

# AMERICAN BAPTIST CHURCHES OF RHODE ISLAND

## COVENANT OF RELATIONSHIPS

### THE PREAMBLE

#### INTRODUCTION

This Covenant of Relationships outlines basic areas in which autonomous local congregations relate to their sister churches in the association we call "ABCORI." It also gives shape to the adopted organizational structure that is entrusted with carrying out the association's purposes.

This Covenant is not to be seen as a strict set of rules to determine every possible aspect of a relationship. Rather, it is a Covenant about a *relationship between churches*, within which the partners have room to grow and contribute their own unique strengths and gifts. It is in that spirit that this Covenant of Relationships is offered, and it is hoped that in that spirit it will be accepted so that we may grow in our common mission as followers of Jesus Christ.

#### ABCORI AND ITS INFRASTRUCTURE

As Baptists, we affirm the worth, integrity, and autonomy of the local congregation as a true church and community of faith. We also recognize that it is important for each local church to voluntarily associate with other congregations, for a broader sense of identity and a unity that provides a greater Baptist witness in the world. When this happens, these churches become accountable to support and encourage the health of their sister congregations, and maintain an infrastructure that enables this partnership of churches to carry out its purposes.

**The American Baptist Churches of Rhode Island (ABCORI), then, is an association of autonomous American Baptist congregations in relationship with each other.**

**The purpose of this association is to carry out a more influential Baptist witness in the world through healthy congregations that are united in identity and strength.**

#### BENEFITS TO THE LOCAL CHURCH

There are several advantages that a relationship with other congregations creates for the local church.

1. By associating with sister congregations, especially within our American Baptist movement, the local church has a **broader identity** than it would have by itself. The ABCORI and ABCUSA distinctiveness enhances the uniqueness of each participating congregation.
2. Associating with sister churches reminds the local congregation that its church, no matter how small or large, is **not isolated from others**. The implied accountability that comes with these relationships means that other congregations will be renewing the strength of each church, and that each church has a role in supporting sister congregations when they have that need.
3. The association **broadens the theological perspective of the local church**. Its theological, cultural, social, and biblical understandings are naturally stretched in a way that builds *unity from diversity* rather than *uniformity*.
4. An association provides opportunities for *worship, fellowship, training, and mutual support* that are greater than an individual congregation can offer. That is, the local community of faith is enlarged **in the ways we practice our faith**.
5. Because of pooled resources from churches and individuals, programs and services can be provided that are possible only because these churches have covenanted together. Thus, each participating church has **access to services, programs, and ministries** that are offered by the ABCORI infrastructure and staff. These benefits include supportive visits by ABCORI representatives, events and ministries planned for individual churches or clusters of churches, help in locating competent interim and pastoral leadership, scholarship aid for campers, opportunities for churches to pool their financial resources for expanded investment possibilities, and provide the opportunity for property protection. Further, local church members, Boards, and Committees have access to the ABCORI-owned Canonicus property, continuing education events for pastors and lay leaders, inter-church or regional mission trips, joint VBS ventures, other training or inspirational programs, and care for our pastors and their families, including the opportunity of full participation in the American Baptist retirement program.
6. By joining forces with other churches, the local congregation has a more profound **Baptist witness in the world** than one church can have by itself. In association, the local church is able to more adequately fulfill the Great Commission and advance the kingdom of God into the world.

#### RESPONSIBILITIES OF EACH PARTICIPATING CONGREGATION:

There are expectations that covenanting churches have of one another:

##### A. TO THE OTHER CHURCHES

Because ABCORI indicates a *relationship between churches*, the participating congregations covenant with each other to:

1. Be a strengthening fellowship by encouraging and supporting sister churches,
2. Communicate with other covenanting congregations in times of joy and grief,
3. Work cooperatively to strengthen one another in witness, ministry, and mission, and

4. Be in prayer for and with one another.

#### **B. TO MAINTAIN AN APPROPRIATE INFRASTRUCTURE**

Covenanting churches can expect ABCORI's elected, appointed, and employed leadership and volunteers to carry out the purposes of the association. To enable this to happen, participating congregations covenant to:

1. Accept the stated purposes of ABCORI,
2. Provide responsible financial support for the corporate work of the association,
3. Welcome opportunities for fellowship among churches and consultation with the staff and officers of ABCORI,
4. Take an active part in the work of ABCORI through delegate and voluntary representation,
5. Participate in ABCORI-offered programs and resources that are relevant to the local church, and
6. Give full consideration to ABCUSA educational and missionary materials and missionary visits.

#### **RESPONSIBILITY OF ABCORI LEADERSHIP TO ITS CHURCHES**

ABCORI is an organizational infrastructure with elected leaders and appropriate staff. It has been formed to enable the association to function effectively and efficiently. For this reason, the *leaders and staff* of ABCORI covenant with the individual churches to:

1. Respect the freedom of the local church to order its inner life and determine its own relationships;
2. Concern itself with the corporate identity, welfare, and health of all the churches in association together;
3. Expand the vision of the association and its churches;
4. Promote a nurturing fellowship among the churches and pastors;
5. Provide facilities, support staff, and programming opportunities for camping, conferencing, retreats, and day outings for participating churches, their staff, officers, and members;
6. Provide meetings for inspiration, celebration, conducting business, resourcing, sharing concerns, and receiving information;
7. Manifest a pastoral concern for each congregation through periodic visits by officers and staff;
8. Provide information about and resources for ministerial training, including continuing education for professional church leadership;
9. Provide placement counseling for pastors and other church staff and aid congregations seeking to fill ministerial and other staff vacancies;
10. Provide a nurturing atmosphere for members of individual congregations who are preparing for the ministry;
11. Produce and distribute annual reports concerning the work of participating congregations and related organizations;
12. Provide information on a regular basis concerning the ministries of the American Baptist Churches of Rhode Island and the American Baptist Churches, USA;
13. Work with covenanting churches to plant other churches; and
14. Because of our stewardship responsibilities for Canonicus, provide opportunities for creation care, recycling, and strategic management of our natural resources.

### **THE COVENANT**

We, the \_\_\_\_\_ church of \_\_\_\_\_ hereby covenant with our sister congregations in the association of churches known as "ABCORI." We appreciate the value that this covenant provides, encouraging us to accept responsibility to support our sister congregations in their times of need, pray for and with each other, and maintain an ABCORI organizational structure and staff that will serve our churches, unite us in common identity and ministries, enable us to carry out the purposes of associating together, and represent us to larger constituencies.

Revision Proposed by Board of Ministries, January 9, 2012  
**Covenant adopted by delegates at Annual Meeting, March 5, 2012**