

Dear Friends

Philippians 4:6-7New Revised Standard Version (NRSV)

“Do not worry about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God.⁷ And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.

Clearly, the Church in Philippi was anxious about a few things. It is reported that there was division and discord in the congregation and general anxiety. Not to mention that one of their leaders, Epaphroditus, was seriously ill and Paul himself was in prison nearly 800 miles away in Rome. Paul’s “don’t worry, be happy” message to the church was incredible given his personal circumstances! Can you imagine what it was like for the church to receive this letter? I am certain that it made a significant impact. The challenges the congregation was facing would have seemed small compared to what Paul was facing. I can imagine the congregation saying to themselves, “If Paul is not anxious then why are we?”

Paul reminded the Philippians, that neither they nor Paul were in charge. Neither were masters of their own fates. God was in charge. So why worry? They were in good hands.

We live in anxious times. There is a lot of unrest in America, heightened by the rhetoric of the current national elections. There are many unresolved tensions between persons of different races and cultures. There is diminishing trust in government, law enforcement, in financial establishments and yes, even the church. This distrust and anxiety is erupting into violent protest as people, especially young people see little other alternatives for achieving justice.

All this unrest adds to the anxiety we are already experiencing in our churches. The impulse for most of us is to withdraw in the face of tension, but the Gospel calls us to take counter intuitive actions in reaching out. If you read the Book of Acts you will quickly understand that the Church was born in a distressing time. Following Jesus often was a death sentence. And yet what we witness is incredible courage and zeal in reaching out to others with the Good News of Jesus Christ. I have said it before but I say it again, people need the Good News of Jesus Christ. The people in our communities, in our nation, in our world need to experience Jesus’ love.

This afternoon Paul Vick will be telling an incredible story of courage of Christians in China who despite oppression spread the Good News with astounding results. Churches and seminaries are bursting at the seams, reaching masses of young people. The oppression did not silence them. It strengthened them.

If you look at Baptist history as it developed in Europe and in America we have been our best when stressed. We are best when oppressed. Oppression strengthens our resistance and resilience.

This summer, one of the books I read while on Sabbatical was the book, **“Weird Church: Welcome to the Twenty-First Century.”** The authors, Beth Ann Estock and Paul Nixon coach hundreds of churches in the United States. One observation they have had is that in the US the young people who choose to participate in the church are those who have had a very positive experience with Christ from their younger years, even though many no longer feel at home in the church where they were raised.

But those who had no such formative experience early in life, will seldom become a part of a church. **Unless – unless** the church reshapes itself by expressing more fully the values of youth. But don’t misunderstand. This is not accommodation. The values youth are expressing are at the heart of the Christian faith. What they value is authentic community, service to those in need, care for the environment, “moving beyond all the barriers of race, culture and nations toward a global tribalism.” The good news is that there are churches that are successfully making the shift. It is possible. There are churches in our region which are making the shift.

The observations these authors share about denominations is even more bleak. It appears we are rapidly entering a post-denominational culture. In truth, we have been in a post-denominational era for the greater part of the last half century.

Think about it, how many of the members of your church grew up in American Baptist Churches? How many of our pastors grew up in the American Baptist Churches? How many members of our churches know very much about American Baptist Churches USA? How many in our churches have any interest beyond their local church?

The Executive Board spent a good amount of time this past year talking about the shift in regional life, a shift we foresee will accelerate in the years ahead. We spent more time talking about the necessary changes we need to make if there will be a future.

The denominational model appears to operate like a wheel with the churches as the spokes tied together through the hub. The vision may better serve us in the future may be more like a network where all the parts are woven together in an intricate web of interconnections. Living into this vision would be a significant shift for our churches but it is a shift we are already making in our personal lives. How many here are tied into one or more social network? Why do we choose to join Facebook, or Twitter, or Linked In? We join to connect don’t we? We join them because we have new ways of sharing information. We

have a new way to document history. For example, I am convinced from my own conversations over my life, particularly deep conversations with friends of other races and cultures that the tensions we are experiencing, especially those tensions around the relationships between law enforcement and communities of color are not new. But now smart phones have allowed everyone to be a recorder of history. Now we can document the abuses. These new networking tools can be life giving. They also are forcing all of us in America to pay attention to what is happening,

A tangible symbol of a new direction for the region was the suggestion of a new name – **The RGR Network of Transforming American Baptists.** RGR representing both our historical roots in Rochester and the Genesee Valley but more importantly our historic values of **respect, godly justice and reconciliation.** Network - representing a host of potential connections of support and resource our churches can be to one another. As I travel the region I am overwhelmed by the gifted leaders and vibrant ministries. My hope is that many others will have the opportunities I have had to witness and celebrate the richness of ministries in our region. Finally, transforming, which speaks to Christ's foundational call to allow Christ's love to transform lives and through transforming lives, transform communities and the world. The Board would like your feedback on this suggested name change. A Network model will help us also help us in adjusting to the new reality that our region has grown and is growing.

Since 2002 has grown 35%. When we at one time were a geography of two counties in NY State we are now a region located in 5 counties in NY and in 9 states. Jabez's prayer in the Old Testament is "expand our territory." Honestly, I don't believe that anyone has been praying that prayer and yet we are blessed with the gift of many wonderful churches which have joined this special collective of congregations.

Another concern that the Executive Board started to tackle was how to enhance the sense of community in the region. One suggestion that had some traction with the board is creating a longer Biennial Gathering in the non-ABCUSA Biennial year. A longer convention would allow for establishing stronger interchurch relationships and set aside more time for extended learning. It might also provide opportunity for planning future joint ventures with youth, young adults and mission. Once again, we will be seeking your input on this suggestion.

Expect an on-line survey during the next month. If you sense that the suggestions of the board are on the mark we will want to hear that affirmation from you. If you sense that these suggestions need more thought, we want to hear from you. If you have some insights that will enrich these thoughts, we want to hear from you.

Another tangible sign of a shift toward a network is the kind of reporting we will request from congregations. No longer will we ask for data. Instead we will invite your churches to tell stories about the transformation taking place in the lives of persons your churches touch. We will want to hear stories telling the impact of your ministry. Numbers and dollars don't do this. Years ago, when I was a local church pastor we would hold a special program or a youth retreat where lives were transformed. The first question I was asked by people was "how many were there?" My response was that is the wrong question. "Ask me what happened?" It is not that we were lacking in numbers. I was not afraid of the question about numbers. But the significance of those events was not how many attended but how lives were changed. We will be inviting you to share how your ministries are transforming lives so we can share these stories with your sister congregations.

In the absence of any National denominational youth programming we will invite leaders in our churches to come together to create a regional youth event. This event will likely be based on the four points of what was once called BYF (Baptist Youth Fellowship). Does anyone remember BYF? Does anyone remember what the four points are? Fellowship, Worship, Study and Service. Please spread the word and help us identify adults and youth who might serve on a planning team.

Finally, a partnership under consideration is to respond to the invitation to partner with Ricardo Mayol, a missionary called to address the violence and crime in Latin America through building peace ministries. This is an opportunity to build an exciting partnership with the potential of participation. Later this afternoon you will be hearing about a partnership between the United Church of Granville and a mission site in Nicaragua. This is an opportunity to expand that work. But to establish this partnership we need a few people from various congregations willing to serve on a leadership team. We have the commitment of three persons already. We need at least three more. Please pray about this opportunity and if you hear God calling you to this team let me know.

I would like to acknowledge persons in our region who serve in roles representing the region within ABCUSA. Tasha Wilson represents the region on the Board of General Ministries and the Executive Committee of that Board. Paul Vick serves on the Board of International Ministries and on the Executive Committee of that Board. Annie Marie LeBarbour serves on the MMBB Board.

Sandy Hasenauer is on staff of American Baptist Women's Ministries. Angel Sullivan is serving as President of American Baptist Women's Ministries. Travis Norvell and Michael Ware serve on the ABCUSA Racism Task Force. Tanya Thurman represented the region at the last Mission Table.

I would like to thank our Executive Leadership Team who meet with me nearly every month. Joanne, Jimmy, Sam – I thank you for your counsel, wisdom and support.

Let's express our appreciation for all these leaders with a round of applause.

We are well represented.

A final word of appreciation to those who are engaged in ministry in parish, in chaplaincy, in community ministries. I hope one day to print a directory with a small bio on each of our pastors. While we are in nine states clergy of our region cover an even wider geography. I think we all would be amazed by full extent of the reach of the ministries of the region. It is inspiring. It is important to be in prayer for our clergy. The brunt of the anxiety in our churches fall on their backs. Too often clergy are the scapegoats receiving blame for anything going wrong in the church. They work long hours often neglecting their own needs or the needs of their families to attend to ministry. **Sunday, October 9 is National Clergy Appreciation Day.** One thing I learned as a young child is that it never hurts to say thank you.

If you need me for any reason – call me. My calendar remains full with invitations to be in our churches so if you have not seen me in a while it is because I am in one of your sister congregations. I love being with you in your churches so please do invite me. My calendar fills many months in advance. I have yet to figure out how to be in multiple locations on the same Sunday but with a little negotiation we will find a mutually agreeable time. But if you have a question, a concern, an idea, or just want to can find me on Skype or Facebook or cell phone or text message or email. Many of you have already figured this out.

Thank you for the opportunity of serving you. It is hard to believe that we are in our fifteenth year of ministry together. It is a joy and a privilege to be in this shared ministry. This region is very special. And it is not just me saying this. I hear it from our interfaith and ecumenical partners. I hear it from community leaders. I hear it from our denominational partners.

Thank you once again. God bless us onward toward 2017.