

Region Address 2018 – Alan G. Newton

From our founding as an Association it has been mandated that the person in leadership give an annual address to the region. In kind, the member churches of the region committed themselves to submit a similar reporting to one another.

I'll bet you thought that those Annual Reports were requested to please your Executive Minister. But in reality, they were a pattern of relationship established 80 years before ABCUSA was formed and 174 years before the General Board adopted the Common Criteria requiring Annual Reports.

When the American Baptist Historical Society was located here in Rochester, I often would go there and read through the reports, which read more like stories than anything else. The richness of our history collectively as an Association and as individual churches are found in those stories. Part of the reason I have encouraged our churches to move away from the simple reporting of statistics and to tell stories is to carry the history forward. And when 78% of the 33 regions have less than half of their churches reporting, there is little statistical relevance that can be harvested. I encourage the churches to tell stories, just one-page stories, that can be printed in the region's annual report. In this way, someone in the generation 100 years from now can explore the records and learn who these American Baptists of the Rochester Genesee region were and contrast that with the Baptists of 3018.

The Rochester Genesee region is unique within the American Baptist Churches USA. Pastors and lay persons who have spent their entire lives here are not always aware of how special this region is. Certainly, the eighteen congregations, which have made a pilgrimage to this region have a taste for how different this region is.

I have often kidded that it is something that is in the water, because certainly the area has given birth to some of the great movements in America. The Abolition movement, Women's Suffrage, the Social Gospel, the Second Great Awakening all came out of this area of upstate New York.

But what I believe has shaped this gathering of Baptists is a dogged commitment to Baptist Principles.

I recognized from the beginning how respectful our churches were of guests who came to the region to speak, some who held very different beliefs and positions. Guests who came here were amazed at how well they were received, despite obvious differences.

During these past 16 years this region has had frank conversations on a host of challenging issues. And yet our differences, which were openly aired, may have caused some discomfort, but not division.

Some in the American Baptist family see this respect for differences and make assumptions that we are a collective of extreme leftist liberals. I invite those who hold these views to come and visit our region. We are and always have been an association of conservative, moderate and liberal churches. We are Black and White and, in the past number of years, Asian. We are country, small town, suburban and urban. But what we hold in common are at least two important things: we are deeply committed to the Good News of Jesus Christ, and we are steeped in the principles of Soul freedom, Religious Freedom and the Autonomy of the Local Church.

Let me speak a few moments about Local Church Autonomy. This has been a part of the DNA of Baptists since there first were Baptists, written into the First London Confession. The threat to the well-being of congregations in those early years was the government, which sought to control the local church and interference from the authorities in the church itself.

Baptists believed that that hierarchal structures were subject to corruption and therefore, rejected the idea of bishops, or creeds, or rules that would place limits on the local church.

E.Y. Mullins, President of Southern Baptist Theological Seminary at the turn of the 20th Century is the person who coined the term "autonomy of the local church," becoming the congregational equivalent of "soul competency" for individuals. Given what has occurred in the Southern Baptist Convention, it is hard to imagine that this rich Baptist Principle of Local Church Autonomy had its genesis in that tradition.

This I believe shows us how fragile Baptist Freedoms are. They can be gone in a moment.

We see through the spread of congregations that have come to join us that there is growing erosion of Baptist Freedoms in the ABCUSA. Over the years I have found it important to regularly visit the ABCUSA website. On at least three occasions I have found documents posted, which were never ratified by the larger American Baptist family but had the power to drastically change the free church character of our denomination. Each time I challenged the posting of these statements, which claimed to be representative of who we are. Each time I was successful in getting the statements removed. There are a growing number of regions which have

adopted creedal litmus tests that deny pastors and congregations their right to interpret scriptures without coercion from their regions.

Be watchful, my friends, and do not hesitate to speak up. I have learned that sometimes it is only a few voices with truth and justice on their side who can stop these assaults on our Baptist freedoms.

I know what it is like to stand alone at times. God knows I have had to do that several times during my tenure as your Executive Minister. But I believed in my spirit that what was being decided was contrary to my core beliefs about our God, being a God of love and not judgment.

From my earliest years I have looked at life through one lens, “what does love require of me.” One of the first passages of scripture that I memorized in Sunday School was “*Love the Lord with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind and love your neighbor as yourself.*” A second passage I memorized is John 3: 16, “*For God so love the world that he gave his only begotten Son, so that whosoever should believe in him may not perish but have eternal life.*” The memorization didn’t stop at verse 16, but continued to verse 17. “*Indeed, God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him.*”

The command is to love. The command is to withhold judgment but leave the judging to God.

Hold fast to our Baptist principles, my friends and colleagues. Hold fast to God’s commandment to love. I guarantee that we won’t always agree. Some of the people who are dearest to me hold very different views from my own. But I love them nevertheless.

Thank you once again for granting me the privilege of serving you these past 16 years. I have learned a lot. I have made mistakes. I have hopefully done a few things right, as well. Thank you to Helen Hoffman who helped break me in and a special word of thanks to Ellen Carr, our current administrator, who now has the mantle of breaking in the next Executive Minister.

I thank my wife, who spent far too many nights and weekends alone as I traipsed across the country in ministry with you. Thank God for cell phones. My wife used to tell people when they asked my whereabouts, she couldn’t recall where I was off to this time, but she had my number. A few weeks ago, Gail asked me if I wanted to go anywhere special for retirement. My response was, ‘Yes. I want to go home.’ These 5 months away from each other have been challenging, but through a cell phone, we were just a dial tone away.

I encourage you to treat your next Executive Minister as well as you have treated me. Remember that your church autonomy requires you to reach out and extend the invitation. Don’t sit there saying, “The Executive Minister never visits our church.” Extend the invitation.

I will look forward to hearing great things about the Rochester Genesee Region, or whatever future name you determine. God bless you. I will be forever grateful.