

Alliance of Baptists urges end to Cuba travel ban: Applaud Obama for loosening restrictions

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The Alliance of Baptists applauded President Obama for loosening restrictions on Americans' travel to Cuba and called for more U.S. policy reform during the progressive group's April 17-19 convocation in Charlotte, North Carolina.

After experiencing hindered access to Cuba under the previous administration, the alliance welcomed the president's April 13 order relaxing restrictions on the ability of Cuban Americans with family members in Cuba to travel to the communist nation and send money to relatives.

The alliance called on Obama to ease travel restrictions further and to continue a thorough review of American policy toward Cuba, including a nearly half-century-old trade embargo "and its destructive impact on both countries."

A number of alliance churches have partnerships with like-minded progressive congregations in Cuba, and some members have traveled there in mission teams.

In 2006 the Treasury Department cracked down on humanitarian visits to Cuba for groups the Bush administration considered too close to the Castro regime. The U.S. declined to renew travel licenses to religious bodies, including the American Baptist Churches USA, the United Methodist Church, the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) and the National Council of Churches.

The government fined the Alliance of Baptists \$34,000 in 2006, alleging that five church mission teams visiting Cuba under the alliance's travel license had violated the trade embargo by engaging in tourist activities. Later officials rescinded the fine, saying none of the five church groups did anything wrong, but warned of "criminal and/or civil penalties" for any future violation of the embargo.

Formed in 1987, the Alliance of Baptists was the first group to split from the Southern Baptist Convention in response to a fundamentalist takeover of the nation's largest Protestant faith group.

With 127 churches, the alliance has its highest concentration of churches in the mid-Atlantic region. It is smaller and more liberal than the 1,900-church Cooperative Baptist Fellowship, which formed in 1991.

The alliance's best-known leader, Stan Hastey, is retiring June 30 after serving the denomination for 18 years, originally as the group's first executive director and the last two years as its minister for missions and ecumenism.

Hastey said efforts by the alliance to include gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender members in the life of the Baptist movement are "not an unimportant contribution in our time."

Like many other denominations in the recession, the Alliance of Baptists has had to cut costs. Alliance president Brooks Wicker said the organization ended 2008 having spent \$91,390 more than it had taken in. The board of directors reduced the 2009 budget to reflect the \$400,000 typical annual income from congregations. -

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