**ABHMS Executive Director Preaches Grace, Forgiveness in Farewell Sermon to American Baptist Churches**

**VALLEY FORGE, PA (ABNS 6/30/15)**—As featured preacher at American Baptist Churches USA’s (ABCUSA) 2015 Mission Summit plenary worship Sunday morning, American Baptist Home Mission Societies’ (ABHMS) Executive Director Dr. Aidsand F. Wright-Riggins III delivered his farewell sermon to the greater denomination.

Set to retire in October after 24 years of ministry with ABHMS, Wright-Riggins preached about extending grace to all, as exemplified by the Apostle Paul in his letter to the Philippians. Although Paul was scourged, abused, disgraced and humiliated in Philippi, said Wright-Riggins, “he did not once utter the words ‘forget you.’” Instead, Wright-Riggins noted, “Paul writes, ‘I thank God every time I remember you.’”

Wright-Riggins said grace is being exhibited by survivors of the recent racially motivated church shooting in Charleston, S.C. “In Charleston, as in Philippi,” Wright-Riggins said, “humans demonstrate the capacity to move beyond ‘forget you’ to ‘I forgive you.’”

Once again urging grace, Wright-Riggins rhetorically asked: “How do we draw circles around ourselves, inviting people in, rather than drawing circles around ourselves excluding people—especially when we feel we have been hurt or victimized by these people?”

Wright-Riggins said American Baptists can overcome their differences by learning “to greet each other with ‘Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.’” He added: “The river of peace—or shalom fullness—comes only from the current flowing from grace.”

At Saturday’s ABHMS luncheon, both Wright-Riggins and ABCUSA General Secretary Dr. A. Roy Medley were honored as they look to retirement this year. Following a litany, each was “draped with a mantle”—Wright-Riggins’ in the form of a quilt crafted by members of Friendship Missionary Baptist Church, Charlotte, N.C., and Medley’s in the form of a prayer shawl woven by Judy Connor Jones of Plymouth, Mass.

“Scripture offers us the image of a mantle in stories of leadership,” said ABHMS board member the Rev. David C. Gregg, during presentation of the mantles. “Mantles are passed down when leaders make a transition and hand off responsibility to a new generation.”

During the mantles’ draping, Lois Chiles, vice president of ABHMS’ board of directors, addressed Wright-Riggins: “For 24 years, you have stood as visionary leader and prophetic voice, walking in the tradition of past visionaries and prophets to bring today’s leaders into a transformed future. You have cultivated diversity in our community, and you have advocated for justice in this nation and around the world. We are thankful for your Passionary challenge, urging us to follow Christ more nearly, to love more dearly, and to incarnate God’s grace more clearly.”

Luncheon preacher the Rev. Yamina Apolinaris, executive director, Corporacion Milagros del Amor (“Miracles of Love Corporation”), an ABHMS Neighborhood Action Program Christian center in Caguas, Puerto Rico, noted that all American Baptists are children of the women who taught them, among other priorities, to behave in church, memorize the Bible, visit shut-ins, feed the hungry, and value self and others.

“Aidsand and Roy, I have this feeling that, as with Jesus, each one of you are your mother’s sons,” she said, addressing the two soon-to-retire denominational leaders. “As your mothers left their mark on you, so your ministries have left their mark on the ministries of this denomination.”

During Saturday evening’s plenary worship, Wright-Riggins and Dr. J. Alfred Smith Jr., pastor of the historic Allen Temple Baptist Church, Oakland, Calif., presented the Edwin T. Dahlberg Peace and Justice Award to Rep. Barbara Lee of California’s 13th Congressional District. A member of Allen Temple, Lee is donating the monetary portion of the award to the church’s AIDS ministry.

“This is a very humbling award. Throughout his life—from his fight against the darkness of war to his work with ABCUSA—Dahlberg led a dedicated life to God,” said Lee, adding that she is honored to be among the award’s recipients, which include the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., Children’s Defense Fund founder Marian Wright Edelman and former President Jimmy Carter.

“I can’t explain how honored I am,” Lee said, expressing her awe for American Baptist ministry. “Your mission—what you are doing in the church, what you are doing throughout the world—cannot be applauded enough.”

During plenary worship on Friday evening, the Suzan Johnson Cook Religious Freedom Award was presented to Chin Baptist Churches USA (CBCUSA) and Karen Baptist Churches USA (KBCUSA) by Wright-Riggins and Chiles, accompanied by Cook, former pastor of Mariners’ Temple Baptist Church, New York City, who served as U.S. ambassador-at-large for international religious freedom, 2011-2013.

Accepting the award on behalf of CBCUSA, the Rev. Dr. Duh Kam, executive minister of CBC, said, “This award will speak louder to the people of Myanmar, who long for religious freedom.”

Accepting the award on behalf of KBCUSA, the Rev. Dr. Saw Ler Htoo, executive secretary of KBCUSA, said that the award will “stand for religious rights and freedom in the future.”

Among the speakers at ABHMS’ exhibit throughout the weekend were Dr. Adam Bond, assistant professor of Historical Studies and American Baptist liaison at Samuel DeWitt Proctor School of Theology, Virginia Union University, who discussed “Church on Purpose: Reinventing Discipleship, Community, & Justice,” a Judson Press-published volume of essays that he co-edited; the Rev. Dwight Stinnett, executive minister, American Baptist Churches of the Great Rivers Region, with “A Response to Ferguson”; and J. Brent Walker, executive director, Baptist Joint Committee for Religious Liberty, on “Religious Liberty Today.”

*ABHMS—the domestic mission arm of American Baptist Churches USA—ministers as the caring heart and serving hands of Jesus Christ across the United States and Puerto Rico through a multitude of initiatives that focus on discipleship, community and justice.*

*American Baptist Churches USA is one of the most diverse Christian denominations today, with over 5,200 local congregations comprised of 1.3 million members, across the United States and Puerto Rico, all engaged in God’s mission around the world.*