

Declaration of Repentance for Sexual Discrimination Through the 70-year History of the Japan Baptist Convention

The Japan Baptist Convention was established in April, 1947, and this year we celebrate 70 years of witness and ministry.

Over the span of this history, we as a Convention, organizationally and structurally, were complicit in sexual discrimination, at the very least in our approval by silence. For a very long time, in our lack of awareness we neglected to speak out, and for that we confess our complicity before God.

For the differences that exist among us, we rejoice and respect that rich variety in the light of the Gospel of Jesus Christ. (Galatians 3:28) We are also aware, however, that when these differences are used to assign superiority or inferiority, to make distinctions as to who has power and who does not, discrimination is the result. Discrimination denies a person's being, violates their human rights, and infringes on their very life.

Sexual discrimination encompasses gender issues and sexuality as well as sexual violence. In that sense, we the Japan Baptist Convention, have openly practiced gender discrimination in our organization as a whole, and particularly in the areas directly connected with convention policies and activities, such as pastor training and the formation of local congregations.

We now reflect back on the system that produced this sexual discrimination and through our confession we hereby resolve to become more aware of our subconscious prejudices, to learn, to repent, and to eliminate anything that would grant tacit approve of any sexual discrimination.

We the Japan Baptist Convention have proclaimed to society liberation in the Gospel of Jesus Christ, and in so doing have critically confronted various traditional Japanese ideas and values that form the basis of our culture of sexual discrimination. Nevertheless, we further confess that within our Convention we have preserved uncritically a system of male superiority. It could even be said that we have used that system to our best advantage.

For a long time, this system has been intrinsic to our understanding of faith and the church, and to biblical interpretation strongly influencing our way of believing, thinking, and behaving. Moreover, this approach to faith, the church, and biblical interpretation was clearly represented in the Baptist Faith and Message, 2000, of the Southern Baptist Convention.

Under a solidified biblical interpretation that said that women may teach only when they do not usurp the rights and leadership of men, we have excluded women from the pulpit and decision-making roles. By accepting the centrality of men, we have in our churches and the Convention put women at a severe disadvantage in terms of employment and working conditions, and we have often been oblivious to the actual situations of discrimination in which women have been forced to work.

We have perpetuated this sexual discrimination through education, through glorifying women's submission to men, and by establishing women's work as mainly with preschool children and through music. In many cases, women have been relegated to the kitchen. Putting women in the position of either having to acquiesce to these limitations or to resist them has led to division and unfortunate friction among women themselves.

Particularly in the area of theological education and in the process of matching pastors with churches this discrimination has been striking. Regardless of the individual's or their church's recognition of the call of God in their lives, many women have had the experience of been being told that because they are women their choices are reduced.

This structural, organizational sexual discrimination is incompatible with the Baptist principle as expressed in the 1979 Japan Baptist Convention Confession of Faith. "All believers are to participate equally in the proclamation of the gospel." In spite of the pain felt by those who experienced this gender discrimination and the courage they exhibited in speaking out to raise the issue, we have been insufficiently aware of how far we fall short of that 1979 Confession, failing to recognize both the discrepancies in our understanding of faith and our indifference as we continued to form local congregations and promote major Convention policies and activities. We repent of our insensitivity and irresponsibility, revealed most clearly in our attitudes that expected and even demanded forgiveness and reconciliation from those who have been hurt most by the system which we have perpetuated.

Already through personal interaction, study, and awareness, we have begun to right the wrong. However, structures, organizations, personally held prejudices, and daily routines cannot be swept away so easily. Currently, society is moving in the direction of strengthening a convenient prejudice toward women in order to preserve the status quo. In light of these current trends, we reiterate our conviction that we are always in danger of error, and as we take the position of thinking more highly of others than we think of ourselves, we seek to move forward in the leadership of the Lord.

To those whom we have excluded and ridiculed, from our hearts, we offer our sincerest apologies. Also, we painfully apologize to those who have missed the opportunity of reading this Confession together with us, as they are no longer with us in the Convention, simply because of the fact that we turned our backs on the demands of the gospel and failed to critically engage the sexual discrimination preserved in church and society. A way of true reconciliation for all of us, we believe, will come only by listening sincerely to the voices of those who have been hurt by discrimination.

We confess again to God that in this long walk of faith as the Japan Baptist Convention, sexual discrimination has loomed large and has been deeply ingrained. We confess now before God that as individuals, as churches, and in the organization of the Convention, we will seek to live in a new identity. We pray for God's help as we continue to learn from the Lord of the cross and the resurrection how to live out faithfully the Good News of equality and liberation.