milwaukee Syin-Chin Church officially closed March 27<sup>th</sup>.

### **Congregational Anniversaries:**

Falls Community Church, 185 years, February 12<sup>th</sup>.

Federated Church of Green Lake, 75 years, October 1<sup>st</sup>.

Wyocena Community Church, 170 years, October 8<sup>th</sup>.

### **Years in Current Church**

5 – Jim Garnett – Whiting Community – Neenah

5 – Patrick Greer – Mount Moriah – Milwaukee

5 – Walt Hoshaw – FBC – Beloit – Beloit

5 – Phun Tling/Jody Hice – Milwaukee Chin - South Milwaukee

15 – Roxanne Cardenas Bryant – Tangible Word – Milwaukee

15 – Eh Mew - Smyrna – Milwaukee

20 – Larry Jackson – True Worshipers Community – Madison

### **Ordination Anniversaries**

10 – Betsy Perkins – Memorial – Fond du Lac

10 – Delois Taylor – Metropolitan Missionary – Milwaukee

20 – Juan Contreras - El Calviero – Kenosha

20 – Mindi Welton-Mitchell – ABCWI

25 – Sudie Jones – NA

30 – Jo Ellen Witt – Roundy Spiritual Care

40 – John Nehs – Bridge Point – Green Bay

40 – Joy Nelson-Jeffers – First Presbyterian – Wausau

40 – Jay Cronholm – Retired

**In Memoriam:**

Rev. Karen Sundland, vice-president of the Board of Managers of ABCWI and longtime pastor, on February 9<sup>th</sup>.