

The Alliance of Baptists
A Statement on Travel Restrictions between the United States and Cuba
Birmingham, Alabama, April 22, 2006

For decades the government of the United States encouraged travel to Cuba by representatives of religious organizations and routinely granted visas to representatives of religious entities in Cuba to travel in the United States. Over the past year, however, our government has reversed course and made such travel more and more difficult.

On March 31, 2005, the Office of Foreign Assets Control of the Department of the Treasury informed all groups that held general licenses to travel to Cuba of new and more stringent policies limiting the issuance of such licenses thereafter. Among the affected bodies is the Alliance of Baptists, whose general license was suspended without cause on June 23, 2005. Since then, numerous other national religious bodies have been denied new licenses upon the expiration of those previously in effect. These include American Baptist Churches in the USA, United Church of Christ, Christian Church (Disciples of Christ), United Methodist Church, Presbyterian Church USA, Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, Southern Baptist Convention, and United States Conference of Catholic Bishops.

Similarly denied general licenses under the new policies have been the National Council of the Churches of Christ in the USA and its partner organization, Church World Service. The Alliance of Baptists is a member body of both these broad-based ecumenical entities.

On March 15, 2006, representatives of several of these bodies were invited by five members of Congress to meet with representatives of the Departments of State and Treasury to hear our grievances about the new policies. These were delivered forcefully and well in a written statement by John L. McCullough, executive director of Church World Service. In addition, a bipartisan group of 105 members of the House of Representatives made their complaint known in letters to the secretaries of State and Treasury. Similar letters were signed by 17 United States senators.

To date both departments have refused to make requested changes in the new policies by restoring the previous practice of issuing general licenses to national religious bodies. We of the Alliance of Baptists object:

- **We object to the denial of the free exercise of religion inherent in such policies.**
- **We object to the abuse of regulatory authority by the Departments of State and Treasury in issuing such policies without inviting public comment.**
- **We object to the failure of representatives of the Departments of State and Treasury to respond to inquiries by affected parties in a timely manner, if at all.**
- **We object to the suspension without cause of the general license previously issued to the Alliance of Baptists.**

In addition, we object strenuously to the U.S. government's increasingly routine denial of travel visas to the United States by duly authorized representatives of religious bodies in Cuba, including our partner organization, the *Fraternidad de Iglesias Bautistas de Cuba*.

Finally, but of equal concern, we protest in the strongest possible terms the inhumane policies implemented June 30, 2004, limiting the ability of Cuban Americans to travel as before to their native land to visit loved ones, including those who are sick and dying. In the name of God, we demand the reversal of these cruel policies.

By this statement, the membership of the Alliance of Baptists in annual meeting on April 22, 2006, authorizes and directs its Board of Directors and staff to engage actively in coalitions whose aim is the reversal of these new and unreasonable policies. This authorization includes seeking appropriate remedies of an administrative, legislative, and/or judicial nature.

This statement is to be communicated in writing to the President of the United States, the Secretaries of State and Treasury, and Members of Congress, as well as to our own membership and the media. We commit as well to educating ourselves and our communities concerning these issues.