

Report from the Summit

As I mentioned earlier, I am deeply grateful to you all both for providing me with some much needed time off and also for sending me to the American Baptist Churches USA “Mission Summit 2013.” I probably didn’t rest as much as I should have on my vacation but it was a marvelous opportunity to see family and old friends. And, while I confess that I went to the meeting in Overland Park with some misgivings, in the event it was an almost wholly positive experience that left me excited about our future together here at Good Shepherd Baptist Church and about our part in the broader body of ABC-USA. In the next few minutes, I want to share with you about how my concerns were laid to rest and about what it is that has me excited as Connie and I give you our impressions of and learnings from the Mission Summit.

Best to begin, I suppose, with my apprehensions. I’ve never been to a biennial or annual meeting of an entire denomination, though I’ve certainly heard about them. During my days as a Southern Baptist, the news out of the annual convention, once I was old enough to pay attention, was rarely good. The fundamentalist take-over of that previously “big tent” organization began with frankly political actions at the annual conventions of the late 70s. By the time I was in seminary, the die had been cast, the results seemed inevitable, and those of us in the “moderate” wing of the denomination cringed to hear the news from each successive meeting as the boards and staff of admired and effectual institutions fell like dominoes. Nothing good, it seemed, ever came out of those conventions, which had previously been known for inspiring reports from missionaries and tales of ever-increasing baptisms in the churches. As Connie and I left Southern Baptist-affiliated churches behind for those aligned with the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship or ABC-USA, news from those denominational gatherings sounded lukewarm at best, with the CBF dithering about whether or not it actually WAS a separate denomination and ABC-USA beginning its own descent into conflict, the flash point being issues of human sexuality.

As we prepared to attend this Biennial, there seemed to be a cautious note of optimism in the air that this meeting would not prove to be a battleground thanks to the new structure of the meeting, about which more later. There were, however, some notes of discord regarding the venue for the meeting. Overland Park, Kansas, is well-known in the Midwest as a snooty, upper-class, white suburb of Kansas City. No events were scheduled for the more cosmopolitan and diverse Missouri side of the metro area. Was this a signal that the recent elevation in power for the ethnic caucuses in the denomination’s structure was as flimsy as the paper upon which the plan was printed? Did the well-known conservative politics of the locale indicate that the denomination was charting a course further to the religious right? Some folks were concerned and vocal.

As the names of speakers for the event began to be released, it appeared that organizers had heard these concerns and were acting to allay them. Michelle Alexander, the author of [The New Jim Crow: Mass Incarceration in the Age of Colorblindness](#) was announced as the keynote speaker for Friday night, the first plenary session of the meeting. I hope that you remember hearing from me about this author and her book. Michelle Alexander is a highly acclaimed legal scholar and civil rights lawyer. A graduate of Vanderbilt University and Stanford Law School, she served as a clerk for Supreme Court Justice Harry Blackmun early in her career and has held posts on the law faculties of both her alma mater and of the Ohio State University. She writes that early in her career she dismissed out of hand charges that the federal government’s War on

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Drugs was just another attempt by the powerful to deny the rights of people of color. But as she continued to work on civil rights cases, she began to suspect that there was indeed merit to these claims. In 2005, she won a Soros Justice Fellowship that allowed her to research the issue and, in 2010, she published the results of her research as The New Jim Crow. Alexander shows convincingly that whatever may have been the intentions of the architects of the War on Drugs, the result has been the creation or re-creation of a legal undercaste made up almost entirely of people of color. When I read that she had this position of honor at our Biennial, I wondered, was this mere eyewash for the liberals or was this a serious move to counter even the appearance of racial bias in the selection of the venue? How would Ms. Alexander be received?

In the event, my concerns were more than answered. The theme for Friday night's worship service was "Transformed for Justice," a reference both to the theme of restorative justice underlined by Michelle Alexander's stirring remarks as well as in songs, prayers and Scripture readings and to the ongoing denominational program, "Transformed by the Spirit." I will say more about that program later as well. But with the possible exception of some rather pedestrian praise music, the worship service was nothing but uplifting for me. The Scripture passages I read a few minutes ago featured prominently. There was a wonderful blend of folk from diverse cultures in leadership throughout the evening (and, indeed, in all of the plenary sessions). This included a Native American Welcome and Blessing from the Churches of Oklahoma and Oklahoma Indian Baptist Association. And the response to Michelle Alexander's call for a reworking of the American criminal justice system towards a Biblical vision of restorative justice was overwhelmingly, thunderously, positive.

Our Saturday (the theme now was "Transformed for Mission") began with breakfast for those interested in the Baptist World Alliance. If you don't know about the BWA, they are a fellowship of 228 conventions and unions in 120 countries comprising 42 million members in 177,000 churches. I wish I'd been awake enough to take notes on a fine address by BWA General Secretary Neville Callam, a Jamaican pastor educated at Harvard, among other institutions. I was fascinated by how the BWA is facing many of the same challenges in working multiculturally as is Evergreen and at how the two Baptist bodies are arriving at similar responses, grounded in our traditional Baptist principles.

After breakfast on Saturday, it was time for the new core activity of the Biennial, the reason it is now referred to as the "Mission Summit." Every attendee was provided with a list of 32 conversation topics. We were guided into spacious ballrooms and invited to join a conversation table of approximately 10 people to discuss the topic that most appealed to us. Tables were identified as to their topic with signs and a trained moderator was provided for each table. This activity was primarily planned and administered by ABC-USA's Associate General Secretary for Regional Ministries, Rev. Dr. C. Jeff Woods. Again, I hope the name sounds familiar to you. Jeff has facilitated several leadership and planning retreats for Evergreen as part of his job and I have been extremely impressed by his acumen and easy camaraderie. We ended up spending four and a half hours over two days in these discussion groups and I found the experience very helpful. Since Connie and I took part in different conversations, I thought you might want to hear from each of us about what we learned.

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I took part in one of the groups focused on “Leadership in Cross Cultural Contexts.” As I think you know, I am convinced that because of the ever-increasing multi-culturalism of our city, region and nation, the future for Good Shepherd Baptist lies in pursuing a multi-cultural congregation and ministry. In the small group with which I met at the Summit, I was able to listen to the experiences and thoughts of other church leaders so convicted as well as to those who’ve achieved multi-cultural ministry in their churches. Some of their experiences were directly applicable to our situation; some, less so. But I can tell you that many of those churches that have dared the hard work and the sometimes-drastic change of multi-cultural ministry are filled to the bursting point, with healthy ministries for all ages and groups and even with new churches being birthed. For Good Shepherd to pursue such a vision will be daunting. We can’t even imagine as we consider this future how we may need to change. One pastor compared the experience to death and resurrection. But isn’t the resurrected life what we are all about?

I would be remiss if I didn’t mention a significant event that occurred at Saturday night’s worship service, which was primarily led by our sisters and brothers in the Burmese and Burmese refugee communities. Those of you with a passing knowledge of world or church history may know that the Christian community in Burma, or Myanmar as it is currently known, was founded by Baptist missionaries from America. To this day, the largest group of Christians in Myanmar is Baptists. But American missionaries were ejected from the country in the 1960s by the military junta that held power there for decades. At the Mission Summit on Saturday night, it was announced that the Myanmar Baptist Convention is inviting American Baptist International Ministries to renew its 200-year-old ministry in Burma. This is a great step forward in religious freedom for the country and we hope to be able to make a difference as well in relief efforts for the refugees and the persecuted in that troubled country.

Mission Conversations on Sunday were sandwiched by two worship services, one in the morning and one concluding the Summit. On Sunday morning, when the theme was “Transformed by the Spirit,” we all took communion together (always, for me, a blessing) and among the songs we sang was a folksy little number called “Children of God” that sounded to me like something that would fit right in with some of our “redbook” songs. I think the lyrics sound like Good Shepherd, too. The first verse reads: “As children of God we’re choosing to care / For the poor and the lonely; those lost in despair / We’re living for justice in a world that’s unfair / Off’ring a hand, hope and a prayer.” As soon as I can get the tune in a form we can use, I’ll introduce it to you.

Sunday evening’s worship struck a chord in me because for the first time a question that some of us have been asking in private got a public airing. As I mentioned earlier, after the division of the Southern Baptist Convention, as long as we were in the South, Connie and I attended churches belonging to the more liberal off-shoot, the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship. I know many of the leaders of that organization far better than I know most of the leadership of ABC-USA and I can assure you that in terms of theology and the philosophy and practice of ministry, there is very little difference between the two denominations. Those of us with a foot in both camps or who know a substantial number of folks in both groups have been asking in recent years, “why don’t we merge?” On Sunday night at the Mission Summit, we all heard greetings from Suzii Paynter, the new Executive Coordinator of the CBF. She prophesied a time coming soon that ABC and CBF would be joined in new partnerships. The preacher for the evening then

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stood up and asked the question, “Can somebody please tell me why progressive Baptists in this country are still divided by the Mason-Dixon Line?” Both of those statements got a lot of applause. I was delighted.

On the whole the experience of the Mission Summit made me really glad to be an American Baptist. I was glad because for the first time I really felt that Good Shepherd and Evergreen are not alone out here in the Northwest corner of the country. There are American Baptist churches struggling with the same things we struggle with AND coming up with some of the same answers. Sometimes, reports from ABC meetings have made me feel like Evergreen Association is an outlier — that we are too progressive, too adventurous, or just too weird to fit into our denominational home. But I discovered at the Biennial that that isn’t true at all! Oh, sure, we are out in front on some things. That denominational program I mentioned earlier that set the themes for the worship services is called “Transformed by the Spirit” and it deals with the growing realization of and movement toward the need for transformational change in the churches as we learn to carry the Good News of Christ Jesus to a world in flux, to a new generation, and to rapidly morphing cultures. I could tell in my missions conversation that Evergreen has done far more to get our clergy leaders involved in this program than some regions have. But the spirit of the meeting was all looking forward! There was no one expressing fear of the future but rather hope. There was no one bemoaning the good old days – voices were raised in hopeful anticipation. Good Shepherd, we are not alone in our Baptist family! We have sisters and brothers all across our denomination who are committed, as are we, to the healing of the nations, to restorative justice, to peace for all peoples, to the love of God we experience and share in Jesus. That is the message we bring home from the 2013 Mission Summit of the American Baptist Churches, USA. Thanks be to God.