

Defeated in votes, American Baptist conservatives organize: The Great Commission Network

by [John Dart](#) in the [September 20, 2005](#) issue

Rebuffed at national meetings of American Baptists that declined to adopt tough stances against homosexuality, some conservative leaders will meet this month near Chicago to expand an alternate missionary organization. A leader of the fledgling Great Commission Network calls it a coalition of churches “committed to biblical integrity” and contends that they “are not trying to start another denomination.”

Critics say the campaign would divert funds from the American Baptist Churches in the USA.

Other mainline denominations have struggled to stay together while debating homosexuality under the glare of national media. The 1.4-million-member ABCUSA may be facing greater fracture despite the low national profile of its disputes.

Conservative evangelicals have been frustrated by their failure to obtain strongly worded policies against same-sex blessings and gay pastors. Liberal-to-moderate American Baptists, who acknowledge that a 1992 resolution says “the practice of homosexuality is incompatible with Christian teaching,” say they have been defending traditional Baptist stances on congregational autonomy and individual conscience.

Delegates to the denomination’s July convention supported top ABCUSA executives in approving a statement that, in effect, permits gay-welcoming congregations to join another regional church association if they are kicked out of their own geographical association.

Last month, the senate of the ABCUSA Ministers Council defeated a proposed membership amendment to its bylaws which declared that scripture teaches “sexual intimacy is to be experienced between a man and a woman committed to each other

in marriage.”

The proposal, debated August 22 at the annual senate meeting in Green Lake, Wisconsin, needed a two-thirds majority to pass. The vote was 32 no, 30 yes, according to American Baptist News Service.

The debate made it clear that the issue was “multifaceted rather than . . . merely a referendum on the rightness or wrongness of the practice of homosexuality,” said C. Jeff Woods, associate general secretary for regional ministries. Woods cited issues such as local autonomy, discipline versus exclusion, love versus holiness, varied biblical interpretations and “the amount of time spent on this single issue.”

The latter theme was echoed the next day by the Ministers Council executive director, Kate Harvey, who said that “we are back on mission” after a yearlong series of discussions on homosexuality at locations around the country. The discussions were arduous but respectful “as we wrestled with scriptures and with persons from the other side,” she said. “None of us fully knows the mind of God and it is together that we discern more completely the fullness of God’s truth.”

The bylaws change had been proposed by the ABC’s Pacific Southwest region, whose board was already on record as intending to withhold funds from national headquarters if steps were not taken in July on issues of homosexuality.

The rejection of the bylaws change “didn’t surprise me,” said Bill Nicoson, executive secretary of American Baptist Evangelicals, an advocacy group that claimed 559 affiliated congregations in late August.

The ABE Web site in July invited like-minded conservatives who are disappointed that they are “still left with a denomination that lacks a biblical worldview” to attend a meeting September 23-24 on the campus of Northern Baptist Theological Seminary in Lombard, Illinois. A spokesperson for the seminary said the ABC-related school is not sponsoring the conference but is merely renting the facility to organizers.

Nicoson described the gathering as a “moment to help create a coalition of Baptist churches committed to a solid, compassionate, intelligent orthodoxy.”

Paul D. Borden, executive minister of the ABC of the West, based in northern California, said that he and 70 other Baptists created the Great Commission Network

with the goal of attracting 1,000 ABC congregations and even becoming interdenominational. "When we call sin 'sin' and not try to redefine it as a 'life-style choice' that has God's blessing," Borden wrote, "then we offer people hope, forgiveness and reconciliation to God."

However, the meeting and new network appear as "wolves in sheep's clothing" to Susan Johnson, a Chicago pastor and former member of the ABC general board. "They are veiled attempts to stay under the radar and within the legal limits and either break up the denomination or take over major assets," Johnson said.

Johnson said that the Great Commission Network "has IRD fingerprints all over it," referring to the conservative Institute on Religion and Democracy and its Association for Church Renewal (ACR), which links conservative activists in mainline denominations.

Nicoson scoffed at the claim. He said he attends two ACR meetings a year, and called ACR an "information-sharing group, a fellowship, not something to lay out strategy." As for accusations that the conservatives want to take over the denomination, Nicoson said, "We have no desire to take over the *Titanic*."

Larry Greenfield, interim executive minister of ABC's Metro Chicago region and former president of Colgate-Rochester Divinity School, said that the network started last winter "is trying to develop momentum" around homosexual issues.

"I think the larger part of the denomination believes that the new law in Christ is love," said Greenfield. "About 25 percent make up the hard right, and probably 25 percent are pretty much to the left," he continued. "For the other 50 percent, the tradition of individual conscience and local church autonomy are critical to whom we are as people."