

American Baptist Home Mission Society

In each issue of *The Corporate Examiner*, we profile an ICCR member organization and its work in corporate social responsibility. Below, we spoke with Michaelae Birdsall, Aidsand F. Wright-Riggins III, Rev. Margaret Cowden, and Sr. Patricia Daly of the American Baptist Home Mission Society.

The ABHMS is one of the founding members of ICCR. Can you tell us how your church first understood that it could further its social mission through its investments and what the original impetus was?

MICHAELE BIRDSALL: ABHMS traces the beginning of our formal involvement in socially responsible investing back to January 1971, when then treasurer, Horace Gale, articulated the following vision to the Finance Committee:

“How can the principles the church stands for — reverence for life, improvement of the human condition, etc. — be justified if its portfolio includes the stocks of the top defense contractors?”

In November of 1972, the ABHMS Board of Managers adopted Guidelines Relating to Social Criteria for Investments and voted that all of the financial resources of its Societies be recognized as a resource for achieving social and program objectives. ABHMS continues this legacy today.



Can you tell us about specific justice initiatives the ABHMS is currently engaged in?

MICHAELE BIRDSALL: ABHMS’ justice initiatives stem from our belief that caring for “the least of these” is not only a mandate for Christ’s disciples, it is also a matter of personal well-being. While it might be easy to think that we can insulate ourselves from the impact of problems that “other people have”, nothing could be further from the truth. Martin Luther King Jr.’s words, penned in his 1963 Letter from Birmingham City Jail, are instructive—“We are caught in an inescapable network of mutuality, tied in a single garment of destiny. Whatever affects one directly affects all indirectly.”

We believe that complex issues like poverty, immigration reform, and the prison industrial complex must be confronted on multiple dimensions. From a systems view, if we are visiting a town and see someone on the street who is hungry, we should stop and give them something to eat. But we should also ask ourselves, how might we support and equip the surrounding community so that it is able to provide sustainable provisions for all who live there. And we can’t stop there. We have to ask ourselves are there larger systems (e.g. public and corporate policies), beyond the community, that are inhibiting its capacity to flourish?

In recent years ABHMS has placed a strategic focus on issues surrounding the prison industrial complex. Our motivation?

One in 100 adults in America is behind bars; one in 31 adults in America is under correctional control; and the prison system is the fastest growing industry in America.

ABHMS is committed to addressing this issue on multiple dimensions. We strategically hold enough stock in two of the largest private prison systems to enable us to participate in corporate dialogue and advocacy efforts aimed at convincing these corporations that profits should not come at the expense of safety and decent conditions. Nor should they come through incentives that encourage mass incarceration rates, particularly of immigrants and minorities.

What do you see as the opportunities and challenges that face churches as they seek to be active co-creators of economic justice in the world?

AIDSAND F. WRIGHT-RIGGINS III:



The Christian church, in all of its expressions, is a prominent actor in the economy. It bears responsibility, perhaps in greater proportion to its prominence, for how the economy

functions. The significant assets owned by the church and the large percentage of the U.S. population that self-identifies as



Christian means that church bodies, congregations, organizations and individuals animated by Christian commitment are embedded within markets, systems of finance and the very fabric of the economy.

The challenge for this church is that this is not necessarily an easy conversation to have. We get in the way of ourselves when we adopt a lopsided ideology or theology.

On the other hand, we have a tremendous opportunity. Contrary to popular opinion, neither economics nor economic practices are a given. People invented policies and practices and people can change them. We might begin with a theology of abundance, rather than scarcity. Most moments of human history – including the present moment – have been marred by unequal distribution of resources and widely disproportionate experiences of abundance.

How is the ABHMS taking this message directly to the pews?

AIDSAND F. WRIGHT-RIGGINS III: Socially responsible investing is an incredibly important, complex and often emotionally charged issue. We learned this many years ago when ABHMS led the denomination in calling for American Baptist-related mission entities to divest funds from businesses that did business in then apartheid-ridden South Africa.

We will take socially responsible investing to the pews in the same way that Jesus did when he challenged the double-mindedness of the religious community of his own day. He took a coin, held it up and challenged them to “Render unto Caesar the things that are Caesar’s and to God the things that are God’s” (Mark 12:17 KJV).

We see ourselves as being a demonstration project for the kingdom of God and helping to raise questions for which there are no easy answers.

What do you find to be the unique strengths of working with a coalition like ICCR?

REV. MARGARET COWDEN: One of our greatest strengths has been our commitment as faith-based organizations to focus on what brings us together rather than on what divides us. We’ve been able to maintain a spirit of respect for the uniqueness of our different faith traditions and the fact that those differences may lead us to pursue slightly different emphases in our work, while celebrating those areas where we all join efforts.

As we look at the future of ICCR, we will need to continue to reach out to other faith traditions to broaden our coalition and create new and more effective models of interfaith justice work. We must also celebrate our past successes without being bound only to the methods that have worked for us in the past. Moving the larger economic system toward greater justice will require new methods and approaches in our increasingly complex global economic system. And last, but not least, like all faith-based nonprofits, we must be tireless in the pursuit of stable sources of income to assure that this important work continues.

How does ICCR’s work mirror that of the mission of the Baptists?

REV. MARGARET COWDEN: Like our ICCR partners, we see our investment portfolios not merely as a source of funding for our ministry and mission, but as a vehicle for our mission. Our efforts in socially responsible investing are the direct outgrowth of

our peace and justice ministries, and are often informed by the advocacy efforts of our home missionaries. While involving ourselves in ministries of advocacy, economic development, and racial and gender justice, we use our investments to address the larger systemic issues that contribute to oppression and injustice in our society. Our SRI work is simply part of a seamless strategy to live out our faith values in every aspect of our organizational life and to do it in partnership with other people of faith.

As Executive Director of the Tri-State Coalition for Responsible Investment (CRI), a Catholic organization, you have been managing the SRI work for the ABHMS organization for eight years. This is a great example of how ICCR members work across faiths and in coalition to achieve their SRI goals. Can you tell us about this model?

SR. PATRICIA DALY: The Tri-State CRI’s partnership with ABHMS mirrors the collaborative work in place at ICCR, as we share expertise and resources to get the work done. ICCR members don’t work in silos; the relationship between our organizations is a clear expression of the interfaith nature of our work. Our mutual traditions of preaching in the marketplace are in play as we engage companies on labor, human rights in private prisons, access to health care, violence in the media, sustainable food systems, global warming and other ecological concerns on behalf of the American Baptists.

