

Bylaws/Standing Rules Changes  
Statements of Concern and Public Witness Statements  
6.18.2016

**Baptist Talk**

Growing up as a rather physically small person and Chinese American in Boston, I was often picked on and my teachers would say, "Sticks and stones may break my bones but words never hurt me." I never took what someone said about me too seriously.

My mother being a survivor in a foreign land and a proud matriarch would wisely advise me that I may have thoughts in my head but once I say them publicly, she said, "You can never take the words back." I'm often the last to speak.

Some of us here are old enough to remember that the old bylaws that guided the General Board produced policy statements, resolutions, issues of importance, statements of concern, and public witness statements. These statements reflected the Baptist thoughts of those times. While these adopted statements continue to be a part of our history, our present bylaws and standing rules provide no allowance for new ones. As we all know, we have been hurt so much over these statements that we don't want to be hurt again. It only takes that one time to touch a hot stove to know you won't do it again.

But for the past 4½ years, some of us have been wondering if we may have "thrown out the baby with the bath water." Have we become so afraid of our own shadows?

Last Sunday's horrific terrorism in an Orlando nightclub is an example of casting light on who and what we may be today. It is good that we have offered up prayers for the victims and their families—we must at least do that. But I do wonder when we may have conversations about gun control and gun owners' rights or immigration reform or the diverse face of Americans today or the persistent racial divide or economic inequities or even the topic of homosexuality. I know that we have blazed new trails on Baptist/Muslim dialogue; but can we do more?

Please know that I am not supporting Donald Trump's combative speak here even if he shares my name! My mother would be appalled by what he says.

As Baptists who hold the beliefs of soul liberty and the priesthood of all believers under the guidance of the Holy Spirit in a community of believers, I wonder if we may identify a place in our Baptist life together that the new normal is being in a place we may call, "Baptist Talk."

Last September, the Rocky Mountains region's annual meeting theme was "Dangerous Dreams/Dangerous Conversations." Steve Van Ostran led the region to discuss racial prejudice and human sexuality. In August, the Massachusetts Baptist

Multicultural Ministries and ABHMS will be sponsoring a conference entitled, "Bold Conversations and Prophetic Witnesses." They too will be addressing controversial topics facing our churches and faith today.

I wonder if it's possible for Baptists to engage in conversations with an attitude and behavior that are not like the rest of the society. Can we Baptists talk together without getting all polarized and hurtful? I think that after practicing "mission table conversations" in the past two biennial mission summits and the countless table conversations that have taken place around the country that we may be standing at the threshold when we have the skill set to talk again.

In our board retreat these past two days, we have made a significant attempt to talk together over the place of joy, grief, hope and commitment as persons in our various ministries of service as well as participating members of BGM. We acknowledged that we each bring a particular and perhaps a unique voice to this Body of Christ and started to respect and honor these diverse perspectives in the making of the whole. I would like to propose that we are beginning to have a clearer grasp of what it is like to live into God's unfolding kingdom on earth as we know is already in heaven.

For the matter of discussion, let's call this "Baptist Talk." Whenever we might want to have a conversation about anything especially that which is highly charged and divisive, we can clear the air and say, "We are going to have a 'Baptist Talk.'" This means that we can have heart-to-heart conversations without getting a heart attack. It means we can take the outside hallway conversations back into the meeting room conversation. It means that we can talk about issues with fellow board members and other Christian brothers and sisters and not just with our own family members or tribes.

I believe that our high regard for our human ability to maintain mutual respect and decency would prevent us from total chaos. We would continue to speak out of civility and for the commonweal. There won't be any sticks and stones and we know that the words that we might speak would never hurt us. And in the end, we would have also reclaimed that "baby we threw out with the bath water" because we would have granted one another the ability to have "Baptist Talk" again.

The BGM Executive Committee would invite a task force to review our current bylaws and standing rules for the purpose of possibly incorporating the idea of "Baptist Talk" to be a part of our life together. We would need to identify guidelines to frame our "Baptist Talks" perhaps like the way we had our facilitators guided our small group conversations using the stones, stickers and confetti. With a commitment to be here, anticipating the possibility of joy, acknowledging the presence of grief, we may have hope for the world and for a people call, "American Baptists."

Don Ng (6.18.2016)