

Revisioning the Alliance covenant

by **Tim Moore**

“What are your thoughts about wedding vows?” is a question I’ll ask an engaged couple during a wedding planning meeting. Many have detailed ideas about flowers and bridesmaids’ dresses and music, but haven’t given much thought to the words they would say to publicly commit themselves to each other. Usually I hand them a selection of a dozen traditional and contemporary wedding vows and encourage them to discuss them and select one, modify one or write their own by our next meeting. And why they select what they select becomes part of our next discussion.

Occasionally, I’ve had the pleasure of celebrating the renewal of wedding vows. Sometimes that’s been when a couple is celebrating a 25th or 50th wedding anniversary. Sometimes it’s when a troubled marriage has reconciled and they want to mark a new beginning. Depending on the circumstances some want to repeat the words they once said to each other, while others desire new vows to express a deeper appreciation of their covenant to one another.

The Alliance of Baptists began 31 years ago with a covenant. Churches and individuals vowed to uphold seven promises that expressed their Baptist Christian faith in relationship with each other.

In a time when historic Baptist principles, freedoms and traditions need a clear voice, and in our personal and corporate response to the call of God in Jesus Christ to be disciples and servants in the world, we commit ourselves to:

- 1) The freedom of the individual, led by God’s Spirit within the family of faith, to read and interpret the Scriptures, relying on the historical understanding by the church and on the best methods of modern biblical study;
- 2) The freedom of the local church under the authority of Jesus Christ to shape its own life and mission, call its own leadership, and ordain whom it perceives as gifted for ministry, male or female;
- 3) The larger body of Jesus Christ, expressed in various Christian traditions, and to a cooperation with believers everywhere in giving full expression to the Gospel;
- 4) The servant role of leadership within the church, following the model of our Servant Lord, and to full partnership of all of God's people in mission and ministry;
- 5) Theological education in congregations, colleges, and seminaries characterized by reverence for biblical authority and respect for open inquiry and responsible scholarship;
- 6) The proclamation of the Good News of Jesus Christ and the calling of God to all peoples to repentance and faith, reconciliation and hope, social and economic justice;
- 7) The principle of a free church in a free state and the opposition to any effort either by church or state to use the other for its own purposes.

Now that the Alliance is beginning a fourth decade it’s time to renew our vows. Empowered by the Board, President Mike Castle has appointed a Covenant Revisioning Team to lead us over the next year to reform and renew our covenant. Two changes have been mandated by the Board.

One change will include a commitment to racial justice. Its omission, while including social and economic justice in the sixth promise, is a testament to the blindness of white privilege in the Alliance – it wasn't on our minds 31 years ago. As the nation observes the 50th anniversary of Martin Luther King's assassination this week it's past time for us to commit to being a racial justice organization.

A second change will address the binary gender language in the second promise. Affirming women in ministry was an important part of the Alliance's beginning in 1987. Today, the binary language excludes as it includes. Without diminishing the particular affirmation of women in ministry, we need language that more broadly affirms the marginalized that have been gifted for ministry in Christ's Church.

At the Annual Gathering in Dayton, Ohio, April 26-29 participants will take the first steps in renewing the Alliance Covenant. The revisioning process will begin with interactive discussions about the covenant during the first business meeting. A workshop session also will be available for those who would like to offer additional input.

Finally, I invite you to read over the covenant, contemplate its continued relevance through the changes of the past 30 years and for the future, and share your thoughts with the Revisioning Team – Sally Sarratt, Ned Parker, Cristina Garcia-Alfonso, Nancy Sehested, Andrew Gardner, Malu Fairley and me. You may contact me at ftimothymoore@me.com or call at 704-578-9389. Any input will be shared with the whole team.

The words we use to covenant a relationship – whether in marriage or in faith – lay out the map of our journey together.

Tim Moore is the Writer-in-Residence and former pastor of Sardis Baptist Church in Charlotte, N.C. He also is a current member of the Alliance of Baptists' Board of Directors.