

# Ripples in the Pond

by Kevin E. Porter

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On October 24<sup>th</sup>, 2010, I provided the sermon at First United Baptist Church on the topic title of “Ripples in the Pond”. I wanted to share the message with others that were not able to attend church that day and provide a chance for discussing anything within this message with you. So, following are my notes on the sermon that day.

**Overview:** Each of us is a unique creation of God’s. God loves each of his children. This love implies that there is a reciprocal relationship between God and each of his children. God provides each person with a set of gifts that are expected to be used while we live in this world. Each of us needs to discover what gifts we have been given and then use those gifts to spread the good news. Spreading of the good news requires a community to work with and to grow with. One of our communities is TABCOM that comprises a collection of church congregations that have similar viewpoints on certain values in our faith life. This message is about the participation and support of The American Baptist Churches of Massachusetts (TABCOM) to achieve our responsibility of spreading God’s Word both in depth within each of the committed ABC members and in breadth to all that want to hear the Good News.

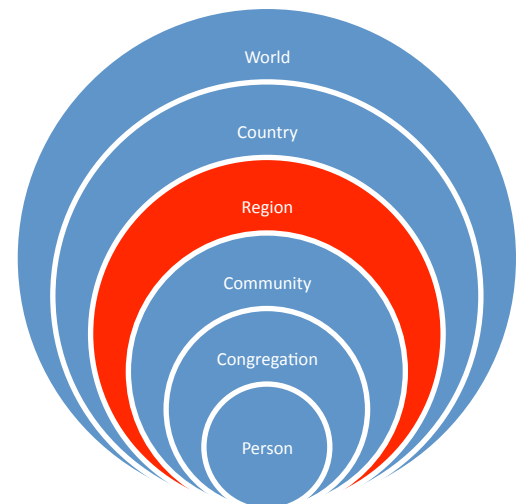
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**Background:** Currently, I am privileged to serve as the President of TABCOM. This has provided me with very interesting opportunities to see how God is affecting many people within our faith family. I would like to share these exciting experiences and to let you know that it is because of the support and participation of many church congregations and individuals like ours that there has been many successful outcomes.

**Praise:** We are blessed to be children of God that loves each of us and desires to have a relationship with each of us. God created a universe where each of us is unique and one-of-a-kind. Our uniqueness also results in each of us having a unique set of gifts that God has given to us. Praise God for this uniqueness and for the distinctive relationship we each have with God.

**Foundation:** This message is about the implications of having a relationship with God. As we come to understand the relationship first between God and ourselves, we come to find that the God did not ask us to keep the good news to ourselves but to spread it to our church family, community, region, country, and the world. We are each unique and have different ways to share the Good News; some through modeling, some through overt actions, others as a mix along the spectrum of passive to active actions. In my past message on June 27<sup>th</sup>, 2010 titled “The 11<sup>th</sup> Commandment” I reviewed the relationship of loving your neighbor and expanding from yourself outward to the congregation, the community and beyond. In this article, I want to review the ripple that relates to the region (colored red in the diagram) and the impacts it can have on our faith journey and using our gifts and resources at a region level. The region for First United Baptist Church is The American Baptist Churches Of Massachusetts (or TABCOM).



**TABCOM Overview:** I do not want to assume that everyone knows how TABCOM is setup today so let me cover that first. TABCOM is simply the collection of 285 American Baptist Churches in Massachusetts which we are a part of. TABCOM is church congregations working together to accomplish what is hard for any one individual church to accomplish by itself. A church becomes part of TABCOM by establishing a covenant relationship with one of the eight

Associations of TABCOM. For FUBC, our Association is the Merrimack Valley Association(MVA). The last MVA Annual Meeting was on November 7<sup>th</sup> at First Baptist Church in Tewksbury. This was an opportunity for you to meet other American Baptists and establish some relationships. Pastor Susan Panek Polizzi ran the meeting as Vice Moderator when the Moderator was not able to attend the gathering due to recent surgery and a dinner was held after the meeting concluded.

TABCOM is comprised of churches that have established covenants with a TABCOM Association. In order to support the TABCOM churches, a central management service organization was established with a few staff and several volunteers. This service team groups their efforts into three areas as defined in the By-Laws of the organization:

- Family Support (Core) Services
- Missions
- Camps & Conferencing

To help provide common services and to support common goals, there is a small staff of 3 full time people and a couple of part time people in the front office that help to orchestrate those three areas along with full and part time staff in the Camps and Conferencing and the Finance functions that work on the same goal for our member churches. However, the largest part of the TABCOM organization is the volunteers that feel the passion to work on the mission of spreading God's word in a quality fashion from a state (or region) perspective.

**Challenge:** The point is that TABCOM is you and me and other American Baptists in Massachusetts working together to accomplish what is difficult to individually succeed with. But it all starts with each of us. God created each of us uniquely and gave each of us unique gifts. We are on a lifetime journey requiring us to pray, study, and act on what we discerned with God as to how we are to use our gifts. Our acts from this discernment are like being ***thrown into the wide pond of God's love and our subsequent attempts to ripple that love to other people.*** Due to our distinctive relationship with God, we are each given a challenge to discern what gifts we have been given. This is not easy since we each do not come with an instruction manual. But each day provides us with a fresh start and the ability to minister to our church family, community, region, country and world. Gifts come in a multitude of different types, sizes, and variations. **What is your gift?** No one is without a gift. This is the time to discover your gift and to use it for God.

**Bible References:** Following are the biblical references for this message:

#### **Matthew 28:16-20 (The Message)**

<sup>16-17</sup>Meanwhile, the eleven disciples were on their way to Galilee, headed for the mountain Jesus had set for their reunion. The moment they saw him they worshiped him. Some, though, held back, not sure about worship, about risking themselves totally. <sup>18-20</sup>Jesus, undeterred, went right ahead and gave his charge: "God authorized and commanded me to commission you: Go out and train everyone you meet, far and near, in this way of life, **marking them by baptism** in the threefold name: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Then **instruct them in the practice of all I have commanded you.** I'll be with you as you do this, day after day after day, right up to the end of the age."

#### **Mark 16:15-20 (The Message)**

<sup>14-16</sup>Still later, as the Eleven were eating supper, he appeared and took them to task most severely for their stubborn unbelief, refusing to believe those who had seen him raised up. Then he said, "**Go into the world. Go everywhere and announce the Message of God's good news to one and all. Whoever believes and is baptized is saved;** whoever refuses to believe is damned. <sup>17-18</sup>"These are some of the signs that will accompany believers: They will throw out demons in my name, they will speak in new tongues, they will take snakes in their hands, they will drink poison and not be hurt, they will lay hands on the sick and make them well." <sup>19-20</sup>Then the Master Jesus, after briefing them, was taken up to heaven, and he sat down beside God in the place of honor. And the disciples went everywhere preaching, the Master working right with them, validating the Message with indisputable evidence.] <sup>[a]</sup>

**Success Stories:** People that have discerned their gifts and are using them are role models that we can learn from. As we work together as a family of churches, there are many success stories and I want to share a few of the accomplishments that we are seeing by working together as a TABCOM family.

*Mission Explosion:* The Mission Explosion program that has been supporting the host churches and other stakeholder churches is an excellent example of how a combined effort by the united power of many churches in Massachusetts has made a significant difference to hundreds of people in the world. From the beginning in 1998, the Mission Explosion program has helped out people in Romania, Northeast India, Honduras, Bulgaria, and Ghana. This influence has helped people in poverty, slavery, orphans and with bringing people to Christ. Currently, children in Tibet and refugee and asylum seeking families coming to Massachusetts are being served by the TABCOM family of churches as part of the 2010-2011 Mission Explosion Program.

- Romania = Built a children's chapel with people being led to Christ(\$210,000)
- Northeast India = Built a conference center and refurbish several buildings (\$409,000)
- Honduras = Plant new churches; build a school and church (\$175,000 + .....)
- Bulgaria = Build a church and social center (\$100,000 was start of a \$3M project – 75% done)
- Ghana = Build dorms for ex-Trokosi slave women (\$162,000)
- Tibet = Build dorm for girls at original (first) orphanage in Tibet (\$110,000)

*Tibet-Dolma:* When I was on the exploratory mission trip to the Jatson Chumig School and Orphanage in May of 2009, I met one of the students, Tashi Dolma. After I had departed from that trip, she had her left leg amputated just below the knee last October because she had a simple infection that turned into gangrene before it was detected. This past month while working with Dolma during a therapy session, Brian McLatchy smelled something and asked her to remove her right sneaker. Sure enough, what was being smelled was gangrene and she needed to be admitted to the hospital for treatment or she ran the real possibility of losing that leg as well. A couple of weeks later she continued to battle gangrene with her good foot. The hospital seemed useless and Dolma was back at Jatson Chumig. Recently, there has been a renovated physical treatment room that is making significant changes to some of the disabled children. There are few places in the world where the story of Jesus has not been heard and the mission team was able to tell the story there. As mainland China inevitably allowed Christianity to grow within its country, I look forward to the day when Christianity can be openly practiced in Tibet. However, the American Baptist Churches of Massachusetts are part of the leading edge of being ready to spread God's Word when the time is right. We can be no closer to living God's command to his people than we are now in our mission work to Tibet.

*Joshua:* The TABCOM Camps make a significant difference in the lives of youth that attend and enable youth to make a commitment to follow Christ as they come to understand Christ among peers and Christian leaders.

During the summer of 2010, Tony Pappas was talking to one of the Grotonwood counselors, Imly, who related a story of one of the campers that had made the commitment to follow Christ. He related the following:

- ⇒ A 10-year old was dropped off at the start of a camp week by their parent who had not told the camper that Grotonwood was a Christian camp.
- ⇒ Upon arriving and finding that he was at a Christian camp, the camper informed his counselor, Imly, that he did not believe in God and that he only believed in what science could prove.
- ⇒ Imly, let the camper know that he should just have a good time at camp and enjoy all the activities the camp had to offer.
- ⇒ During one of the last activities of the week to Six Flags, Imly shared a seat on the bus on the return trip with this camper and they were able to chat during that ride back to Grotonwood.
- ⇒ The camper related to Imly his experiences during the week at camp and that he had made the commitment to accept Christ into his life.
- ⇒ Imly was very excited for the camper and was very enthusiastic in sharing his experience with Tony.

TABCOM provides the environment, programs, and leadership to enable a camper to learn about Christ and how Christ is a part of their lives.

*Shutesbury:* The TABCOM Core made a significant difference in the lives of this congregation by working through connecting the right people and pastors to support the resurrection of this church.

Shutesbury Community Church in Shutesbury, MA is in a rural town and the church building was built in 1827. Over the years the membership had dwindled and had two 80 year old members left when they reached out to the TABCOM front office for help.

- Tony Pappas arranged for a meeting of his team and with the Shutesbury leadership and found that it would take more than \$250K to bring the building up to code.
- A call was made to 5 neighboring churches and a couple of pastors and churches rose to the call to support this church in Shutesbury.
- A follow-up meeting by Jim Sinclair at his house led to Don Bradley and the Second Baptist Church in South Hadley stepping up to the challenge to support this dire need.
- Rev Bradley and the members of the church's "With His Hands" ministry led by David Tetralt worked for more than 3 months with 12-60 people to renovate the church property. The construction was substantial and the dedication of a sister church was overwhelming.
- Second Baptist Church even went a step beyond and lent pastoral leadership (Mark Lawrence) to Shutesbury Community Church as a mission pastor.
- Since this support started, Shutesbury Community Church has more than three dozen attendees now at their services and has a future as a viable congregation.

What TABCOM provided was to be catalytic to connect a church in need with people that had the gifts and heard the calling to support a church in need.

*Church Renewal (JP):* The TABCOM Core made a significant difference in the lives of this congregation by working through a Redevelopment Covenant program and providing for a stronger church family.

- First Baptist Church in Jamaica Plain (JP) in the past was a vibrant and strong church in the 1960s. Then fire claimed their building and they had to rebuild it. They had a committed pastor for 30 years but over time the congregation had dwindled.
- They connected with the TABCOM front office and asked for support to reignite their church.
- The TABCOM staff suggested that they accept a Redevelopment Covenant to bring in new thoughts and approaches and to bring new life into their membership.
- JP accepted and a pastor with a redevelopment vision was found and joined this church; Rev. Ashley Weist-Laird.
- Ashley promoted a multicultural vision for JP and worked to convert this view into tangible results.
- The church was building when another fire claimed their meeting house again.
- The church membership rose to the challenge and has rebuilt the ground level of their sanctuary where they currently worship.
- Some day they will complete the rest of the church but what they have today supports a committed church membership and enables them to be committed to the mission God has called us to.

TABCOM provide the program and leadership and was catalytic to enable a church to obtain pastoral leadership to realize how their gifts could be used to sustain and grow their church.

**Conclusion from Stories:** Although this is a subset of stories about the results of the TABCOM staff and volunteers, it shows the effect in people's lives in the areas of Missions, Camping, and Family Support. Due to the

support that FUBC provides of volunteer time and financial support, these differences are able to be made in people's lives for the Glory of God.

**TABCOM on the Move:** There are many more stories like these happening in the American Baptist Churches of Massachusetts. There are few places that you will be part of that has such a diversity of cultures and styles than you will find in the TABCOM congregations. The American Baptists are a microcosm of the cultures of America and that is one of our strengths. We are proud to be a church that welcomes God's children and to recognize that we all need the grace of God and that we **daily struggle to live the ideals that Jesus modeled for us 2,000 years ago.** **It is an exciting faith family to be part of and to see the potential that we all have in making a difference by discerning what God is asking us to act on.**

## Faith Journey:

- ⇒ How is your faith journey going? How are you doing on discerning your gifts through a continual dialogue with God? Are you able to pray on a regular basis and discern with God what your gifts are and if you have a passion to support your calling?
- ⇒ Are you able to read your Bible daily? Are you reading other information to enable you to live "in the world" although not being "of this world"? We must truly care for all those that we come into contact with and establish authentic relationships with each of them. Understanding the world and the constant change is part of being able to relate to people.
- ⇒ Do you feel that strong bond with God during Prayer and that he is relating what your gifts are and how you should be using them? This is not a checklist but a journey in which we have successful days and others in which we need to contemplate upon and hope to do better the next time we encounter a similar situation.
- ⇒ Are you a reflection of God's love? Are you acting upon what God has asked you to do?
- ⇒ **Are you part of the ripple in the pond and supporting the spreading of God's Word?**
- ⇒ Are we getting more clarity on our personal journeys to understand God's message?
- ⇒ Are we involved in spreading the Word to our sister churches, faith communities, community, region, country, and world? God never intended us to live in seclusion but to have relationships in an ever expanding ripple spreading outside our current boundaries and walls.

**Summary:** In Acts we find Paul as an example of one working to unify churches to be true to Christ's message.

- Today, the TABCOM staff and volunteers are working to serve the needs of the American Baptist Churches of Massachusetts and to be true to God's mission of spreading the Word to our congregational members and beyond our church walls to the world.
- Due to the decrease of funds from our member churches the staff has had to be reduced and not enough volunteers have stepped forward yet to fill in all the holes left by these reductions.
- There are wonderful examples of where God is working within the TABCOM family of churches and I encourage you to become involved by volunteering your time and becoming a part of this family.
- Through the financial contributions this church makes to the United Missions and to the Massachusetts Mission Fund, your money is being used to further the work that God has called us to through supporting each other in our faith and secular communities. Any increases to these funds will benefit the efforts that the American Baptist Churches of Massachusetts are making here in Massachusetts and throughout the world by the TABCOM staff and volunteers to benefit our expanding faith community we are all a part of.
- This year's Mission Explosion project is to help the children of Tibet at Jatson Chumig School and Orphanage to replace the Girl's Dorm that was condemned after an earthquake make it structurally unsound.

Remember, **WE** are part of The American Baptists of Massachusetts ripple of spreading God's love. Are we answering his call each day? Are we using the gift or gifts that God has given us for his glory? AMEN.