

Community Church of Issaquah

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The Church, Our History and Our Future

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It's not a secret that each of us has been curious at some time about our own personal history and family origins. It's also not a secret that Ancestry.com and 23 and Me have become booming businesses tracking the history of individuals and families. I was always content just hearing my grandfather tell stories of our Italian family, but my brother wasn't satisfied and wanted to know more, so he went on a website and tacked our family history from both my father's and my mother's side. Seems my mother's family came from Wales and could be tacked all the way back to the 1500's. Her family name was Aldridge, and in Welch language that meant old ridge, which is where her family lived in Wales. My father's side came from Sicily but because of poor record keeping, could only be traced back until the last 1800's. History fascinates us at times. I'm sure you could tell us much about your history if we sat for a casual conversation. Perhaps one day we will do that. For today, I'd like to tell you a little bit about the history of our faith tradition – Baptist – and some history of our own denomination, American Baptist.

The origins of Baptist thought and practice can be seen as early as the late 16th century in English Congregationalism, which rejected the “parish” structure of church life (dictated by the Church of England) where everyone in a given community was a member of a neighborhood parish

and where children were baptized. The reaction against that kind of church structure was articulated in the concept of “the gathered church,” in which membership was voluntary and based on evidence of conversion, and where baptism (for the most part) was limited to believers. Thus, the name “Baptist.”

The earliest Baptist churches (1609-1612), although comprised of English- speaking congregants, flourished in Holland, where religious toleration was much greater than it was in England. Among their leaders were John Smyth, who led the first congregation of 36 men and women, and Thomas Helwys, who returned to England in 1612 to establish the first Baptist church in England.

In the early 1630s Roger Williams, formerly a member of the Church of England, took up clerical responsibilities in Massachusetts. However, he eventually became at odds with authorities in the Massachusetts Bay Colony over the failure of church and state to be independent of one another. About 1638 he established the first Baptist church in America in the then-uncolonized Rhode Island (Providence), which became the first government in history founded on the premise of absolute religious freedom. At the same time John Clarke, also originally came from England and who was also dissatisfied with religious practice in Massachusetts, founded a Baptist church in Newport, R.I. Williams and Clarke secured a charter guaranteeing civil and religious freedom in Rhode Island from King Charles II in 1663.

John Leland, a pastor from Virginia, actively supported Thomas Jefferson's religious freedom bill passed in Virginia in 1786. As a delegate nominee considering the proposed federal Constitution, Leland originally proposed to vote against it because of its lack of provision for religious liberty. He offered his support, however, when his opponent for the state delegate position, James Madison, convinced him provision for religious liberty would be made in what became the Bill of Rights, the first ten amendments to the Constitution. The Baptist influence, thus, was significant in the First Amendment: "Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof..." By 1833 all of the U.S. states had, in their constitutions, affirmed the principle of separation of church and state with full religious liberty. This issue is one of current concerns.

Though we are known for many things, Baptists are best known for our call to missionary work. It was Pastor William Carey who began this missionary movement in 1793 and served as overseas missionary, remaining in India for more than 40 years. Though he was a strong supporter of Baptist mission work, the actual first Baptist to evangelize in a foreign country was George Lisle, a freed slave and first ordained black in America, who sailed from Georgia to establish churches in Jamaica in the 1770s. The creation in 1814 of the General Missionary Convention of the Baptist Denomination in the United States for Foreign Missions (Triennial Convention), the first unified national missionary-sending effort formed in the U.S. and the forerunner of today's American Baptist Board of International Ministries.

When the Triennial Convention was formed in 1814, it included Baptists from different perspectives but was responsible for the American Baptist Foreign Mission Society. In 1845, the issue of slavery was the cause of the split within the Mission Society and Southern churches leaving to begin the Southern Baptist Convention. There were still many Baptist varieties that remained within the American Baptist Mission Society, but the Northern Baptist Convention was organized in 1907 to bring together the work of the various societies.

In the year 1950, the Northern Baptist Convention became the American Baptist Convention, and then in 1972, it became the American Baptist Churches USA, of which we are a part today. What are the current issues that form our doctrines? Let me share a few:

Our Basic Beliefs: American Baptists believe that Jesus Christ is Lord and Savior and that the Bible is the inspired Word of God

The Local Church: We believe that the local church is the fundamental core in denominational life, selecting its own doctrine, style of worship and mission

Mission Work: American Baptist take vary seriously the call from God to spread the Gospel and engage in mission work wherever possible

Social justice: ABC has a long history of involvement in social issues such as the Civil Rights Movement, women's rights and ecological responsibility. Many do not know that the pastor of Ebenezer Baptist Church of Atlanta who led the Civil Rights Movement, Dr.

Martin Luther King, Jr., was an American Baptist at the time.

Believer's Baptism: We believe that baptism should be reserved for any individual who has made a personal profession of faith

Local Church Autonomy: Each local Baptist church is considered independent and self-governing

Independence of All Believers: We believe that every believer has direct access to God and can interpret the Scripture themselves

Religious freedom: Baptists are the champions of advocating for the separation of church and state and freedom of religion, being able to worship as you believe

Extended Family: We believe that God's family extends far beyond our local churches and that God calls us to work graciously with other ministries

ABC celebrates diversity: American Baptist Churches USA honors the racial, cultural and theological diversity within its membership and more. ABC is the most racially inclusive Protestant faith tradition.

This is a very brief history of our American Baptist Church tradition. It can be traced back to the very First Baptist Church in American in the year 1638. Though the American Baptist Churches USA name was not adopted until 1972, our history goes back much further. But that's just our past. What does our future look like. Like many Protestant denominations, ABC finds itself in a serious decline. Churches with significant growth are the evangelical fundamentalist traditions, and recently, the Catholic Church in some areas, like the West Coast, are

seeing significant growth, particularly among Gen X and Gen Y. The Teen Revivals currently underway have had a significant impact on the Catholic Church, particularly with the new younger Pope.

Unfortunately, our denomination, like other Protestants, has been experiencing declines in our memberships. Did you know that more than 1000 churches close each month in the US? That number is growing. Here are a few statistics from data tracking numbers from the years 2000 to 2020:

Evangelical Lutheran Church in America declined 41%

Presbyterian Church USA declined 58%

The Episcopal Church declined 36%

The United Church of Christ/Congregational declined 52%

The United Methodist Church declined 31%

And

The American Baptist Church declined 23%

Why? There are many reasons that our future and the future of many of our sister churches are cloudy at best. First, we have chosen to maintain traditional worship that overlooks the other types of services that evangelical churches have chosen. Second, the mix of politics and religion has been a turn-off for many younger generations with Christians often being seen as hypocrites or worse, bad people. Third, technology has placed social media in the forefront of what most people see and follow. Where you and I could not wait to gather in-person for services, after the pandemic, too many have chosen sofa worship. If you miss the service, check it out on Facebook is the alternative. Lastly, where families and children used to be

a way congregations grew, that is no longer true. Our children of the younger generation have chosen to move away from the church. I can verify that personally. When I took my son for dinner on his 18th birthday, he told me, “Dad, I know this will upset you, but I’m 18 now and can make my own decisions, so I just wanted you to know that I will never go to church again. There are too many hypocrites there. They don’t love others, they hate.”

So, what is the future of CCI? Not being a psychic, I cannot foretell the future, so I do not know exactly what the future holds. I simply know what I believe. When we begin to grow in numbers again because of our mission outreach HERE in Issaquah and when we cease to be the church of “But we’ve always done it that way,” clouds will begin to move away and the future will be brighter. We are comfortable where we are but perhaps we need to think about the need to be uncomfortable a little. I don’t want us just to grow. I want us to thrive and be the best example of Christ in this town. Believe in yourself because I deeply believe in you. You’re the future. Let’s make it brighter than the sun. And one more thing. I love you.