

Churches in Southwest will leave the ABC: May be start of national split over homosexuality

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In what may be the beginning of a national split over homosexuality, leaders in a regional group of the American Baptist Churches USA have voted to begin leaving the denomination by the end of this year.

Directors of the American Baptist Churches of the Pacific Southwest have initiated the process of disaffiliating from the ABCUSA, which is based in Valley Forge, Pennsylvania. The region, based in southern California, also includes southern Nevada, Arizona and Hawaii.

The vote was taken September 8, but the news was not made public until five days later when a pastor in the region, Glenn Layne of Temple City, California, posted the news on his Internet site. Layne estimated that 275 of the 300 churches would vote to leave, according to the *Los Angeles Times*.

Writing to pastors, Dale Salico, the region's executive minister, said the Pacific Southwest board "has determined that the time has come to create distance between the ABCPSW and the ABCUSA so that both may move ahead in the mission God has given them without continued conflict."

In another letter, Brian Scrivens, president of the region's board, said the action was taken "because the deep differences of theological convictions and values" of leaders of the two parties are understood "as irreconcilable."

Top American Baptist officers said September 14 that they "deeply regret" the move toward withdrawal. "Our denomination has been blessed by the historic commitment by our regions to interdependent dialog and action for mission in the name of Christ," said a statement by the National Executive Council. "We grieve when partners in ministry move away from that covenantal relationship."

Tensions over the issue of homosexuality have come to a head in recent months in the ABC, which counts more than 1.4 million members in about 5,800 churches. Although the group adopted a resolution opposing homosexual conduct in 1992, many conservatives in the denomination have complained that ABC leaders have done little to enforce it in the denomination's agencies or congregations.

Several ABC regions urged the national denomination to deal decisively with the issue during its biennial meeting in July. Some regions left unsatisfied. In West Virginia, reputedly the largest ABC region, with about 460 congregations, a "biblical truth" coalition of 65 churches says it will ask delegates at the region's annual meeting this month to amend its constitution in order to leave the denomination.

In opposing a variety of steps to enforce disapproval of homosexuality, most national leaders of the ABC have cited traditional Baptist principles of local-church autonomy and the priesthood of every believer, rather than theological support for homosexuality.

"We stand at a crossroads," ABC general secretary Roy Medley told delegates at the biennial meeting. "In our world, the path of radical discipleship—the path of radical love—is the road less taken. We dare not choose another. We dare not choose the wrong road . . . the road that leads to separation. That choice will certainly unite you with like-minded people but will give you small souls and make you comfortable Christians."

Medley and ABC's national president, Peggy Johnson, met with regional leaders from the Pacific Southwest just prior to their vote to leave the denomination, but to no avail. *-Associated Baptist Press*