

American Baptists cutting staff, but not 'collapsing'

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VALLEY FORGE, Pa. (ABP)—The American Baptist Churches USA is shutting down its communications department —the latest step in budget cuts and restructuring brought on by declining funds and theological division in the denominational group.

Although the American Baptist national office is experiencing funding losses due to divisions over homosexuality, the venerable denominational group, based in Valley Forge, Pa. is not collapsing, General Secretary Roy Medley said.

Richard Schramm, spokesman for the 1.5 million-member denomination since 1996, will leave his position Oct. 31, along with an associate director and a media assistant in the office of communication. Schramm will serve as a consultant to the American Baptist Churches USA.

Cuts were based on recommendations from consultants McConkey and Johnston and resulted in the merger of two divisions—communications and missions/stewardship development, Medley said.

“We have formed a new division called mission resource development,” said Medley. “This new entity will be responsible for communicating the ABC story effectively with our family and the larger church as well.”

The restructuring is similar to what the Baptist World Alliance did following the withdrawal of funding from the Southern Baptist Convention, he added. The new effort, he said, will focus on electronic communication.

Tensions over the issue of homosexuality have come to a head in recent months among American Baptists and their 5,836 churches. Although the group adopted a resolution opposing homosexual conduct in 1992, many conservatives in the denomination have complained American Baptist leaders have done little to “enforce” it on the denomination’s agencies or congregations.

In September, directors of the American Baptist Churches of the Pacific Southwest, which includes Southern California, initiated the process of separating from the denomination by the end of the year. While some other regional bodies of American Baptists still debate the issue, the full impact of the controversy remains undetermined.

Regional fellowships are the channel through which local congregations relate to the national body, known earlier as the Northern Baptist Convention. In recent years, several gay-friendly churches have been expelled from some of those regional bodies.

But Medley said talk of the ABC’s demise is unfounded.

“Some of the headlines, like in a *Christianity Today* web article, which speak of a stampede are just untrue,” said Medley. “At our biennial meeting, which was held in Denver this past year, two-thirds to three-fourths of the delegates clearly expressed their commitment to remaining united through this time of dissension.”

Medley said he and Pacific Southwest executive minister Dale Salico have sought to avoid “an atmosphere of charge-countercharge” in the media. “We have consistently communicated to PSW that it is not our wish that they withdraw from the covenant of relationships,” said Medley. “Our polity grants them the freedom to order their life as a region as they choose, as it does other regions.”

Often the press does not understand a church structure that is not hierarchical, Medley said, and that the rights and privileges of local congregations can never be usurped by an over-reaching General Board or general secretary.

“I have consistently stressed that the inability of the General Board to impose any resolution upon our member churches is not a flaw in our system, but was an intentional design in the denomination,” Medley said.

Despite dealing with significant fallout over the homosexuality controversy, the ABC has adopted a new mission statement, Medley said. He added that American Baptists are “energized” by growing relationships with other groups such as the Progressive National Baptist Convention, the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship and the Church of the Brethren.

“ABC is not collapsing,” said Medley. “Our mission focus and call are clear. We intend to focus on them like a laser beam.”

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