



American Baptist News Service

Office of Communication / American Baptist Churches USA

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NEWS FEATURE

AMERICAN BAPTIST INPUT PROMINENT IN 'FAITH COMMUNITIES TODAY' REPORT DETAILING MOST COMPREHENSIVE STUDY EVER OF U.S. CHURCH LIFE

A majority of American Baptist congregations have increased or held steady in the number of members, consider the Bible by far the most important source of authority in worship and teaching, have tended to undergo some changes in their worship services in recent years, consider themselves theologically moderate or somewhat conservative, maintain ongoing Bible study and/or prayer groups, are vitalized by active lay ministries, lead or are involved in food and cash assistance ministries, and consider their senior pastor to be a good preacher, motivator and administrator.

A report released today at a major media March 13 in New York City recounted those and other results of a wide-ranging survey of practices and realities of congregational life that elicited significant input from American Baptists and 41 other faith groups.

Faith Communities Today, a coalition of religious organizations including American Baptist Churches USA (ABCUSA), began initial work on the project in the mid-1990s. Its survey returned by 14,301 U.S. churches in early 2000 has been described as the most comprehensive ever of church life and practice in the U.S.

The survey covered six broad areas: worship and identity, location and facilities, internal and mission-oriented programs, leadership and organizational dynamics, participants and finances. Researchers from the faith groups developed a common questionnaire, customized for each group, in order to gather comparable data from local churches, synagogues and mosques. The faith groups involved—including American Baptist, United Methodist, Presbyterian Church U.S.A., Progressive National Baptist, Southern Baptist, Roman Catholic, Episcopalian, Evangelical Lutheran and United Church of Christ among others—represent an estimated 90% of all worshippers in the U.S.

Among the churches responding—usually through the pastor or a congregational leader—748 (5.2% of total respondents) were American Baptist. (The total number of surveys sent out to ABCUSA churches was 1465; the return rate was 51%.) Approximately half of those churches were from three American Baptist regions—Central (Kansas, Oklahoma and Arkansas), Connecticut and Ohio—and the other half of responses were gathered from churches from among the 31 other denominational regions.

The Rev. Paul Light, former director of Research and Development for American Baptist National Ministries, has been the key researcher and facilitator for American Baptist input from the project's inception. Light has been working with the ABCUSA Office of Communication in following the surveying and dissemination process, and will help to provide analysis of the data in consultation with that office.

AMERICAN BAPTIST RESULTS

American Baptist data confirmed, among other results, the following:

The physical condition of the congregations' buildings was judged good (50%) or excellent (24%). Over half (53%) considered parking facilities, and 43% identified educational space, as "less than we need."

Only 24% of the largest worship services held weekly are 80% or more full, with 50% of churches reporting those services at 40%-80% of capacity.

Major worship services are described as being significantly reverent (78%), joyful (77%), friendly (91%) and experiencing a sense of God's presence (82%).

Sermons often tend to emphasize personal spiritual growth (88%), practical advice for daily living (78%) and struggling with faith and belief (64%), and are less frequently focused on social justice (21%) or stewardship of time and money (27%).

Those sermons often tend to include personal stories or first-hand experiences (64%) and detailed explanations of Scripture or doctrine (68%).

Overwhelmingly the Bible ranked first--95%--as the single most important authority for worship and

teaching. "Revelation of the Holy Spirit" was ranked first by 3% of respondents.

Worship often includes a time for congregants to greet each other (70%) but not a regular time for members to testify about their faith (27%).

Common ongoing year-round programs include (non-Sunday school) Bible study (72%), prayer or meditation groups (62%), youth/teen activities (61%) and American Baptist Men, American Baptist Women's Ministries or other lay groups (63%). Program areas that a majority of churches have not undertaken during the past year include spiritual retreats (54%), parenting or marriage enrichment (61%), group discussions on books or contemporary issues (64%), self-help or personal growth groups (59%), sports teams (70%).

Responses (visits or phone calls) from church leaders to visitors (identified through visitors' cards, etc.) take place within a few days in 42% of churches and within a week in 26% of churches. Approximately 5% of churches have no means for visitors to identify themselves.

Church members are involved in recruiting new members to "a very great extent" in 5% of churches, to a "large extent" in 15%, to "some extent" in 41%, to a "slight extent" in 34% and not at all in 4%.

In describing the theological outlook of the majority of regularly participating adults, survey participants responded: very conservative—17%; somewhat conservative—45%; moderate—29%; somewhat progressive or liberal—7%; very progressive or liberal—1.5%.

Those regularly participating adults also tend to be similar to nearby community residents in terms of race (93%), culture or language (93%), income (79%), age (72%) and lifestyle (76%).

Comparing current worship with that of five years ago, 20% said the style basically is the same, 39% said it had "changed a little," 24% said theirs changed "more than a little" and 16% indicated their worship style had "changed a lot."

Describing their congregation, respondents said their church at least "quite well" fit the categories of: close-knit family (66%), spiritually vital and alive (56%), easy incorporation of new members (60%), well organized programs and activities (59%) and excitement among members about the church's future (58%). In some other areas respondents were less inclined to indicate their congregation had done at least "quite well": dealing openly with disagreements and conflicts (41%), celebration of the church's American Baptist heritage (38%) and working for social justice (14%).

The rate of regularly participating adults (including non-members) since 1995 was identified as: increased 10% or more—29%; increased 5%-9%—19%; stayed about the same—31%; decreased 5%-9%—11% and decreased 10% or more—10%. The average number of regularly participating adults (18 and over) was 123 (median: 80); the average number of regularly participating children and teens was 42 (median: 25).

Churches tend to have promoted themselves within the past year through ads or features in local newspapers (71%), in special services aimed at the unchurched such as "Invite a Friend" Sunday (55%) and phone calls or personal visits by church staff (84%) and by lay members (75%). Direct mail or distribution campaigns were done by 34% of the represented churches.

Ecumenical activities during the past year included joint worship services: 39% of churches met with other ABCUSA churches or persons and 66% did so with other Christian churches. Joint service projects were undertaken with other ABCUSA congregations (21%) and other Christian congregations (51%).

A majority of represented churches during the past year led (54%) and/or were involved ecumenically (61%) with a food pantry, soup kitchen or other food assistance program; cash assistance programs were led (69%) by the churches and/or involved them cooperatively (33%). Most churches did not provide programs for temporary or permanent shelter (55%), substance abuse (74%), day care, pre-school or before/after school (72%), tutoring or literacy (81%), migrants/immigrants (92%) and senior citizens (51%).

The median age of the senior pastor in surveyed ABCUSA churches was 51. Employment status of leaders included 74% full time, 16% part time and 10% full time bivocational. Co-pastors led in 6.3% of the churches. Some 24% of church leaders hold only college bachelors degrees, 47% hold masters degrees and 20% have doctoral degrees. Of those, 77% have seminary masters or post-masters degrees.

Of the pastors represented, 92% were male; 84% were white, 10% Black/African American, 3% Hispanic/Latino, 1.3% American Indian/Alaska native and .7% Asian.

Those responding to the survey said they felt their members would rank their senior pastor in the "quite well" or "very well" category as: a good preacher—94%; effective administrator—66%; effective teacher—87%; "knows how to get people to work together"—81%; charismatic leader—50%.

Churches reported the degree of conflict during the past five years in several areas, including: theology—73% none and 14% moderately or very serious; budget—49% none and 23% moderately or very serious; pastor's leadership style—55% none and 28% moderately or very serious; and how worship is conducted—47% none and 22% moderately or very serious.

Regarding conflict resolution, respondents reporting conflict said that in their churches: "all conflicts were resolved with no negative consequences"—20%; "all conflicts were resolved [but with] some negative consequences"—49%; "some conflict still exists but it is no longer serious"—26%; and "We still have serious conflict"—6%.

In their purchasing of worship, educational, stewardship, evangelism and other materials, churches did so: exclusively from within the ABCUSA—2%; primarily from within the ABCUSA—19%; in even balance

from ABCUSA and non-ABCUSA sources—40%; primarily from outside the ABCUSA—33%; and exclusively from outside the ABCUSA—6%.

Mission statements and/or vision statements were in effect in 73% of the churches represented. Churches that had “definite expectations for members that are strictly enforced” accounted for 7%; those with “fairly clear expectations for members” but with “not very strict enforcement” of them characterized 51%; and those with “only implicit expectations for members that are seldom, if ever, enforced” best described 43%.

Churches described their current financial health as: excellent—26%; good—37%; “tight, but we manage”—29%; “in some difficulty”—6%; and “in serious difficulty”—2%. Current church expenditures totaled on average \$150,408 (mean--\$100,000). Current income from all sources averaged \$155,848 (mean--\$100,000). Of total expenditures 8% on average was allocated for ABCUSA mission work (regional and national) and 44% was allocated for staff salaries and benefits.

SURVEY-WIDE RESULTS

Among the most significant positive findings from across the spectrum of respondents were:

The great majority of faith communities are vital and alive. Half of churches surveyed see themselves as growing in numbers, especially those using or blending contemporary forms of worship and those located in newer suburbs.

By and large U.S. houses of worship are making major, though unheralded, contributions to the welfare of their communities through social and spiritually-focused ministries.

Many congregations have the commitment and the facilities to undertake social welfare programs but lack the infrastructure to see such programs realized.

Many churches without explicit expectations for members experience less vitality and more conflict.

Vitality in churches requires change, but such change often is implemented at the cost of conflict affecting new member growth, new volunteers and financial support.

Faith Communities Today, supported by participating faith groups and the Lilly Endowment, is directed by Professors Carl Dudley and David Roozen of the Hartford Institute for Religion Research, a part of the Hartford (Conn.) Seminary. The Faith Communities Today report and its complete specific data pertaining to American Baptist Churches, as well as other information and commentary on the findings and their implications, will be accessible through the American Baptist Churches USA Web site: www.abc-usa.org.

ABW MINISTRIES NOMINATES OFFICERS FOR 2001-2004

Cheryl Wiebers, chair of the Nominating Committee of American Baptist Women's Ministries, has identified the nominees who will be presented for election at the organization's annual meeting June 22 in Providence, R.I.

The announcement was made during national Executive Committee meetings held last month in Richmond, Va. National officers are nominated through an application process and serve three-year terms.

Mary J. Jackson, of Richmond, Va., is the nominee for national secretary. Jackson, who will complete her term as president of ABW Ministries of the South in April, is a member of Riverview Baptist Church in Richmond and has served as the director of music there for 30 years.

Alicia Luquin, of San Pedro, Calif., will be presented as the candidate for national coordinator of AB GIRLS. Alicia has served on the National Leadership Team of AB GIRLS as the gathering coordinator. A member of Iglesia Bautista Horeb in Torrance, she works as the family services coordinator of a state-funded childcare program that is expected to serve up to 800 families this year.

Carole Moore, of Redwood City, Calif., has been nominated as national coordinator of Church and Community Ministries. She recently completed her term in the same role for ABW Ministries in the ABC of the West region. An elementary school teacher in the Palo Alto Unified School District for 34 years, she is a member of Trinity Baptist Church in San Mateo.

June Hamblen, of Indianapolis, Ind., will be presented as the nominee for geographical coordinator of the Midwest, relating to the ABW Ministries region leadership in the central third of the country. A former junior high school teacher, she has served as president of ABW Ministries of Indianapolis and is an active member of First Baptist Church in Indianapolis.

HAROLD STULL, FORMER PRESIDENT OF FOREIGN MISSION SOCIETIES, DIES

Harold R. Stull, a former member of the board and president of the American Baptist Foreign Mission Society and the Woman's American Baptist Foreign Mission Society, died Feb. 19. He was 93.

He was first elected to the board in 1955 and served until 1967. During his last year he was elected president of the societies. Stull also served on the boards of directors for the Baptist Home in Pittsburgh and Alderson-Broaddus College.

Condolences may be sent to the family in care of his wife: Martha Stull, 23371 Blue Water Circle #C-514, Boca Raton, FL 33433.
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