COVENANT REVISIONING TEAM

January 8, 2018

To: Michael-Ray Mathews, President of the Board of Directors
    Cathy Tamsberg, Vice-President of the Board of Directors
    The Alliance of Baptists Board of Directors

From: Tim Moore, chairperson, on behalf of the Covenant Revisioning Team—Sally Sarratt,
    Ned Parker, Malu Fairley-Collins, Andrew Gardner, Cristina Garcia-Alfonso, and
    Nancy Sehested, with Paula Dempsey, ex officio.

Re: Final Report and Recommendation to the Board on a new Alliance covenant

The following includes the Covenant Revisioning Team’s recommendation and final report to the Board. Included in this report is a review of our process, our recommendation, and our reasoning behind the recommendation. This recommendation is a consensus decision by the group.

Our Process
We met monthly, via video conferencing, from March through our November, and weekly from November 19 through January 7 with a break for the holidays.

We reviewed the work the covenant board committee did last year under Daniel Miles’s leadership.

We held a “Table Conversations” session during the Annual Gathering, modifying the World Café model, with roughly 150 persons in attendance. This yielded 19 pages of typed comments in addition to the collective summaries produced at the event. We studied and analyzed this information individually and in groups.

We contacted Alliance of Baptists members, churches, partners, and chaplains through the communication emails used by the staff. We asked the same questions of the larger Alliance body that were asked in April during the Table Conversations. We received over a dozen written responses. Kristy Pullen did the legwork to get this out to Alliance folks, and we are indebted to her.

All former Alliance staff were contacted either by phone or email, which led to extended conversations with Stan Hastey, Jeannette Holt, and Leah Grundset Davis. Paula, on behalf of the group, had conversations with leaders of some of our international partners. Alliance founders, who participated at various levels in developing the first covenant, were contacted by email.

In preparation for our initial in-person meeting September 14-15, which was cancelled because of Hurricane Florence, we created three different types of drafts to codify our thinking and feeling about the covenant. One was an “amended” version, which was closely linked to the current covenant. A second, more creative version, utilized the Alliance mission statement to design a new vision of our covenant together. A third option was not tethered to any previous document.
We held an in-person meeting at The Oratory, a Catholic retreat center, in Rock Hill, South Carolina on November 2nd & 3rd. We realized the most energy revolved around a fresh rendering of our covenant. We left Rock Hill with a workable draft and began refining it.

During our refining process in November and December, we shared our thinking with a few strategic persons for their feedback. Paula shared a draft with the Alliance staff during their fall retreat. We had a particular concern about a sentence on ecological justice, and I reached out to Sarah Macias, who leads the ecology community group. We asked three persons with editing skills – Toya Richards, Guy Sayles, and Relma Hargus – to review our draft-in-progress in regards to grammar, clarity, and brevity along with any content concerns. Each of these persons provided helpful feedback in regards to our general direction and with specific issues. Our recommendation is a collaborative creation.

Our Recommendation

THE ALLIANCE OF BAPTISTS’ COVENANT AND MISSION

We are a people formed from a long tradition of dissent and historic Baptist freedoms. Celebrating this heritage, we seek to cultivate beloved community, claiming our identity within the body of Christ in the world. We welcome all persons with full respect to gender, sexual, racial, and ethnic identities. We value all voices and hold space for all persons with varying abilities, social standing, or economic status.

We lament and confess that historically many of us have benefited from and contributed to systems of racial, social, political, economic, and ecological injustice. As Baptists we have cherished independence from one another more than responsibility to one another, and we have allowed systemic injustices to flourish under the banner of individual freedom. We repent.

Transformed through baptismal waters, we freely gather to follow the way of Jesus. As disciples and congregations we openly respect and wrestle together with scripture, practice shared leadership, and promote religious liberty.

Guided by the Spirit, we commit ourselves to:

- Make the worship of God primary in our gatherings
- Cultivate relationships of mutual respect and accountability
- Establish spaces of refuge and renewal with those who are wounded
- Act to dismantle systems of white supremacy, patriarchy, and abusive power
- Listen to and follow voices that have been silenced
- Work to eradicate poverty in all its forms
- Hold the earth sacred and practice sustainability
- Support theological education for all ages
- Develop ecumenical and interfaith partnerships
- Pursue God’s peace and love
- Break down barriers that divide humanity
- Raise prophetic voices for liberation and justice

We seek to live in joy, humility, and gratitude, nurturing the realm of God.
Our Reasoning
The new document reimagines our Alliance covenant while combining the intent of the 1997 mission statement – hence, the name, “The Alliance of Baptists’ Covenant and Mission.” The statement has four movements and a closing sentence.

In our first few conversations each of us stated in one form or another that we only imagined amending the original covenant. By summer, however, a number in the group began expressing the idea that a new covenant should be as fresh and bold as the first covenant. We also began talking about the mission statement – which was the Alliance’s first step to update the covenant – and what was its relationship to the covenant. We also noticed there was a fair number of responses from the Table Conversations that addressed the mission statement; some which desired a clearer connection between the covenant and mission documents.

With various ideas about the shape of the covenant being discussed by the group, we decided to work on different formats so that we could see something on paper. Three small groups worked on creating different drafts of a covenant – an amended version, a version tethered to the mission statement, and an untethered version. The group liked the amended version for what it was. But it was only after we saw it and read it that we realized it felt like warmed over ideas from three decades ago. That did not feel true to the Alliance.

The overwhelming feeling of the group at that point was that we should work to create a fresh word that would aim to express relating to and through the Alliance for the next generation. The section below lays out our thinking in creating this covenant and mission.

1) The covenant and mission opens with a declarative statement of who we are and whom we welcome. By claiming our tradition of dissent, we are not only recognizing the genesis of the Alliance, but also affirming the origins and history of Baptist life. We wanted to celebrate this history of dissent, because it is one of the Alliance’s strengths. When the Alliance resists empire, it is repeating an old Baptist practice. This practice of dissent, however, has often triggered separatism, and we wanted to pair this piece of our DNA to the Alliance’s desire to be connected within the body of Christ.

It felt natural to follow naming our desire to cultivate beloved community with sentences about whom we welcome. Often times people use the phrase “without respect” to certain identities when making inclusive statements. We concluded that it was better to be inclusive with “full respect to gender, sexual, racial, and ethnic identities,” because we want to honor the identities that make people who they are.

2) The second paragraph moves us from celebrating our heritage to lamenting the pain that heritage has caused. Keeping in mind the directive by the board to include racial justice in a new covenant and the board’s decision to seek to operate as a racial justice organization we felt it imperative to include a section of lament and confession in the new covenant.

In particular we talked long and in circles, into a maze and returning by breadcrumbs about the ways in which our Baptist independence and autonomy has particularly contributed to the injustices of our nation. Too often Baptists have used our respect for autonomy and freedom as a cowardly cover when we did not want to address injustice. At such times we gave sanctuary to the worst among us and left the marginalized alone to fend for themselves – all in the name of freedom. We felt that if we want to
claim and celebrate Baptist history and freedoms, we must also repent from the ways it has cut off relationships to the detriment of those harmed by racism, sexism, and homophobia.

3) The third paragraph became known as our “Baptist” paragraph. Here, we tried to briefly speak of the core fixtures in the original covenant using ordinary language. We wanted to begin with baptism. First, this ties us to the beginnings of the Christian movement and not just to a European group four hundred years ago. Secondly, our call as followers of Jesus is rooted in baptism. Finally, the way we practice believer’s baptism is fundamental to our particular identity.

Repentance is a transformative act. We chose the preposition “through” instead of “by” because we did not want to insinuate that the waters do the transforming. Nevertheless, our tradition claims that somehow through baptismal waters – individuals can fill in the particulars – change occurs. This paragraph tries to name core ideals of what it means to practice this faith as Baptists, understood in an Alliance of Baptists way. Metaphorically, think of this paragraph as the baptismal robe we wear through the waters of baptism on our way to following Jesus.

We freely gather as the Alliance of Baptists, and in all our other embodiments: congregations, ministries, and advocacy, ecumenical, and educational partners. In this section, we wanted to honor the following ideas in the original covenant: freedom of the individual to read and interpret Scripture, freedom of the local church, the servant role of leadership, and religious liberty along with historic Baptist ideas about congregational polity and priesthood of the believers.

4) Repentance is a movement from and a movement to. We repent from the actions we lamented and confessed in paragraph number two. We repent to the actions we name as commitments in the fourth paragraph and thus embody our announced transformation.

Our twelve commitments begin with guidance by the Spirit. Each commitment, therefore, begins through the guidance of the Spirit. Guided by the Spirit we commit to hold the earth sacred and practice sustainability. Guided by the Spirit we commit to listen to and follow voices that have been silenced.

Most of these commitments are either a reframing of lines from the 1997 mission statement along with a couple of ideas in the original covenant. The order was reworked a number of times till we settled on one we thought flowed well in capturing these diverse commitments.

The fourth and fifth commitments are new. We added the fourth in part due to the board’s mandate that we speak to racial justice, but also as continuation of our repentance paragraph (this would be the turning to part). The commitment to listen and follow silenced voices came partly out of our conversations about lifelong learning or spiritual formation. We ended up shifting our language about lifelong learning, which was in the mission statement, into a commitment to theological education, but wanted to keep this phrase. Part of justice work is learning from voices that have been silenced, and is much healthier than speaking up for them.

The other new commitments are the eleventh and twelfth ones. Along with the other new ones they speak to aspects of justice work. In a society that is increasingly polarized, we commit to breaking down barriers that divide. We specifically chose the words “raise prophetic voices” instead of the simpler “speak prophetically” because we wanted to get beyond ourselves. We commit to be a platform for prophets, whether they are among our group or beyond us.
5) We wanted to end the covenant and mission with a sentence that tries to get at being beloved community, which we mention in the opening paragraph. We seek to live in joy in order to celebrate the bounty of God even in the midst of the injustices of the world. We seek to live in humility in order to be more unassuming about our role in what God is doing in the world. We seek to live in gratitude in order to give thanks for what has been and to embrace what is to be. And our prayer is that in living this way we will be incarnationally nurturing the realm of God.

We were intentional in saying that we would be guided by the Spirit, follow in the way of Jesus, claim identity within the body of Christ and speak of the realm of God. We were also deliberate about centering the document in baptism (though we did test beginning the covenant in baptism). Finally, we wanted to use touchstone words such as justice, peace, liberation, joy, and love.

We believe the new covenant and mission reinforces the identity work in conjunction with our new logo. The covenant and mission speaks to being a welcoming theological home, our pursuit of justice, and our desire to be in partnership in mission.

Epilogue
This report concludes our work for the Board. We leave this recommendation in your hands. While we love the statement as is, we know it is the Alliance way to make any recommendation its own. So, we offer it not as an end in itself, but as the beginning of a process for the body to wrestle with.

As we mentioned in our September report to the Board, there may be wisdom in lengthening the process between announcing a new recommended covenant and taking a vote to approve it. Maybe the Annual Gathering in DC begins a public conversation about a proposed new covenant rather than ending it.

Finally, we did hear from several persons a concern for preserving the original covenant in some form in our official documents. Maybe we should rename it as the founding covenant of the Alliance. Maybe we preserve it as a historical document in our by-laws. We will leave that to the Board, but we did want to mention it.

Thank you for this opportunity to serve the Alliance in this small way.

Grace and peace to you.