

ACTING EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR REPORT TO THE SENATE

AUGUST 2009

DR. JOE KUTTER

First, I want to thank you for the honor of serving Christ and his Church in this way. You have unfailingly been gracious and hospitable to me as I have attempted to fulfill the assignment that has been given to me as the Acting Executive Director of the American Baptist Ministers Council.

Let me say that the American Baptist Ministers Council is alive and well. There are clouds on the horizon for which we must prepare but we have the capacity to make that preparation.

The biggest cloud is that Lilly funding will come to an end in three years and we do not now have a replacement for that money. We have, however started a process to address the issue.

First, given the transition within the Ministers Council from Kate Harvey to me, it seems necessary to engage in the process of building relationships. That necessity has been exacerbated by the fall-out from the controversies that have so strongly affected our life together. So I have invested significant time in calling and visiting with our constituent councils. I have been to annual meetings, retreats, executive committee meetings and special meetings called just for the purpose of spending time together. And I must say, with gratitude, that even among regions disaffected by our disagreements, I have been warmly received.

Second, we need to put in place a strategic planning process that includes a strong fund-raising component. Key leaders in our denomination have agreed to serve in this capacity if this body agrees to move forward in this way.

Third, the vitality of the Ministers Council, both the constituent councils and the national body depends on the quality of our leadership. Here we are doing two things.

1. I am asking you, the Senators to come to a new understanding of your role here. You are the Board of Directors. You are the primary stewards of The American Baptist Ministers Council. More than anybody else, the Ministers Council belongs to you. To honor your responsibilities, I have possibly told you more about my activities each month, in a monthly report, than you really wanted to know. The reason – I am accountable to you through the Executive Committee. You have a right and a responsibility to know.
2. To enhance the capacity of leadership within our constituent councils, we are now offering workshops designed to strengthen our constituent councils using insights of “Community of Practice” literature and leaders. I’ll not rehearse the Community of Practice material here, but I will say that I want to be invited to conduct a workshop with your leaders and members in the next two years. And I will be aggressive in asking to be invited.

All of this fits my vision for the Ministers Council. As I see it, the effectiveness of the American Baptist Ministers Council is in large part measured by the effectiveness of our constituent councils.

Let me make the case: The heart of our mission statement says something like this: We covenant together first to deepen our spiritual journeys and second, to increase our effectiveness as leaders in Christ’s church. Three observations: the word covenant implies community. Our vision is to become a community of ministerial leaders. Community has its best chance of being realized at the constituent level. Second, the purposes of our community are to deepen our spiritual journeys and to increase our effectiveness as leaders. All of that happens best locally. Most of our colleagues will experience Ministers Council only through their experiences at home.

As great as our experience with Leonard Sweet was in Pasadena, most of our colleagues were not able to see him there. As wonderful as the “Together in the Lord” conference will be in Orlando, even

with a really good attendance, most of our colleagues will not be there. For most of our colleagues, if it doesn't happen locally, it doesn't happen.

Does that exclude our national witness, our national advocacy for ministerial leaders? Of course not! And every chance we have, we make our case. But as rarefied as the air of the national environment can sometimes be, and sometimes that air is a little polluted, we must never be distracted from attending to the local council. It is there that most of our colleagues will experience an effective community of ministerial leaders who, together, are deepening their spiritual journeys and increasing their ministerial effectiveness.

About the constituent councils: I have been shocked at the vitality of some. Some have exceeded my most optimistic expectations. And others? Let's say that they have not exceeded my expectations. They have not even threatened to brush up against those expectations. Some are remarkably strong. Some have nearly died. And most of our councils are rolling along pretty well.

Among our constituents, our primary challenge is to build a sense of identity. One lady, whom I have known for a dozen years, introduced me to a friend. "This is Joe Kutter. He was a pastor but now he is doing something with" then she looked at me, "is it the Ministers Council?" As I was nodding, she said, "Whatever that is. What is it Joe? What are you doing? What is the Ministers Council?"

Identity is an issue that we must forever address. With our publications and visits and workshops, we are working at it but we need your help. You need to have a response to the questions of identity and purpose. We are ministerial leaders who covenant together to deepen our spiritual journeys and to increase our effectiveness as leaders in Christ's church. It all starts there.

Let me conclude with a word or two about the distinctive nature of this community of ministerial leaders into which we have been called.

We are a community of priests. That is the way we live and that is the way we are experienced by those whom we serve. The priest is the one who stands in the gap between God and humanity. The word, etymologically, has to do with bridges and bridge building. The priest is the bridge that connects God and God's people.

I know, our high priest is Jesus Christ and none other is needed and I believe that with all of my heart. But that is not the way we live. And I know and celebrate the Priesthood of Believers but I also know that our way of being, ministerial leaders, being priests is a little different from most of the laity. While we are in no way spiritually superior, we are functionally distinctive.

As a worship leader, look at the way that you function. At one point in the service, you will likely lead a thing called "The Pastoral Prayer" or "The Morning Prayer." In one tradition, it was called "The Protracted Prayer" because it was long. And what are you doing in this prayer? You are gathering the concerns and celebrations of the people in your care together and offering them to God. You are the people's spokesperson to God and that is a very priestly thing to do and a priestly thing to be.

Now move to another part of the service. You take your Bible and you say to the people, "Thus says the Lord." Now you are God's spokesperson to God's people. Speaking for God, how audacious is that? But that is what you do and it is a very priestly thing to do and to be.

In one moment, you are the voice of the people to God and in another moment, you are the voice of God to the people. You are the bridge. You are the priest.

Has something like this happened to you? It's three in the morning and you get a call. Somebody has died and they want you to come to the home – now. Your relationship may be very casual but it's you they called. Why? They want a priest. You are the one to speak their heartbreak to God in prayer and you are the one to remind them of God's grace in the midst of this tragedy.

The baby was born in the morning and in the afternoon you visit, just like a member of the family. You are not a member of the family and your relationship may indeed be casual but you go. And the parents invite you to hold their baby. Why? You are their priest. You represent God's grace for that child and you voice their hopes and prayers to God. You are the bridge. You are the priest.

Why are you invited to the hospital rooms and weddings and the nursing homes and anniversary celebrations, and the hospice centers and even, once in a while, to the morgue? You are the priest.

And that changes the way that people look at you. It changes the way that people relate to you, doesn't it? You know that, don't you? Oh, they know that you are a mere mortal. But when you have buried their parents and baptized their children and preached from Holy Scripture, and stood by them in the hospital or morgue, they see you differently. And the way that they see you frequently gets in the way of their ability to be a priest to you. It's not that they don't love you. They do. They just don't know what to do with you! And they really don't know what to do with you when you need your own bridge to span the gap between God and you.

Now the question is, who "priests" the priest? Who stands in the gap for you? I know it's Jesus but Jesus has called his disciples to stand in for him in a physical and personal way.

So this is my prayer for us. My prayer is that we can become a community of priests and within this community; we can be priests to one another. As Christians, as little Christs, as Jesus' reps, we can bridge the gaps for one another and with one another. This is precisely what happens when we covenant together to deepen our spiritual journeys and to increase our effectiveness as ministerial leaders.

Do we have a problem? Yes and it's a big one. Most of us were not taught to do ministry in this way. We were taught to learn by isolating ourselves with books and papers and writing instruments and then to emerge from that isolation to perform on a test in a class. Learning was largely a solitary and individual matter.

To preach, we first disappeared into the study. To teach, we first prepared in the study. To counsel, we went created a private and safe place. Only later did we put windows in the doors. To pray, we went to our closet. We were the designated church visitors to hospitals and homes and we usually go alone. The ministry was ours and ours alone even though we paid lip service to the notion of the priesthood of believers.

We have this congregational polity, which I strongly believe. So we became absorbed with our own congregation, perhaps thinking of the other congregations and pastors as competitors. Truth is that our biggest Sunday morning competitors are IHOP and Perkins Pancakes. But we learned to think of ourselves as living and working in splendid isolation in isolated autonomous congregations.

We became competitive. Have you ever counted "evangelistically"? I know that we were invited to become fishers of men and women but I've heard some Sunday morning counts that would make a fisherman blush. And it's isolating.

And then we entered our season of conflict. Who wants to be a part of a community whose second name is "Fight Club". On the one hand, some of us just don't like fighting and others among us can not believe that somebody who disagrees with us just may be another of God's priests. And, some of us fear that if we listen to the mistaken or the heretics, then the purity of our own faith may be threatened and we surely don't want that. So we isolate ourselves and the community of Priests doesn't happen.

Dear hearts and gentle friends, it's time to get over it. The one person who is most likely to be your priest is the one who understands the life you live, the priestly life that you live even if he or she is wrong about some important theological matters. It is time to get serious again about our place in the community of ministerial leaders.

The last I heard, instead of giving individual tutorials to the disciples, Jesus called them into a community of learners and that community of twelve became the forbearer of both the church and the community of ministerial leaders to which we belong.

What a magnificent call we have!

We are called to speak to God in behalf of those entrusted into our care.

We are called to speak the word of God to God's people.

We are called to proclaim the good news that Jesus Christ is Lord

To proclaim that sin is forgiven and brokenness is healed

We are called to announce the good news to every one of God's children, "You are my beloved child."

Called to declare that Evil will be overcome and the goodness of God will prevail.

We are called to stand with God's people in moments of ecstatic joy and in seasons of heart-wrenching despair.

To this ministry, we are called.

We are called to declare that in Christ, crucifixion has been defeated by resurrection and death will never again have the last word.

We are called to the Body of Christ, to be leaders in the body of Christ,

We are called to a holy priesthood

Thanks be to God, we have been called to this magnificent life.

Amen.