

BAYLOR UNIVERSITY

PROGRESSIVE BAPTIST DISSENTERS:
A HISTORY OF THE ALLIANCE OF BAPTISTS

A PAPER SUBMITTED TO

DR. BILL PITTS

BY

AARON DOUGLAS WEAVER

WACO, TEXAS

APRIL 27, 2009

Out of the Southern Baptist “Holy Wars” that were fought during the 1980s emerged an organization which was committed to preserving historic Baptist principles of freedom such as religious freedom, local church freedom and academic freedom in theological education. This organization, now known as the Alliance of Baptists, quickly found a small niche in Baptist life as the most progressive or liberal Baptist body in the United States. From its opposition to the death penalty to its support of a Palestinian state, the Alliance has taken numerous controversial positions since its founding in 1987. Due to their role as radical dissenters that constantly challenge that Baptist status-quo, the Alliance of Baptists has continued the “genealogy of dissent” started by progressive Baptist advocates of racial integration in the 1940s. Thus, this paper examines several of the Alliance’s dissenting viewpoints such as its welcoming and affirming stance towards homosexuals in both the life of the church and in the political arena. Other areas explored include the Alliance’s emphasis on ecumenical cooperation, interfaith dialogue and missions partnerships.

The Southern Baptist Controversy

The story of Southern Baptists is a story of almost perpetual controversy.¹ The latter half of the twentieth century witnessed a Southern Baptist conflict, most popularly known as the “Conservative Resurgence”² by those who claimed victory, which historian Barry Hankins contends was “one of the most contentious and significant denominational battles in American religious history.”³ While popular renditions of the “Southern Baptist Controversy” start the

¹ Walter B. Shurden, *Not a Silent People: Controversies That Have Shaped Southern Baptists* (Macon, GA: Smyth & Helwys Publishing, 1995).

² The SBC Controversy has also been popularly referred to as the “Fundamentalist-Moderate Controversy” and the “Fundamentalist Takeover.” While scholars such as Nancy Ammerman and David Stricklin employ the term fundamentalist, others such as Barry Hankins prefer the word “conservative” to describe the victors in The SBC Controversy. While the “Conservative Resurgence” ended nearly twenty years ago, current Southern Baptists have sought to preserve the resurgence theme by launching a “Great Commission Resurgence.”

³ Barry Hankins, *Uneasy in Babylon: Southern Baptist Conservatives and American Culture* (Tuscaloosa, AL: The University of Alabama Press, 2002), 2-3. Hankins points out that this controversy was just the second time

imbroglio in 1979, conflict over the nature of the Bible and its interpretation began in the 1960s with the “Genesis Controversy.” A storm of controversy erupted when Broadman Press, the publishing agency of the Southern Baptists’ Sunday School Board, published a book by Midwestern Baptist Theological Seminary professor Ralph Elliot which asserted that an affirmation of the historicity of the first eleven chapters of Genesis was not necessary to express a strong affirmation of their theological truth.⁴ Elliot’s suggestion in *The Message of Genesis* (1961) that Adam and Eve were not historical figures led a number of loud Southern Baptist pastors to cry “liberal” and accuse Elliot of not believing in the Bible. Ultimately, Elliot lost his position at Midwestern Seminary.⁵

A second controversy occurred over biblical interpretation in 1970 when Broadman Press published a commentary in which British author G. Henton Davies denied that God had literally told Abraham to practice child sacrifice (Gen. 22). These two controversies convinced many conservatives that the leadership of the Southern Baptist Convention was fostering or allowing a liberal drift in denominational agencies and seminaries.⁶ Throughout the 1970s, these

that the “conservative side” had won a major denominational battle for power. The “conservative side” prevailed in a 1970s battle in the Lutheran Church Missouri Synod. The major denominational fights of the early twentieth century among Presbyterians and Northern Baptists saw the “liberal side” come out on top.

⁴ Ralph H. Elliot, *The Message of Genesis: A Theological Interpretation* (Nashville, TN: Broadman Press, 1961). For Elliot’s personal memoir about the controversy surrounding his book, see Ralph Elliot, “*The Genesis Controversy*” and *Continuity in Southern Baptist Chaos: A Eulogy for a Great Tradition* (Macon, GA: Mercer University Press, 1992).

⁵ Elliot, “*The Genesis Controversy*,” 67-68. Elliot’s dismay was actually for insubordination rather than his affirmation of the methods of modern academic biblical study. However, the “Genesis Controversy” caused enough conflict that Southern Baptist leaders thought a new revised confession of faith was needed to offer a theologically unifying presence. Thus, the 1963 Baptist Faith and Message was born. See Grady Cothen, “Truths or Truth: Creeds or Scripture,” in Grady Cothen and James Dunn, *Soul Freedom: Baptist Battle Cry* (Macon, GA: Smyth & Helwys Publishing, 2000), 92.

⁶ Jerry Faught, “Round Two, Volume One: The Broadman Bible Commentary,” *Baptist History & Heritage* 38, no. 1 (Winter 2003): 94-114.

conservative critics developed networks to oppose alleged liberalism in the convention.⁷

As the convention was mobilizing for “Bold Mission Thrust” in the late 1970s, a missionary effort to share the Gospel with the whole world by the year 2000, a group of fundamentalists were formulating a political strategy to gain complete control of the Southern Baptist Convention. The main architects of this planned takeover, Paige Patterson of the Criswell Biblical Institute and layman Paul Pressler, a Texas appeals court judge, sought to elect as SBC president men who were committed to biblical inerrancy. Patterson and Pressler recognized that the president, though historically considered a figurehead, had the power to appoint leaders to committees who would then select trustees to the various denominational agencies. With a series of presidential victories, trustee boards of SBC institutions and thus the institutions themselves could be completely remolded.⁸

The fundamentalists’ first victory came in 1979 with the election of Memphis pastor Adrian Rogers as the President of the Southern Baptist Convention. While several of the presidential elections in the 1980s were close, the political strategy of Patterson and Pressler worked. Each year the candidate supported by the “Conservative Resurgence” won. By 1990, the Patterson-Pressler coalition had gained complete control of the Southern Baptist Convention.

⁷ David Stricklin, *A Genealogy of Dissent: Southern Baptist Protest in the Twentieth Century* (Lexington, KY: The University Press of Kentucky, 1999), 145. One such group formed was the Baptist Faith and Message Fellowship.

⁸ Bill Leonard, *God’s Last and Only Hope: The Fragmentation of the Southern Baptist Convention* (Grand Rapids, MI: W. B. Eerdmans Publishing Inc., 1990), 138-139. Despite the critics, most Baptists across the Southern Baptist Convention believed that historic love for cooperative missions would hold theological infighting in check. Baptist historian Bill Leonard has argued that for most of the twentieth century the diverse constituencies which existed throughout the Southern Baptist Convention were held together by a “Grand Compromise.” This “Grand Compromise” was an understood agreement not to let any ideological party, whether they were on the left or the right, take control of the denomination. Instead, the Southern Baptist Convention would be held together by a large group of centrists who for the sake of missions and evangelism found unity amidst diversity. According to Leonard, “There was less a synthesis than a Grand Compromise based in an unspoken agreement that the convention would resist all attempts to define basic doctrines in ways that excluded one tradition or another, thereby destroying unity and undermining the missionary imperative.” See Leonard, *God’s Last and Only Hope*, 29-38.

Leaders trumpeted a new Reformation in religious history. America's largest denomination had turned the tide back on the evil of liberalism, and according to the victors, historic Baptist conservatism had been restored.⁹

Southern Baptist Alliance: Early Years

The group of Baptists who opposed the “Conservative Resurgence” led by Paige Patterson and Paul Pressler came to be referred to as “moderates” or “moderate Baptists.” They viewed the SBC Controversy not as a conflict over conservative versus liberal theology or a “Battle for the Bible.” Instead, moderates saw the SBC Controversy as a political power struggle. The real issue at stake was “control versus freedom.” Moderates rejected the fundamentalists’ demands for doctrinal conformity and attempts to squelch dissent and stomp out theological diversity. Moderates asserted that the charges of widespread liberalism in Baptist seminaries and denominational agencies were false. Moderates repeatedly affirmed the centrality of biblical authority, but they resisted inerrancy as dogmatism and objected to the increasing political connotation of the word—its use was becoming a creedal litmus test for “Baptist orthodoxy.”¹⁰

Repeated attempts by moderates during the 1980s to stop or slow the fundamentalists’ efforts failed. During the fall of 1986, after losing the election for the SBC presidency in eight consecutive years, a small group of moderates who had been fighting the fundamentalist movement convened on the campus of Meredith College in Raleigh, North Carolina and decided

⁹ Note the title of Jerry Sutton, *The Baptist Reformation: The Conservative Resurgence in the Southern Baptist Convention* (Nashville: Broadman and Holman, 2000). Baptists opposed to the Patterson-Pressler coalition and the “Conservative Resurgence” did not see the conflict as conservative versus liberal theology.

¹⁰ Shurden, *Not A Silent People*, 86-87. See also Leonard, *God's Last and Only Hope*, 149-151, 181. In this paper, the term “moderates” or “moderate Baptists” refers to Baptists within the SBC that opposed the Pressler-Patterson coalition. There was a great deal of theological and political diversity among this group. Today’s “moderate Baptists” function primarily outside of SBC life.

to adopt a new approach.¹¹ Desiring to work for rather than against something, these moderates explored the possibility of forming an organization that would work to preserve historic Baptist principles of freedom such as religious freedom, local church freedom and academic freedom in theological education.¹² After three additional meetings were held, the formation of the Southern Baptist Alliance was announced on February 12, 1987 at press conferences in Charlotte, Raleigh and Atlanta.¹³ At these simultaneous press conferences, Alliance founders offered the following statement of purpose: “The Southern Baptist Alliance is an alliance of individuals and churches dedicated to the preservation of historic Baptist principles, freedoms and traditions and the continuance of our ministry and mission within the SBC.”¹⁴

In the face of criticism that the SBA’s real intent was to serve as a vehicle to lead moderates out of the SBC, Alliance founders were quick to rebut that claim and assert that the SBA would supplement the work of the SBC.¹⁵ Mahan Siler, Alliance leader and pastor of Pullen Memorial Baptist Church in Raleigh, reflected on the heavy criticism,

We keep getting press about splintering and starting a new denomination. That’s not in our conversation and intent. Hopefully, rather than eroding the convention, this will

¹¹ Victoria A. Rebeck, “The Southern Baptist Alliance: The Loyal Opposition Organizes,” *The Christian Century*, June 1, 1988, 542-544. This initial meeting was held on September 25, 1986 and was comprised of individuals mostly from North Carolina and Georgia. Discussions were continued at a second meeting on December 1-2, 1986 in Charlotte, North Carolina. See Nancy Ammerman, *Baptist Battles: Social Change And Religious Conflict In The Southern Baptist Convention* (London: Rutgers University Press, 1990), 271-272.

¹² Alliance of Baptists, “History,” <http://www.allianceofbaptists.org/learn/about/history> (accessed April 17, 2009). See Rebeck, 542-544.

¹³ Alliance of Baptists, “History.” See also Stan Hastey, “Highlights of Alliance History,” Alliance of Baptists (unpublished history). Two additional organizational meetings were held at Providence Baptist Church in Charlotte in January and February of 1986.

¹⁴ Bill J. Leonard, ed., *Dictionary of Baptists in America* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Christian Fellowship of the USA, 1994), 19. Oakhurst Baptist Church, a well-known Southern Baptist progressive congregation, became the first church to join the Southern Baptist Alliance. See also Oran P. Smith, *The Rise of Baptist Republicanism* (New York: New York University Press, 1997), 220-222.

¹⁵ Marv Knox, “Alliance Talks Center on ‘Supplement,’ Not Split,” *Biblical Recorder*, May 30, 1987, 3.

provide a vision for people to stay in the SBC with concern and leadership. A lot of Southern Baptists are hungering for support. They feel alienated.¹⁶

Alliance President Henry Crouch declared: “We are Southern Baptists and we intend to remain Southern Baptists. We will not be scared off by extremes on either side.”¹⁷ At the SBA’s first annual Convocation in May, 1986, Crouch continued to explain why the new organization was needed: “We want to provide a lifeline to Southern Baptists who are discouraged and keep them from leaving the denomination.”¹⁸

Alliance leaders also unveiled a covenant of seven principles that members of the SBA would commit themselves to. Crafted by Mahan Siler, Walter Coleman, Luther Brewer, Richard Groves and Alan Neely, the Covenant included beliefs and practices that this group of moderates believed were essential to Baptist life.¹⁹ The first principle stressed the “freedom of the individual, led by God’s Spirit within the family of faith, to read and interpret the Scriptures, relying on the historical understanding by the church and on the best methods of modern biblical study.” Additional principles emphasized the freedom of the local church to call and ordain both men and women to the Gospel ministry, ecumenical cooperation, “open inquiry and responsible scholarship” in theological education, social and economic justice, and the separation of church and state.²⁰ While historian Walter Shurden described the SBA’s Covenant as one of the most significant Baptist pronouncements of the twentieth century,²¹ respected sociologist Nancy

¹⁶ Marv Knox, “Leaders Call Alliance Lifeline,” *Biblical Recorder*, May 30, 1987, 1.

¹⁷ R.G. Puckett and Larry E. High, “Alliance Born to Preserve SBC Heritage, Leaders Say,” *Biblical Recorder*, February 21, 1987, 1.

¹⁸ Marv Knox, “Leaders Call Alliance Lifeline.”

¹⁹ Alliance of Baptists, “History.”

²⁰ Alliance of Baptists, “Covenant & Mission,” http://www.allianceofbaptists.org/learn/about/covenant_mission (accessed April 17, 2009).

²¹ Stan Hasteley, “Setting the record straight on the Alliance of Baptists,” *Baptist Standard*, August 5, 2002, http://www.baptiststandard.com/2002/8_12/pages/comment_hasteley.html (accessed April 17, 2009).

Ammerman noted that the Covenant placed the SBA theologically “to the left of most Southern Baptists.”²² In her study of Southern Baptists during the late 1980s, Ammerman found that members of the Southern Baptist Alliance were far less conservative on political issues than average Southern Baptists. According to Ammerman, the Southern Baptist Alliance “offered a re-creation of the kind of place where progressive politics and progressive theology did not make one an outsider.”²³

During the 1987 Convocation, Alliance members voted to create task forces to explore what they deemed “problem areas” of Southern Baptist life. The SBA was furious that the fundamentalist-controlled Sunday School Board had decided to stop publishing educational literature authored by moderates. Referring to the Sunday School and bible study lessons authored by fundamentalists, Alliance President Henry Crouch emphatically declared, “We’re not going to have that literature coming into our churches.”²⁴ In partnership with the popular moderate publication *SBC Today*, the Alliance began publishing its own bible study curriculum in January, 1989.²⁵ The SBA also sought to help mission churches pastored by women after the Southern Baptist Convention’s Home Mission Board enacted a policy that prohibits financial support of ordained female pastors. This example of actual applied egalitarianism confirms Ammerman’s assertion that the Alliance was theologically to the left of the average Southern

²² Ammerman, 272.

²³ Ammerman, 274-275. Ammerman notes that while the Alliance members she surveyed were theologically and politically to the left of the rest of the Southern Baptist Convention they were not uniformly “liberal” in theology.

²⁴ Knox, “Alliance Talks Center on ‘Supplement,’ Not Split.”

²⁵ Ammerman, 277.

Baptist. Religious liberty and the separation of church and state were also “problem areas” high on the SBA’s list of priorities.²⁶

The Southern Baptist Alliance quickly evolved from a fluid, grassroots movement of committed Baptists into an institution with a solid organizational structure – a structure that more closely resembled that of a Baptist association than that of a bloated bureaucratic Baptist convention in its founding years.²⁷ Initially, the SBA named Alan Neely, a missions professor at Southeastern Baptist Theological Seminary, as acting executive director, and opened an office at Myers Park Baptist Church in Charlotte which employed two part-time workers. By 1989, the SBA had hired two full-time employees and opened a permanent office at First Baptist Church, Washington D.C. Stan Hasteley of the Baptist Joint Committee on Public Affairs and Baptist Press was elected Executive-Director of the SBA.²⁸

During these early years, the Southern Baptist Alliance served as a place of refuge for those who had been fired or forced from their denominational positions. The SBA helped kick-start the healing process for these exiled and disenfranchised Southern Baptists. According to Nancy Ammerman, the SBA “provided a sense of identity for people who were no longer sure they could wholeheartedly call themselves Southern Baptists. It offered a place of fellowship, where common concerns and grief’s could be shared. And it offered a place to laugh – at themselves, at fundamentalists, at Southern Baptist traditions, at the world.”²⁹ However, the

²⁶ Jim Newton, “Southern Baptist Alliance ‘Regrets’ Policy on Women,” *Biblical Recorder*, March 21, 1987, 1. The SBA also operated a placement service which helped like-minded ministers find positions in generally Alliance-friendly congregations. The service also helped Southern Baptists who had moved find a new church home.

²⁷ Ammerman, 279.

²⁸ Alliance of Baptists, “History.” See also Marv Knox, “Stan Hasteley elected first executive director of SBA,” *Biblical Recorder*, December 10, 1988, 4. Jeanette Holt of the Baptist Joint Committee was also hired as the SBA’s second full-time employee.

²⁹ Ammerman, 274.

SBA continued to face a serious image problem as a schismatic group that was in actuality forming a new denomination. This public perception was impossible to put to rest especially after the SBA voted in 1989 to start a seminary in Richmond now known as the Baptist Theological Seminary at Richmond (BTSR).³⁰

Finally, in 1992, five years after its inception, the Southern Baptist Alliance voted to cut ties with the Southern Baptist Convention and change its name to the Alliance of Baptists.³¹ One speaker at the fifth annual Convocation explained that the Alliance “can no longer define ourselves primarily where we have been.” At this point in time, the newly named Alliance of Baptists counted a total membership of slightly over 70,000. However, the Alliance remained a largely regional group with over seventy percent of their membership located in North Carolina, Virginia, Maryland and the District of Columbia.³²

Following the formation in 1990 of the more centrist Cooperative Baptist Fellowship, a national organization comprised of mostly moderate Southern Baptists, both membership and financial support of the Alliance began to wane.³³ Though talks of a merger between the two groups broke off after fifteen months, the CBF ultimately assumed responsibility for funding several projects formerly funded by the Alliance.³⁴ Free from fundamentalism and the Southern

³⁰ Ibid., 278-279. BTSR was established as a free-standing accredited school that shared resources with nearby Presbyterian and black Baptist seminaries. Ammerman describes BTSR as a “symbol of the Alliance’s willingness to overcome the black-white and North-South divisions that had created the SBC.”

³¹ Leonard, *Dictionary of Baptists in America*, 19. The SBA dropped the phrase “within the Southern Baptist Convention” from its mission statement in 1991.

³² “Alliance changes its name, contemplates its future,” *Biblical Recorder*, March 21, 1992, 8-10.

³³ Leonard, *Dictionary of Baptists in America*, 19. Nancy Ammerman stated that even denominational defeat “could not create progressives out of the conservatives.” See also Ammerman, 278-279. Most of those who flew under the “moderate Baptist” umbrella and who left the SBC (with one-foot or both feet) chose to align with the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship, an organization that claims 1,900-affiliated Baptist churches in the United States.

³⁴ Amy Greene, “Alliance meets in Daytona Beach, simplifies vision, clarifies goals,” *Baptists Today*, March 18, 1993, 1-2. The CBF began funding projects previously funded by the Alliance such as the Baptist Joint Committee on Public Affairs, Associated Baptist Press, Baptist Center for Ethics, Baptist Theological Seminary at

Baptist Convention, the Alliance of Baptists had begun the process of finding its own small niche in Baptist life by 1993 as the most progressive Baptist body in the United States.

Racism and Repentance: The Alliance of Baptists as an Anti-Racist Organization

The Alliance of Baptists, then still the Southern Baptist Alliance, unanimously adopted its first formal position statement, on the subject of racism, in 1990 at their fourth annual Convocation held in St. Louis.³⁵ “A Call to Repentance: A Statement on Racism and Repentance,” offered a public apology to African-Americans “as members of the Southern Baptist family...for condoning and perpetuating the sin of slavery prior to and during the Civil War.” The statement on racism continued,

We reject the racism, segregation, and prejudice in our past and the continuing pattern of racism, segregation, and prejudice which has persisted throughout our history as a Christian denomination, even unto this present day. Likewise, we call upon our fellow Southern Baptists meeting in convention in New Orleans, Louisiana on June 11-13, to help cleanse our denomination of the blight of racism by adopting a similar statement of confession and repentance.³⁶

This historic statement concluded with a pledge that Alliance members would work to fight all forms of racism and prejudice from other Southern Baptists and seek out the participation of African-Americans and African-American congregations in the life of the Southern Baptist Convention.

Historian Bill Leonard noted that the Alliance’s confession was necessary to improve relations between white Southern Baptists and African-Americans especially black Baptists. “A Call to Repentance” led to a productive on-going relationship between the Alliance and the

Richmond and the Baptist studies programs and scholarship funds at Emory University and Duke University divinity schools. Meanwhile, the Alliance continued their support of Southern Baptist Women in Ministry, the Baptist Peace Fellowship of North America, and the Fraternity of Baptist Churches in Cuba.

³⁵ Victoria Rebeck, “Repenting of Racism,” *Christian Century*, April 4, 1990, 337.

³⁶ Southern Baptist Alliance, “A Call to Repentance: A Statement on Racism and Repentance,” March 10, 1990, <http://www.sitemason.com/files/bWq6sw/statementracism1990.pdf> (accessed April 19, 2009).

Progressive National Baptist Convention (PNBC), a 2.5 million member historically African-American denomination. Five years later in 1995, the Alliance of Baptists held a joint service with the PNBC.³⁷ Also five years later, the Southern Baptist Convention adopted a resolution which apologized to African-Americans for “condoning and/or perpetuating individual and systemic racism” and vowed to pursue racial reconciliation.³⁸ It is not known if the Alliance’s statement of repentance and new relationship with the PNBC directly caused the Southern Baptist Convention to adopt a similar apology to the African-American community. It seems likely that the statement pressured some concerned Southern Baptists to take up the issue. Whatever the case, the Alliance’s public actions definitely paved the way for conservatives and fundamentalists to finally address the issue of racial reconciliation and their past race-related sins.³⁹

Welcoming & Affirming: Sexual Orientation and Same-Sex Marriage

The Alliance again made headlines when the organization appointed a task force on human sexuality to study key issues surrounding homosexuality in 1992. Just five years prior, messengers to the Southern Baptist Convention had passed an anti-gay resolution which described homosexuality as “a manifestation of a depraved nature,” “abomination before the

³⁷ Alliance of Baptists, “History.” See also “Baptist Dialogue,” *Christian Century*, September 4, 1991, 801.

³⁸ Southern Baptist Convention, “Resolution on Racial Reconciliation on the 150th Anniversary of the Southern Baptist Convention,” June 1995, <http://www.sbc.net/resolutions/amResolution.asp?ID=899> (accessed April 19, 2009).

³⁹ The Alliance adopted a follow-up statement on racism at its 2006 Convocation held at Southside Baptist Church in Birmingham, Alabama, a congregation which once included members of the Ku Klux Klan. The theme of the Alliance’s twentieth annual meeting focused on confronting racism and forging racial reconciliation. This introspective statement noted that “repenting of our racism is not a one-time event but a long and demanding process.” The statement called for increasing racial and ethnic diversity within the Alliance of Baptists and committed the Alliance to an “intentional process of becoming an anti-racist organization.” See Alliance of Baptists, “A Statement on Racism and Repentance,” April 22, 2006, <http://www.sitemason.com/files/cOyP0k/statementRacismRepentanceStatement2006.pdf> (accessed April 19, 2009). See also Greg Warner, “Alliance vows to go on offensive as anti-racist organization,” *Associated Baptist Press*, April 26, 2006, http://www.abpnews.com/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=1097&Itemid=119 (accessed April 19, 2009).

eyes of God” and a “behavior that has wrought havoc in the lives of millions.”⁴⁰ Meanwhile, the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship was fighting the pro-gay label given by many of its Southern Baptist brethren due to the CBF’s refusal to address the issue of homosexuality.⁴¹ The Alliance’s study on human sexuality also came at a time when several prominent Alliance-affiliated congregations such as Binkley Memorial Baptist Church in Chapel Hill, North Carolina were making headlines for their gay-friendly positions. Binkley Church had made the controversial decision to ordain or “license” to the ministry an openly gay Duke University Divinity school student who had joined their church.⁴² Clearly, Alliance leaders felt that it was an appropriate time to address what they considered to be perhaps “the most divisive challenge for the church in North America since slavery.”⁴³

The Alliance Covenant was used as a framework for the report. In fact, nearly half of the report was devoted to articulating how the Covenant’s historic Baptist principles of the “freedom of the local church under the authority of Jesus Christ” and the “freedom of the individual led by God’s Spirit within the family of faith to read and interpret Scriptures” served as guidelines for the task force’s recommendations. While not adopted as official policy, the report was received by the Alliance’s Board of Directors with “profound gratitude” and offered seven “invitations to

⁴⁰ Southern Baptist Convention, “Resolution on Homosexuality,” June 1988, <http://www.sbc.net/resolutions/amResolution.asp?ID=610> (accessed April 19, 2009).

⁴¹ Don Hinkle, “CBF homosexuality stance ignites controversy over group’s direction,” *Baptist Press*, October 27, 2000, <http://baptist2baptist.net/printfriendly.asp?ID=187> (accessed April 19, 2009). Forced to confront the issue in 2000, the CBF adopted a policy that prohibits the funding of organizations that “condone, advocate or affirm homosexual practices.” The policy also prohibits the “purposeful” hiring of homosexuals as CBF staff or missionaries.

⁴² *Rightly Dividing the Word of Truth: A Resource for Congregations in Dialogue on Sexual Orientation*, ed. LeDayne McLeese Polaski and Millard Eiland (Washington, DC: Baptist Peace Fellowship of North America, 2000), 135-136.

⁴³ Alliance of Baptists, “A Clear Voice: Report of the Task Force on Human Sexuality,” March 4, 1995.

action.”⁴⁴ First, the report encouraged the Alliance of Baptists community to study the biblical/theological understandings of sexuality and the teaching of “responsible sexual expression applicable to all Christians.” Alliance churches were also encouraged to “welcome all persons without regard to sexual orientation or marital status into the life of the congregation” and “recognize and develop gifts for ministry in all persons without regard to sexual orientation.” Finally, the report encouraged its churches to “lift up the ideal of covenant” by “challenging persons, whether heterosexual or same-sex oriented, to express sexual intimacy within the covenant context of a committed, monogamous relationship. One example of that support could be, according to the report, “a ritual of covenant-making between the couple, the couple and God, and the couple and the Christian community.”⁴⁵

With this report, the Alliance staked out a position as the only gay-friendly Baptist body committed to welcoming and affirming all individuals into the life of its churches without regard to sexual orientation. In the years following this ground-breaking report, many churches affiliated with the Alliance of Baptists would adopt their own “welcoming and affirming” policies.⁴⁶ Some Alliance churches would follow the lead of congregations like Binkley Baptist Memorial Church and ordain openly-gay individuals to the gospel ministry. These decisions caused much consternation among conservatives, fundamentalists and even some moderate Baptists. Ultimately, many congregations from the Alliance of Baptists community would be disfellowshipped by others Baptist organizations at the local, state, and national levels.⁴⁷

⁴⁴ Alliance of Baptists, “Report of the Task Force on Human Sexuality.” See also Pam Parry, “Alliance directors receive report on human sexuality,” *Baptists Today*, October 13, 1994, 2.

⁴⁵ Alliance of Baptists, “Report of the Task Force on Human Sexuality.”

⁴⁶ The Alliance of Baptists and the Baptist Peace Fellowship of North America published a resource guide congregations, *Rightly Dividing the Word of Truth*, which encouraged other congregations to address the issue of homosexuality. The resource guide offers a variety of resources (personal, family and congregational stories) for churches engaged in sexual orientation dialogues.

⁴⁷ Smith, 225-230.

Two years after the Alliance's Board of Directors received the report on human sexuality, the Alliance of Baptists' 1997 Convocation was hosted by Pullen Memorial Baptist Church in Raleigh, North Carolina. Pullen Memorial made newspaper headlines in 1992 when it was ousted from the Southern Baptist Convention for blessing the union of two men.⁴⁸ The 2000 Convocation of the Alliance of Baptists was held at University Baptist Church in Austin, Texas, a congregation which was disfellowshipped from the Austin Baptist Association (1995) and the Baptist General Convention of Texas (1997) for its welcoming and affirming position towards homosexuals.⁴⁹ In the Alliance's monthly newsletter *Connections*, Executive-Director Stan Hastey explained why University Baptist Church was selected to host the annual Convocation:

In the small household of faith called the Alliance of Baptists, University Baptist Church is welcomed and affirmed because it is doing what a Christian congregation is supposed to do. It is loving all of God's children precisely because "God shows no partiality. (Acts 10:34b)"⁵⁰

The following year in 2001, the Alliance again emphasized its welcoming and affirming position towards homosexuals by adopting a motion expressing grief over a policy adopted the previous year by the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship which declared that the CBF will not fund organizations that "condone, advocate or affirm homosexual practices" and prohibited the "purposeful" hiring of homosexuals as CBF staff or missionaries. Though many individuals and congregations active in the Alliance of Baptists were also active in the Cooperative Baptist

⁴⁸ "2 Churches Ousted by Baptists' Vote," *The New York Times*, June 11, 1992, <http://www.nytimes.com/1992/06/11/us/2-churches-ousted-by-baptists-vote.html> (accessed April 19, 2009).

⁴⁹ University Baptist Church, "The Early Years," <http://www.ubcaustin.org/index.cfm?i=3134&mid=1000&id=44894> (accessed April 19, 2009).

⁵⁰ Stan Hastey, "Perspectives," *Connections*, March 1998, 3.

Fellowship, several CBF leaders were outraged and accused the Alliance of interfering in internal CBF affairs.⁵¹

Building on its 1995 report on human sexuality which encouraged individuals and churches to “witness before the state...on behalf of the civil rights and equality of opportunity for persons of same-sex orientation,” the Alliance declared in 2004 its support of “the rights of all citizens to full marriage equality.”⁵² Adopted without objection, the position statement decried the politicization of same-sex marriage, rejected efforts to amend the United States Constitution and various state constitutions to prohibit same-sex marriage. The statement concluded:

As Christians and as Baptists, we particularly lament the denigration of our gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender sisters and brothers in this debate by those who claim to speak for God. We affirm that the Alliance of Baptists supports the rights of all citizens to full marriage equality, and we affirm anew that the Alliance will “create places of refuge and renewal for those who are ignored by the church.”⁵³

With this statement affirming marriage equality for heterosexual and homosexual alike, the Alliance became the first Baptist group to take such a stance. This statement also made the Alliance of Baptists the first member body of the National Council of Churches to go on record in support of same-sex civil marriage. The United Church of Christ, a Christian denomination in partnership with the Alliance of Baptists, endorsed same-sex civil marriage one year later.⁵⁴

Little attention was given to the Alliance’s same-sex marriage statement in Baptist publications

⁵¹ Don Hinkle, CBF homosexuality stance ignites controversy over group’s direction.” See also “Alliance will be represented at CBF’s General Assembly,” *Baptists Today*, June 2001, 4.

⁵² Alliance of Baptists, “Report of the Task Force on Human Sexuality.” Sue Harper Ross and Rob Marus, “Alliance adopts statements on marriage, Cuba at meeting,” *Associated Baptist Press*, April 30, 2004. http://www.abpnews.com/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=2315&Itemid=117 (accessed April 19, 2009).

⁵³ Alliance of Baptists, “Statement on Same-Sex Marriage,” April 17, 2004, <http://www.sitemason.com/files/e10jfO/statementsamesexmarriage2004.pdf> (accessed April 19, 2009). It is worth noting that the 1995 study on human sexuality only addressed homosexuality. Somewhere between 1995 and 2004, the Alliance became welcoming and affirming of those with a bisexual and transgender orientation.

⁵⁴ “United Church of Christ endorses gay marriage,” MSNBC, July 4, 2005, <http://www.msnbc.msn.com/id/8463741/> (accessed April 19, 2009).

funded by moderate Baptists.⁵⁵ However, fundamentalists from the Southern Baptist Convention were not so silent. Al Mohler, President of Southern Baptist Theological Seminary in Louisville, Kentucky, published a very lengthy response to the Alliance's action. Mohler explained that the Alliance's decision "comes as no surprise" and is merely "the logical extension of the group's denial of biblical inerrancy and its subversion of biblical authority."⁵⁶ Alliance leaders would likely suggest, however, that their action was merely the logical extension of a biblical interpretive hermeneutic that had previously affirmed the equality, in both society and in the church, of women and African-Americans.

Without a doubt, the Alliance's position on gay marriage was quite controversial though not entirely unexpected. By 2004, the Alliance had developed a reputation for taking controversial stands on a plethora of social issues. This particular controversial stand was quite consistent with their past advocacy on behalf of "welcoming and affirming" homosexuals in all areas of life. Executive-Director Stan Hastey has acknowledged that the Alliance of Baptists doomed itself to perpetual smallness in 1995 with the ground-breaking statement on sexual orientation. In 2006, Hastey noted, "It is true that we delimited our numerical growth by becoming a movement that welcomes and those of same-sex orientation. But I sense we've about gotten over worrying about it."⁵⁷ Hastey's attitude stands in stark contrast to the attitude of

⁵⁵ Ross and Marus, "Alliance adopts statements on marriage, Cuba at meeting." Oddly, the Associated Baptist Press did not see fit to write a stand-alone article about the Alliance's historic yet extremely controversial decision.

⁵⁶ Albert Mohler, "The Alliance of Baptists Affirms Same-Sex Marriage," *Baptist Press*, April 30, 2004, <http://bpnews.net/bpnews.asp?id=18195> (accessed April 19, 2009).

⁵⁷ Warner, "Alliance vows to go on offensive as anti-racist organization." At its 2009 Convocation, Alliance members debated a proposed statement inviting ministers to refuse to sign marriage licenses both as a matter of separation of church and state and as a way of protecting laws that ban gay marriage. However, the Alliance voted to refer the issue to a task force for further study. See Bob Allen, "Alliance of Baptists urges end to Cuba travel ban," *Associated Baptist Press*, April 20, 2009, http://www.abpnews.com/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=4009&Itemid=53 (accessed April 25, 2009).

larger conservative Baptist organizations that put great emphasis on numerical growth. However, its pro-gay positions have helped the Alliance to transform from a mostly regional body into a truly national organization as a number of “welcoming and affirming” Baptist congregations affiliated with the American Baptist Churches USA have decided to join the Alliance of Baptists community in recent years.⁵⁸

Interfaith Dialogue

For most of its history, the Alliance of Baptists’ ministry has been characterized by a deep commitment to interfaith dialogue. In addition to statements on Jewish-Christian relations and Muslim-Christian relations, interfaith dialogue is often emphasized in the Alliance’s monthly newsletter. Many congregations affiliated with the Alliance have also displayed a deep commitment to interfaith dialogue over the years. The Alliance’s passion for interfaith dialogue is consistent with the Baptist group’s mission statement which pledges to “foster relationships... with other people of faith.”⁵⁹

During the same year that the Alliance’s Board of Directors received their controversial report on human sexuality, the Alliance adopted “A Baptist Statement on Jewish-Christian Relations” in 1995 which urged “genuine dialogue with the broader Jewish community, a dialogue built on mutual respect and the integrity of each other’s faith.” The statement rejected past efforts at Jewish-Baptist dialogue that had been “reduced to a theology of conversion” and a

⁵⁸ Ibid. The congregations are located primarily in areas where there is not a strong Southern Baptist presence such as the north and west.

⁵⁹ Alliance of Baptists, “Covenant & Mission.” The Alliance of Baptists has helped facilitate this local church commitment to interfaith dialogue through its Interfaith Relations Committee which began in 1998 to produce and distribute to affiliated congregations and individuals suggested guidelines for the development of Christian-Jewish-Islamic dialogues in local church communities. See “Christian-Jewish-Islamic Dialogues,” *Connections*, October 1998, 3.

theology that “views Jewish people and Jewish nationhood merely as pieces in an eschatological chess game.” It concluded by calling upon all Baptists to seek genuine dialogue with the broader Jewish community, speak out against anti-Semitism, educate others on the history of Jewish-Christian relations, renounce interpretations of Scripture which foster prejudice against the Jewish people and affirm the teaching of the Christian Scriptures that God has not abandoned God’s covenant people.⁶⁰ The Alliance reaffirmed its commitment to dialogue with the Jewish community and improving Jewish-Christian relations with a similar statement in 2003.⁶¹

The Alliance also adopted “A Statement on Muslim-Christian Relations” in 2003. A timely document, “A Statement on Muslim-Christian Relations” came less than a year after the Rev. Jerry Vines, former president of the Southern Baptist Convention, referred to Mohammed as a “demon possessed pedophile” and the Rev. Jerry Falwell, a renowned Southern Baptist pastor, called Mohammed a “terrorist.”⁶² This historic Baptist document expressed many of the same themes of confession and repentance found in the Alliance’s statements on Jewish-Christian relations. The statement began:

As Christians in the Baptist tradition, we are the inheritors and the transmitters of a theology which largely ignored fifteen centuries of Muslim development by viewing contemporary Muslims from a monolithic perspective. This perspective belies the vibrant diversity found within the larger umbrella of the Islamic family. We have held to a theology which has valued conversion over dialogue, invective over understanding, and

⁶⁰ Alliance of Baptists, “A Baptist Statement on Christian-Jewish Relations,” March 5, 1995, <http://www.sitemason.com/files/f6GcW4/statementchristiansjews2003.pdf> (accessed April 19, 2009).

⁶¹ Alliance of Baptists, “A Statement on Jewish-Christian Relations,” April 25, 2003, <http://www.sitemason.com/files/f6GcW4/statementchristiansjews2003.pdf> (accessed April 19, 2009).

⁶² “Vines calls founder of Islam a ‘demon-possessed pedophile,’” *Biblical Recorder*, June 14, 2002, http://www.biblicalrecorder.org/content/news/2002/6_14_2002/ne140602vines.shtml (accessed April 19, 2009). See also “Muslim anger at Prophet slur,” *BBC News*, October 7, 2002, <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/americas/2304179.stm> (accessed April 19, 2009). Southern Baptist leaders voiced their support of Vines’ statement during interviews with the Associated Press. After 9/11, evangelist Franklin Graham, the son of renowned Southern Baptist evangelist Billy Graham, referred to Islam as an “evil and wicked religion.” See “Franklin Graham: Islam Still Evil,” *The Associated Press*, http://cbs11tv.com/watercooler/Franklin_Graham_Islam.2.265296.html (accessed April 19, 2009).

prejudice over knowledge; a theology which does not acknowledge the vibrancy, vitality, and differences of the Muslim faith.⁶³

In this document, the Alliance called on Christians and Muslims to work together for the oppressed in areas of common concern such as racial and social justice, human rights, religious freedom, environmental stewardship and resolving national and international conflicts.⁶⁴

Committed to dialogue and establishing a better relationship between Baptists and Muslims, Alliance leader Stan Hasteley participated in a dialogue in 2009 with several dozen Baptist and Muslim leaders from across the United States. The purpose of the dialogue, according to one news report, was to “repair a relationship better known for harsh anti-Islamic rhetoric by high-profile Baptist preachers than by dialogue or cooperation.” As a member of the event’s Baptist-Muslim task force, Hasteley helped plan the dialogue.⁶⁵ Other Alliance members such as Welton Gaddy, Executive-Director of The Interfaith Alliance, have been extremely active in facilitating and participating in interfaith dialogue.

Ecumenical Cooperation

From its inception in 1987, the Alliance of Baptists has strongly emphasized the importance and necessity of ecumenical cooperation with other Christian denominations and organizations. In its organizational Covenant, authored and affirmed in 1986-1987, the Alliance expressed a commitment to “the larger body of Jesus Christ, expressed in various Christian traditions, and to a cooperation with believers everywhere in giving full expression to the

⁶³ Alliance of Baptists, “A Statement on Muslim-Christian Relations,” April 25, 2003, http://www.sitemason.com/files/gcm6Ck/statementchristians_muslims03.pdf (accessed April 19, 2009).

⁶⁴ Ibid.

⁶⁵ Bob Allen, “Baptists, Muslims say dialogue a step in right direction,” *Associated Baptist Press*, January 12, 2009, http://www.abpnews.com/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=3772&Itemid=53 (accessed April 19, 2009).

Gospel.”⁶⁶ This rather unique commitment to ecumenism by a Baptist organization with southern roots was on display in the early 1990s when the Alliance entered into a relationship with the 2.5 million member Progressive National Baptist Convention. One result of this relationship was a joint worship service between the two organizations in 1995. Since its founding years, the Alliance has also been in cooperation and formal dialogue with other Baptist organizations such as the American Baptist Churches USA and the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship.⁶⁷

The Alliance gave full expression to its stated commitment to ecumenism in 1998 when its Board of Directors voted to explore formalizing the Alliance’s relationship with the National Council of the Churches of Christ in the USA (NCC). Long the leading force of the Christian ecumenical movement in the United States, the NCC is a fellowship of 35 Christian groups that comprise over 45 million Christian believers.⁶⁸ Speaking before the General Assembly of the NCC in 1999, Hasteley noted that “We Baptists in the South have isolated ourselves from the rest of the church for far too long. Today marks a milepost of significance for us that I can scarcely exaggerate. With great thanksgiving, we offer ourselves to you.”⁶⁹ The Alliance’s three-year quest for membership into the NCC culminated in 2000 when they were received as the 36th member communion of the NCC by a unanimous vote.⁷⁰

⁶⁶ Alliance of Baptists, “Covenant and Mission.”

⁶⁷ “Baptist Dialogue,” *Christian Century*, September 4, 1991, 801. Due to an initiative of the Ministers and Missionaries Benefit Board of the American Baptist Churches USA, Alliance-affiliated churches are eligible for participation in that agency’s retirement program. See also Stan Hasteley, “Perspectives,” *Connections*, May 2001, 1. The Alliance has collaborated with the CBF in the placement of pastors in moderate and progressive Baptist churches. See also Stan Hasteley, “The Alliance and CBF: Setting the record straight,” *Connections*, September 2002, 3.

⁶⁸ Stan Hasteley, “Perspectives” *Connections*, May 1998, 3.

⁶⁹ “Alliance Certified for NCCC Membership,” *Connections*, December 1999, 1.

⁷⁰ “Alliance accepted into National Council of the Churches of Christ,” *Connections*, December 2000, 1.

The Alliance waded deeper into the waters of ecumenism in 1999 when it authorized the establishment of a formal dialogue with the United Church of Christ, a liberal mainline Protestant denomination with 1.2 million members. Hasteley explained, “The dialogue with the UCC gives us in the Alliance a chance to live up to our commitment to ecumenism.”⁷¹ At the 2001 Convocation, Alliance members approved a resolution affirming an ecumenical partnership with the UCC.⁷² In his monthly column, Hasteley noted that this new relationship between the UCC and the Alliance was not an ecumenical experiment. Instead, the relationship was the product of a grassroots effort by individuals affiliated with the Alliance who were already working with individuals from the United Church of Christ in their local communities to start new churches and rebuild existing churches. Due to the ecclesial and theological similarities between the two groups, Hasteley emphasized that such a relationship was needed because the number of seminarians affiliated with the Alliance exceeded the number of available ministry positions in Alliance congregations.⁷³ Finally, at their 2003 Convocation, the Alliance approved a proposed ecumenical agreement with the United Church of Christ and the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ). By adopting this agreement, the Alliance committed itself to an “ecumenical relationship of deepening friendship, continuing dialogue, and joint public witness.”⁷⁴

⁷¹ “UCC wants to keep talking: Two-year dialogue with the Alliance approved by Synod,” *Connections*, August 1999, 1.

⁷² “UCC partnership approved easily but other issues draw lengthy debate,” *Connections*, May 2001, 1.

⁷³ Stan Hasteley, “Perspectives,” *Connections*, September 2001, 3. One such example of grassroots ecumenism includes a Florida congregation that was formed from the merger of a Baptist church and a UCC church. See Adelle M. Banks, “Alliance forges ties with UCC, Disciples,” *Baptists Today*, June 2003, 10.

⁷⁴ Alliance of Baptists, “Ecumenical Agreement between the Alliance of Baptists, United Church of Christ, and The Christian Church (Disciples of Christ),” April 25, 2003, [http://www.sitemason.com/files/hi20iA/statementecumenial agreementwithUCC2003.pdf](http://www.sitemason.com/files/hi20iA/statementecumenial%20agreementwithUCC2003.pdf) (accessed April 19, 2009).

Missions Partnerships

In its brief history of just over two decades, the Alliance of Baptists has entered into several missions partnerships with other Baptist groups across the globe. According to Executive-Director Stan Hastey, these partnerships were the “direct result of the retrogressive policies of the new Southern Baptist Convention. These policies, characterized by an obsession for authority and control, amount to a headlong rush back to the colonialistic and paternalistic policies of the 19th century.”⁷⁵ In Hastey’s view, the Alliance has sought to foster partnerships with international Baptist bodies characterized by “genuine mutuality.” Several years ago, Hastey explained the Alliance’s model, adopted in 1991, for missions partnerships:

The model works from the simple yet essential premise that indigenous leadership is to be nurtured, that missionary personnel soon will be out of a job or sent on to train new leaders elsewhere. It is a model that recognizes the transparent truth that indigenous people are better evangelists, better church starters, better pastors, better teachers and better administrators than are their North American colleagues and counterparts. This is a model we have sought to emulate in the Alliance, only without any missionary personnel in the equation. What we have done a bit differently, of necessity to be sure, but also by design, is to seek partners who from the beginning control things on the ground. What we do is provide the means, modest though they are, for our partners to set their own priorities, adopt their own methods, and then inform us how best we can participate.⁷⁶

Though Hastey has conceded that the Alliance of Baptists was not the first Christian group to adopt this missions model, it is worth noting that very recently two other Baptist missions organizations have taken steps toward the implementation of a similar missional model. Rob Nash, Global Missions Coordinator of the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship, unveiled a comparable missions strategy for the CBF in 2007. The CBF’s new global missions strategy

⁷⁵ Stan Hastey, “A Looming Crisis,” *Connections*, October 2003, 3.

⁷⁶ *Ibid.*

puts a primary focus on fostering partnerships between congregations in America with other Baptist congregations around the world for the purposes of missions and evangelism.⁷⁷ The International Mission Board of the Southern Baptist Convention announced in 2008 that it would focus more on local churches' involvement in missions. Although, according to IMB President Jerry Rankin, the SBC's main priority would continue to be the sending of Southern Baptist missionaries to evangelize indigenous peoples in other countries.⁷⁸

The Alliance launched its first major missions initiative in 1991 when a formal partnership was forged with the Fraternity of Baptist Churches of Cuba. The Fraternity is a fellowship of Baptist congregations formed in 1989. The Baptist Convention of Western Cuba – an organization supported by the Foreign Mission Board of the Southern Baptist Convention – ousted the Fraternity's founding churches due to their support of women's ordination and rejection of the convention's strong anti-Castro stance. A small progressive Baptist body, the Fraternity includes thirty-one congregations with a combined membership of around 3,000.⁷⁹ Through this missions partnership, the Alliance and the Fraternity have co-sponsored a multitude of projects and events since 1991. In those years, the Alliance has also facilitated the formation of over two-dozen congregational partnerships between Alliance-affiliated and Fraternity-affiliated churches.⁸⁰

⁷⁷ Patricia Heys, "Nash to unveil new CBF Global Missions Strategy," *Biblical Recorder*, June 18, 2007, http://www.biblicalrecorder.org/content/news/2007/06_18_2007/ne180607nash.shtml (accessed April 22, 2009).

⁷⁸ Vicki Brown, "IMB retooling to focus agency on local-church mission work," *Associated Baptist Press*, September 23, 2008, http://www.abpnews.com/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=3535&Itemid=104 (accessed April 22, 2009).

⁷⁹ Bob Allen, "Alliance of Baptists has niche on left, Hasteley tells Convocation," *Baptists Today*, March 24, 1994, 3. See also Baptist World Alliance, "Member Bodies and Statistics," <http://www.bwanet.org/default.aspx?pid=437> (accessed April 20, 2009).

⁸⁰ Alliance of Baptists, "History."

With the exception of 2008, the Alliance has adopted a resolution on Cuba at each of its annual Convocation's since 2001. In 2001, the Alliance reiterated its "continuing solidarity with our brothers and sisters in Cuba in their ongoing struggle with the effects of the political and economic isolation imposed on their country by the policies of the United States of America for the past four decades."⁸¹ The Alliance followed their 2001 statement up with a statement in 2002 calling upon Congress and President Bush to allow the unrestricted sale of food and medicine to Cuba with private financing and to eliminate the ban on travel to Cuba by most United States citizens.⁸² Renewing their commitment to the normalization of relations between the United States and Cuba, the Alliance adopted similar statements in 2003, 2004, and 2005.⁸³ The Alliance's 2006 statement on Cuba decried new restrictive policies issued by the Department of the Treasury that severely limited the issuances of licenses to religious groups to travel to Cuba for humanitarian purposes.⁸⁴ At their 2009 Convocation the Alliance changed their tone towards the federal government and applauded President Obama for loosening restrictions on American's travel to Cuba. However, the Alliance urged both President Obama and Congress to make further reforms towards a normalization of relations between the United States and Cuba.⁸⁵

⁸¹ Alliance of Baptists, "A Statement on Cuba," April 21, 2001, <http://www.sitemason.com/files/lxY0so/statementcuba01.pdf> (accessed April 20, 2009).

⁸² Alliance of Baptists, "A Statement on Cuba," April 6, 2002, <http://www.sitemason.com/files/ksi6M8/statementcuba02.pdf> (accessed April 20, 2009).

⁸³ Alliance of Baptists, "Statement on Cuba," April 25, 2003, <http://www.sitemason.com/files/bPEvTi/StatementCuba03.pdf> (accessed April 20, 2009). See also Alliance of Baptists, "A Statement on U.S. – Cuba Relations," April 17, 2004, <http://www.sitemason.com/files/cVkpzy/statementcuba04.pdf> (accessed April 20, 2009). See also Alliance of Baptists, "A Statement of Solidarity with our International Partners," April 2, 2005, <http://www.sitemason.com/files/g5Aw36/statementintpartners2005.pdf> (accessed April 20, 2009).

⁸⁴ Alliance of Baptists, "A Statement on Travel Restrictions Between the United States and Cuba," April 22, 2006, <http://www.sitemason.com/files/dUeIGA/statementcuba06.pdf> (accessed April 20, 2009).

⁸⁵ Bob Allen, "Alliance of Baptists urges end to Cuba travel ban," *Associated Baptist Press*, http://www.abpnews.com/in dex.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=4009&Itemid=53 (accessed April 21, 2009).

The Alliance also has established partnerships for missions purposes with the Baptist Convention of Zimbabwe (BCZ) and the Sri Lanka Baptist Association (SLBA). In 1998, the Alliance accepted an invitation from the BCZ to enter into a formal partnership.⁸⁶ For three years prior to that invitation, the Alliance had served as a financial supporter of the Baptist Theological Seminary of Zimbabwe. As partners with the BCZ, the Alliance has continued to support the seminary. The Alliance has also facilitated partnerships between Alliance congregations and congregations in Zimbabwe as part of their effort to fight the HIV/AIDS epidemic that has plagued the African country.⁸⁷

The Alliance entered into a similar partnership with the Sri Lanka Baptist Association in 2003.⁸⁸ In the wake of the deadly 2004 tsunami, the Alliance has worked towards providing that impoverished country with relief. The Alliance has also lobbied the United States government and international lending institutions to forgive the debts of Sri Lanka in “the interest of addressing its immediate and overwhelming needs to rebuild communities and care for its poorest citizens.” In addition to working with the SLBA and other ecumenical partners to deal with increasing violence against Christians, the Alliance has helped facilitate partnerships between its own congregations and SLBA congregations.⁸⁹

A Genealogy of Dissent: Concluding Thoughts

In *A Genealogy of Dissent: Southern Baptist Protest in the 20th Century*, historian David Stricklin reveals and examines the long-existing progressive wing of Southern Baptist life. Through his research, consisting mostly of primary sources and oral history interviews, Stricklin

⁸⁶ Alliance of Baptists, “History.”

⁸⁷ Alliance of Baptists, “A Statement of Solidarity with our International Partners,” April 2, 2005, <http://www.sitemason.com/files/g5Aw36/statementintpartners2005.pdf> (accessed April 22, 2009).

⁸⁸ Alliance of Baptists, “History.”

⁸⁹ Alliance of Baptists, “A Statement on Solidarity with our International Partners.”

uncovers a rich heritage of progressive dissent during the 20th century. Stricklin begins his study with a discussion of the deep historic roots of dissent in colonial Baptist life against state-established religion. Despite the radical roots of the Baptist tradition, Stricklin notes that Southern Baptists, for most of their history, have been held captive to their southern culture. As archetypal southerners, 20th century Southern Baptists had become “racially and sexually hierarchical, suspicious of modern viewpoints, complacent about the exploitation of the economically disadvantaged, militaristic, nationalistic, and generally hostile toward the reformist (and northern) social gospel.”⁹⁰ However, Stricklin argues that a “genealogy of dissent,” a small faction of Southern Baptist individuals, rebuffed their culture’s values, refusing to be, as Rufus Spain once wrote, “at ease in Zion.”⁹¹

These dissenters functioned in many ways like a family. The spiritual father of this progressive-minded family was Walter Nathan Johnson, a radical North Carolina Baptist and pioneer racial integrationist who created a network of supporters and sympathizers from the 1920s through the 1940s. From this “genealogy of dissent came civil rights advocates, labor organizers, peace activists, and advocates of equal political and economic rights for women in society and for equal vocational opportunities within churches and denominational organizations and institutions.” According to Stricklin, the thought of Johnson trickled down this family tree of dissenters to influence even those who had never heard his name.⁹²

The Alliance of Baptists represents the continuation of this “genealogy of dissent” in late 20th century and 21st century Baptist life. Alliance members and Alliance-affiliated congregations are the heirs of radical Baptist dissenters like Clarence Jordan, Will Campbell and

⁹⁰ Stricklin, 11.

⁹¹ *Ibid.*, 19.

⁹² *Ibid.*, 11.

Martha Gilmore who all believed that peace and justice were at the heart of the Gospel of Jesus Christ. Continuing in the footsteps of their fellow Baptist dissenters who were staunch racial integrationists, the Alliance of Baptists recognized immediately that better relations with African-Americans, Jews, Muslims and the broader Christian community would not occur without intentional dialogue. As shown from their past statements and actions, the Alliance believed that dialogue must be preceded by a display of public repentance for past sins. With their words and actions, the Alliance paved the way for other Baptist organizations to connect with Baptists of color, Christians of other denominations, and people of other faiths. According to sociologist Nancy Ammerman, “The Alliance’s place on the left has created more spaces for other Baptist groups to leave old traditions behind.”⁹³

Like individuals and congregations from this “genealogy of dissent,” the Alliance of Baptists did not shy from taking controversial positions. For their predecessors, the issue of racial equality was a priority. Baptist dissenters such as Clarence Jordan and Martin England devoted their lives to fighting for the equality of all races and against racial discrimination in society and in the church. Similarly, the Alliance of Baptists has devoted much time and effort to fighting for equality for heterosexual and homosexual alike in both society and in church life. Thus, the Alliance of Baptists became the first Baptist organization to come out in favor of “marriage equality” or extending the right to civil marriage to homosexual couples.

Progressive, former Southern Baptists built upon Walter Johnson’s loose network of Baptist dissenters and built an organization, Alliance of Baptists, which was devoid of the bloated bureaucracy that has characterized the Southern Baptist Convention and so many Baptist state conventions. Like Johnson’s network of Baptist dissenters, the Alliance of Baptists has

⁹³ John Pierce, “Alliance of Baptists still living on edge after 20 years of work,” *Baptists Today*, April 2007, 8-9.

served for over 20 years to connect together progressive Baptist individuals and congregations from across the country. The Alliance of Baptists has served primarily as a facilitator for interfaith dialogue, ecumenical cooperation, and congregation-to-congregation international missions partnerships. However, the Alliance has also served as a loud, national voice for progressive Baptist individuals and churches. In addition to being an aggressive advocate on behalf of gay rights, the Alliance has also advocated for a change in foreign policy between the United States and communist Cuba. This is a position that no other Baptist organization in the United States has been willing to publicly take for fear of being dubbed as sympathetic to the Castro regime. Even organizations with missionaries in Cuba have stayed on the sidelines in these debates.

Also like the progressive Baptists that comprised the “genealogy of dissent,” Alliance members and affiliated congregations have often been marginalized and alienated by those from the Baptist mainstream. At least a few Baptist historians believe that the Alliance does not have a role to play in current Baptist life. The Alliance of Baptists receives little attention by moderate Baptist publications. As previously noted, the Alliance’s historic decision to support same-sex civil marriage apparently was not considered worthy enough to receive a full-length article by one popular Baptist publication funded by moderates. Nonetheless, a survey of the Alliance’s monthly newsletter reveals that more than a few prominent moderate Baptist pastors and leaders are in fact individual members of the Alliance of Baptists. Further, very little has been written about the Alliance of Baptists in books and journal articles. One can easily conclude that in the context of Baptist history, the Alliance of Baptists has been all but forgotten. History demonstrates that there has always been an enormous amount of theological and political diversity among those who identify as Baptist. Well-known Baptist historian Bill

Leonard has argued that there are different "ways" of "being Baptist." In order to more fully explore this diversity and rich genealogy of Baptist dissent, the contributions to Baptist life and American culture by the Alliance of Baptists should be recovered by future Baptist historians.

However, it is understandable why Baptist publications have paid greater attention to centrist groups such as the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship. Homosexuality is an issue that has torn apart many churches including a number of Baptist churches. In fact, most Alliance-affiliated congregations did not become "welcoming and affirming" without paying a price. As Stan Hastey has noted, the Alliance's position on homosexuality has severely limited their numerical growth and potential for new growth. Other Baptist organizations have worked hard to avoid another controversy. Baptist groups such as the CBF have chosen to leave the issue of homosexuality in the hands of the local churches instead of making an organizational pronouncement during an increasingly post-denominational period of time that is witnessing the gradual decline of the Baptist brand. Ironically, organizers of the 2008 New Baptist Covenant Celebration which was an effort to unite a diverse group of Baptists from across America, concluded that efforts aimed at racial unity at this historic Baptist event would fail if the subject of sexual orientation was addressed. Thus, pro-gay Baptist organizations such as the Alliance of Baptists were not allowed to participate in the event in an official capacity.⁹⁴ Undoubtedly, homosexuality is one of the most divisive issues in Baptist life and will continue to be divisive in the foreseeable future. Despite the divisiveness of this issue, Baptist historians should be careful not to neglect the Alliance for their contributions on behalf of equality, ecumenism, interfaith dialogue and innovative missions work and for their rightful place among 20th century Baptist dissenters and their "genealogy of dissent."

⁹⁴ Hannah Elliot, "Post-Covenant criticism comes from left, right," *Associated Baptist Press*, February 19, 2008, http://www.abpnews.com/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=3151&Itemid=121 (accessed April 22, 2009).

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