

# Preface to the Second Revised Edition

THE VERY IDEA OF A *BAPTIST* MANUAL OF POLITY AND practice is an odd one. On the one hand, it is not, and could never be, a denominational rule book, analogous to the Methodist *Book of Discipline*. Baptist polity is founded first on the integrity and self-responsibility before Christ of each level of organization: the individual believer, the local church, the association, the society, the denomination. There can be no externally enforced rules, but only shared convictions, mutual commitments, and the accountability they command. On the other hand, this book is not simply a historical or sociological description of what has been done or what usually goes on, although it has elements of these. The values that have governed this evolving family of traditions have never been merely sociological, but also theological and scriptural. The manual, therefore, is neither rigidly prescriptive nor simply descriptive but something in between. It describes what has been and *generally is done*—what the expectations of most Baptists will be about a certain issue—and the theological and biblical reasons why, so that those who wish to do ministry (both lay and professional) in Baptist ways have some guidance they can turn to.

This new edition was prepared with several goals in mind. The chief was to respond to profound shifts in American Baptist polity that have occurred since the last edition, about twenty years ago. These shifts—described in the later chapters of the book—reflect an ecclesiological response to new challenges, especially the challenge of an increasingly fragmentary and secularistic culture. What is often described as the pendulum of Baptist history is swinging back away from a more connectional and uniform model of ministry toward looser and more locally focused forms. This edition attempts to soften (though not eliminate) the previous editions' emphasis on the former and to offer some justification for the latter.

The other goal for the new edition was a general updating, both with respect to issues that seem less pressing than upon first writing (such as the question of open membership) and with respect to general style and tone.

The most immediate shift facing the American Baptist Churches in the U.S.A. (ABCUSA) is a new denominational structure. The long process of adopting new bylaws was finally completed with the biennial convention in San Juan (2011). Originally proposed at the biennial convention in Pasadena in 2009, the new structure failed at that time to secure the required supermajority for passage. Work continued to improve the proposal and to educate the constituencies about it, resulting in a stronger proposal, greater clarity about expectations of all the parties to the denomination's Covenant of Relationships, and increased enthusiasm among the churches about the advantages of the new structure. As of this writing, the new structure has been adopted but not yet implemented. Many details remain to be worked out, and new practices can only evolve slowly over time. Therefore, this manual can only describe the broad outlines of the new denominational structure and make some educated guesses about potential consequences. Much remains to be seen.

Despite a number of changes, some of them quite significant, this edition remains greatly faithful to the original. In particular, it retains the basic aim of the original: describing

the general church practice of Baptists (especially American Baptists) in the context of their biblical and theological foundations. Further, it retains the original design, having proven serviceable over time. Although, especially in the latter chapters, the focus of the book is indeed on the ABCUSA, most of the manual is written with an eye to basic principles shared widely and historically across the Baptist family of associations and denominations. So it is also hoped this book remains useful to many Baptists.

Although the topic has its theoretical aspects, polity is an essentially practical discipline. It is *churchcraft*, the craft of tending and inhabiting Christ's church. We hope that our reflective principles and values shape our practice, but our truest polity is seen in what we do. This means that our greatest teachers of polity are those with whom we practice our craft. Therefore, as I begin to express my gratitude for those who have contributed to this effort, I find my deepest debt to the members, pastors, and staff of the churches where I have served and belonged. These include the First Baptist Church of Ann Arbor, where I grew up; Grace Baptist Church of Chicago, where I currently belong; and the three churches I have served: the South Church of Mount Prospect (IL), the Community Church of Wilmette (IL), and the Lake Street Church of Evanston (IL). I owe this last community particular thanks: although their confessional tradition is hardly typical of the ABCUSA, there could not be a church more fiercely committed to the principles and values of Baptist churchcraft. Not surprisingly, their commitment to tender-hearted, sharp-minded community building according to Jesus' gospel of freedom informed many of my additions to this book. Thanks are also owed to the servant clergy of these churches during my sojourns with them: Robert Wallace, George Lambrides, Paul and Stacey Simpson Duke, John Wilson, Denise Janssen, and my mentor, Robert Thompson. More gratitude is owed to the members themselves, usually the wisest practitioners and most savvy interpreters of polity. In the same spirit, I thank my

polity students in the ABCMC for their contributions to my understanding.

Other individuals deserve particular mention. I am most grateful to two colleagues who helped think through various aspects of the manual: Denise Janssen (already mentioned above, an invaluable resource for Christian and religious education) and Larry L. Greenfield, who has given me many hours discussing the ways Baptists get along. I am grateful to General Secretary Roy Medley, past president Mary Hulst, Executive Directors Reid Trulson and Aidsand Wright-Riggins, Associate General Secretary Jeff Woods, Evergreen Regional Executive Marcia Patton, and all the members of the writing team and the General Board over the past few years: our shared work of crafting a new denominational structure has proved a remarkable seminar in the larger ramifications of Baptist polity. George Hancock-Stefan and Jerrod Huguenot provided rigorously incisive and enormously helpful feedback on the manuscript, and I am indebted to them for their interventions. Finally, I am grateful to Judson Press for the invitation to participate in this effort: I thank its publisher, Laura Alden, from whom the original idea for this reedition came, and editor Rebecca Irwin-Diehl, whose support and patience have been more than gracious, in both senses of the word.

Finally, I would name two American Baptist saints who contributed more than they ever knew to my development in this their tradition: The first was prophet and evangelist Jitsuo Morikowa, who in retirement served my home church and called me into ministry. The other was Elizabeth Haselden—former vice president of ABCUSA and director of metropolitan programs for Church Women United (and wife of *The Christian Century* editor and Dahlberg prize winner Kyle Haselden)—who was without a doubt the fiercest, clearest, and ablest practitioner of Baptist churchcraft I have known.

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