‘Evangelical’ American Baptists Ponder Future

More than 350 American Baptists attended last weekend’s meeting at Northern Baptist Theological Seminary to begin to chart a future course for “evangelicals” frustrated in their efforts to force American Baptist Churches in the U.S.A. to adopt a stronger stance against homosexuality.

According to notes from breakout sessions reported on the American Baptist Evangelicals Web site, participants support a new organization for conservative Baptists but not a new denomination.

Suggestions included organizing a non-geographic region around theology, including opposition to homosexuality, or gradually building an alternative body with churches dually aligned.

Earlier last week, executive ministers from eight ABC/USA regions across the country met at a conference center in Parchment Valley, W. Va., to forge an agreement for cooperation in mission based on “mutually held core values.”

The eight regions—American Baptist churches of Michigan, Ohio, Indiana/Kentucky, West Virginia, Pennsylvania/Delaware, New Jersey, Maine and the Pacific Southwest—represent more than 2,300 churches, 40 percent of ABC/USA congregations.

The executives identified “core values” as biblical authority, “associational integrity and accountability among regions,” leadership development and “equipping our churches to impact the world for Christ.”

“As American Baptist leaders, we foresee a bright future of mission and ministry together,” they stated.

One of the eight regions, the Pacific-Southwest, has initiated a process to separate from the ABC/USA because of differences over homosexuality. Another, the West Virginia Baptist Convention, is expected to discuss similar action when it meets next month.

Larry Mason, executive minister of the ABC of Indiana and Kentucky, told
EthicsDaily.com that the agreement by executive ministers at Parchment Valley “was in no way an attempt to create, or even suggest, the formation of a new denomination.”

“It was an agreement to work together and, with other like-minded region executives, to share resources for leadership development and the equipping of local congregations for ministries,” Mason said. “We want to continue our work within the ABC/USA to facilitate change in what we understand to be important issues of biblical authority.”

A petition from the American Baptist Churches of Indiana and Kentucky received a first reading in June. It would forbid churches dismissed from a region for membership in the pro-gay Association of Welcoming & Affirming Baptists from remaining American Baptist by joining another region.

The petition also would amend a document entitled “We Are American Baptists” to include a description as people “who submit to the teaching of Scripture that God’s design for sexual intimacy places it within the context of marriage between one man and one woman, and acknowledge that the practice of homosexuality is incompatible with biblical teaching.”

The ABC/USA General Board will give the petition a second reading in November.

The American Baptist Churches of Rochester/Genesee Region are collecting signatures on a counter proposal, which would set up an appeal process for dismissed cooperating churches. Supporters hope to have a required 200 signatures from five regions in time for a first reading in November.

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