



## From ABCUSA to CPBC: A Historical Analysis of Baptist Local Church Autonomy

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Rev. Dr. Francis Neil G. Jalando-on, ORCID No. 0009-0000-3657-8662

Director of Communication & Theology Faculty, Central Philippine University, Jaro, Iloilo City, Philippines

### Abstract

This paper investigates how the Convention of Philippine Baptist Churches (CPBC) can draw valuable lessons from the American Baptist Churches USA (ABCUSA) in applying the principle of local church autonomy. The concept of local autonomy was first introduced to the Philippines by American Baptist missionaries, profoundly shaping the development of Baptist ecclesiology in the country. Employing a historical research method, the study traces the evolution of local autonomy within the ABCUSA and examines its subsequent influence on the CPBC. The analysis reveals both strengths and challenges in implementing this principle across different cultural and organizational contexts. Key findings emphasize the importance of achieving a balanced approach to autonomy: one that preserves local church independence while fostering meaningful collaboration within the wider convention. To this end, the study recommends establishing clear operational guidelines, thoughtfully integrating Filipino cultural values such as bayanihan (community spirit) and the barangay system of communal thinking, and promoting inclusive, shared decision-making processes. The barangay tradition, rooted in pre-colonial community cooperation, encourages collective effort and mutual support, which can help bridge individual church autonomy with convention-wide unity by prioritizing shared goals and interconnected responsibility. Ultimately, the research concludes that true local autonomy for the CPBC does not equate to absolute independence or isolation. Instead, it involves empowering individual congregations to exercise responsible self-governance while nurturing interconnectedness, mutual support, and cooperative mission efforts across the convention. By adopting these insights from the ABCUSA experience and adapting them to the Philippine context, the CPBC can strengthen its organizational vitality and ecclesial unity.

**Keywords:** local autonomy; Baptist church; Baptist principle; Convention of Philippine Baptist Churches; American Baptist Churches USA; historical analysis



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## INTRODUCTION

The history of the Philippine Baptists did not start in the Philippines but in Spain. Rev. Eric Lund, a Swedish Baptist missionary, baptized Braulio Manikan through immersion in Barcelona, Spain, before May 1, 1898. He is regarded as the first Filipino Baptist and the first Philippine Baptist pastor. In Barcelona, Lund and Manikan began the translation of the Bible to Hiligaynon. Although they lacked the necessary funds, the two of them wanted to serve as missionaries in the Philippines. Eventually, Manikan and Lund were appointed as missionaries to the Philippines and received funding from the American Baptist Missionary

Union (ABMU) in 1900 to support their missionary venture in Iloilo, Philippines. They arrived in Iloilo City on May 3, 1900. In September of the same year, the first chapel was established and was renamed as the Jaro Evangelical Church. By virtue of the Comity Agreement of 1901, the Baptists were to do missions in Western Visayas, comprising the islands of Negros, Panay, Romblon, and Masbate (Sitoy, 1989). The local Baptist churches started organizing themselves into Kasapulanans, which is a Hiligaynon term that means the provincial association of local churches. In 1935, the local Baptist churches and Kasapulanans organized the Convention of Philippine Baptist Churches (Bunda, 1999).

The American Baptist missionaries shared the Gospel of salvation in Jesus Christ and the Baptist principles. They also introduced the principle of “local autonomy” as a guide to the leadership structure of Philippine Baptist Churches (Bunda, 1999). On May 23, 1935, the delegates from Baptist Churches approved the first CPBC By-Laws, whose preamble declares:

*To more intimately unite the Baptist Churches in the Philippines and the Baptist missionaries, to work more effectively for the spread of the Gospel ministry, to give more harmony to the work of the different Baptist churches in the Philippine Islands, and to promote and perpetuate the Baptist principles, including (a) the authority of the Bible, (b) the competency of the soul to work out its religious destiny, (c) a regenerated church membership, (d) the democracy and independence of the local church, (e) the separation of church and state, and (f) religious liberty, we do hereby ordain and establish these By-Laws (CPBC, 1935).*

The principle of “democracy and independence of the local church” has been taught like the principle of “local autonomy.” Subsequently, “local autonomy” has become the general principle adopted by local churches in the administration of their affairs.

The popular interpretation of local autonomy among CPBC-member churches is equated to the “three-self theory” developed by Henry Venn that the local church is self-governing, self-propagating, and self-supporting (Venn & Venn, 2022). Venn's three-self theory has been adopted and adapted by various mission organizations and denominations over the years. From various understandings of the three-self theory, diverse interpretations have flourished, and different applications have been integrated into the life and ministry of the Baptist churches. It has resulted to difficult issues, misconceptions, threats, and challenges; however, the benefits of local autonomy far outweigh the challenges the local Baptist churches of CPBC have experienced. Moreover, in the course of history, the principle of local autonomy has not only survived but also

become an essential part of the understanding and practice of the local churches and church-related institutions (Bunda, et al., 2005).

To better understand the Baptist principle of the local autonomy of the church, a review of the understanding of the American Baptist Churches USA about the principle of local autonomy is needed. By knowing the current understanding of the ABCUSA, the CPBC can learn from them how to go about that principle.

Specifically, this study sought to answer the following research questions:

1. What are the different interpretations and applications of the principle of local autonomy within the American Baptist Churches USA?
2. What lessons can be learned from history that are useful in formulating a definition and interpretation of the principle of local autonomy within the context of the CPBC?

## LITERATURE REVIEW

The American Baptist Churches USA (ABCUSA) website provides a brief history of its organization, including the formation of the Philadelphia Baptist Association in 1707. This association honors the autonomy of its constituent churches. Each church has the right to govern itself without interference from external entities. Local associations of churches serve as councils for ordination and discipline ministers and settle congregational disputes. The autonomy of the local church is a key distinctive of the Baptist denomination. The autonomous structure of each local church honors self-governance. The authority to make decisions rests with the members of that congregation. While churches may choose to work together in associations or conventions, each church remains independent and is not subject to the authority of any external hierarchy.

The principle of local church autonomy is grounded in the belief in priesthood of all

believers and the authority of Scripture. According to this view, each believer has direct access to God and can interpret the Scripture. No external entity, such as a bishop or church hierarchy, has the right to impose its interpretation of Scripture on a local congregation. Overall, the ABCUSA highlights the significance of local autonomy throughout its history.

In addition, the American Baptist Churches has two valuable documents that shed light on the official stand of the American Baptist Churches in relation to local autonomy; "Autonomy and Interdependence within the American Baptist Denomination: A Declaration" and the other is a theological commentary of that declaration.

Adopted in December 1983 by the General Board of the ABCUSA, this document, "Autonomy and Interdependence within the American Baptist Denomination: A Declaration" delves deeply into the intricate relationship between autonomy and interdependence within the denomination. It clarifies the historical and theological underpinnings of the delicate balance between autonomy and interdependence.

The document traces the historical development of both autonomy and interdependence within the ABCUSA, from its earliest roots to the 1970s. This context proves crucial in understanding the evolution of current practices. Key terms like "autonomy," "interdependence," and "covenant" are clearly defined, establishing a solid foundation for understanding the principle and practice of local autonomy.

The document consistently emphasizes the importance of individual and congregational autonomy, reflecting a core Baptist value. Moreover, it acknowledges the need for collaboration and cooperation among various Baptist organizations for effective mission fulfillment, thus respecting interdependence while preserving autonomy. This delicate balance is framed through the concept of covenants, emphasizing collaboration based on shared values and commitment rather than

legalistic structures. The document respects diversity by acknowledging the right of each organization to interpret and modify understandings within the established framework, embracing diverse perspectives. This document, however, did not provide concrete examples of how autonomy and interdependence function in actual practice.

Overall, this document stands as a significant resource for comprehending the intricate interplay between autonomy and interdependence within the ABCUSA. By exploring its strengths and areas for further consideration, it can serve as a thought-provoking catalyst for ongoing reflection and dialogue within the denomination.

In July 1985, Larry Greenfield and other members of the ABCUSA Task Force on Autonomy and Interdependence drafted a paper entitled "A Theological Commentary on Autonomy and Interdependence within the American Baptist Denomination: A Declaration." This insightful theological commentary explores the core values defining the denomination's identity and mission.

The document clearly articulates two fundamental values: dependence on God and interdependence among God's creatures, alongside the freedom of individuals, congregations, and associations to respond to God's will. Grounding these values in both Scripture and Baptist history, the commentary demonstrates their enduring significance within the denomination. It rightfully acknowledges the potential dangers of distorting value at the expense of the other, leading to detrimental consequences. The focus on voluntary interdependence, emphasizing free commitment and shared responsibility within covenants, underscores the dynamic nature of Baptist cooperation. The commentary concludes with a compelling call for American Baptists to embody these values through active collaboration in ministry and mission.

This document offers a significant contribution to understanding the theological grounding of

autonomy and interdependence within the ABCUSA. By exploring its strengths and areas for further consideration, it can serve as a thought-provoking resource for reflection and dialogue within the denomination.

## METHODS

This paper primarily used the historical method, also known as historical research, to review the history of local autonomy. The historical method collects and analyzes data to interpret the influence of events and phenomena (Wilhite, 2023).

Based on the available sources of data, the historical method discovers causes and effects and helps explain the development of events and stories and predicts future changes and trends to reconstruct the past (More, 2023). The process of the historical method starts by selecting a topic and preparing questions related to the topic. It uses published and unpublished primary sources and secondary data and pays more attention to primary sources that provide firsthand and reliable information about the topic. All data collected are critically analyzed to recapture and reconstruct meaningful events, make inferences, draw relationships, and identify trends from past to present and future (Lune & Berg, 2016). Although historical research is an iterative process of interpreting and reinterpreting data based on existing knowledge and emerging insights, the historian's own background and interpretive lens inevitably influence the analysis (Gadamer, 2004).

This study primarily relied on primary sources published in books and online resources of the American Baptist Churches USA.

In examining the principle of local autonomy, this study used the method of "historical theology" (Dreyer & Pillay, 2017) in addition to "historical research." Historical theology is "the branch of theological inquiry which aims to explore the historical development of Christian doctrines and identify the factors which were

influential in their formulation and adoption" (McGrath, 2013). Historical theology can contribute to the development of critical awareness of the past and current theological discourses on local autonomy. "Historical theology, when properly structured and presented, could play a major role in enriching the theological and ecclesial conversation and in assisting the church in the process of reformation and transformation" (Dreyer & Pillay, 2017).

In this study, "context" refers to the Philippine context, and it refers to the unique cultural, historical, and social environment of the Philippines. It includes factors such as the country's colonial history, the blend of cultural values with Christianity, the impact of a colonial mentality on the adoption of foreign religious practices, and the need for contextualization of Christian theology to address the specific needs of the Filipino people (Diestro, 2011).

## RESULTS

**The different interpretations and applications of the principle of local autonomy within the American Baptist Churches USA.** The principle of local church autonomy within the American Baptist Churches USA (ABCUSA) has been consistently affirmed throughout its history, yet its interpretation and application have developed in response to changing historical, theological, and organizational contexts. Rather than being a static concept, local autonomy in ABCUSA reflects a dynamic balance between congregational self-governance and voluntary interdependence.

**Interpretations of Local Autonomy.** First, local autonomy is interpreted historically as the absolute self-governance of the local congregation. From the formation of the Philadelphia Baptist Association in 1707, American Baptists upheld the conviction that each congregation possesses the authority to govern its own affairs. While churches gathered for consultation, ordination, and mutual support, associations were understood to be advisory rather than authoritative. This

interpretation firmly rejected hierarchical control, affirming that no external body could impose decisions on a local church.

Second, local autonomy is interpreted theologically through the priesthood of all believers and the authority of Scripture. Each believer, and by extension each congregation, is believed to have direct access to God and the responsibility to interpret Scripture under the guidance of the Holy Spirit. Consequently, no bishop, convention, or denominational hierarchy has the authority to dictate doctrine or practice to a local congregation. This theological interpretation remains a defining Baptist distinctive within ABCUSA.

Third, local autonomy is interpreted relationally as freedom exercised within covenantal relationships. While autonomy affirms independence, it does not imply isolation. Baptist forebears understood both the local church and the universal church as valid expressions of the body of Christ. This understanding laid the groundwork for later developments in which autonomy coexists with voluntary cooperation, framed not by legal authority but by covenantal commitment.

***Applications of Local Autonomy.*** In practice, local autonomy has been applied through advisory associations and conventions. Early Baptist associations, including the Philadelphia Baptist Association, provided counsel, guidance, and fellowship without exercising coercive authority. Although churches were expected to respect and seriously consider the counsel of associations, final decision-making authority remained with the congregation. Withdrawal of fellowship, rather than discipline or control, was the strongest action an association could take.

At the denominational level, local autonomy has been applied through limited and advisory national structures. The Northern Baptist Convention, established in 1907, explicitly declared that denominational bodies were advisory in nature. Even as organizational coordination increased during the twentieth

century, denominational authority was intentionally restricted to avoid undermining congregational independence.

A significant application of local autonomy emerged in the 1983 Covenant of Relationships adopted by the ABCUSA. This covenant clarified that all American Baptist churches and organizations remain free to enter into, amend, or withdraw from cooperative agreements. The covenant is not legally binding but serves as a voluntary and provisional framework for cooperation in mission and ministry. This approach reflects an application of autonomy that preserves freedom while enabling coordinated action.

Further applications of local autonomy are evident in financial and organizational arrangements, such as the American Baptist Mission Fund and the General Staff Council. Congregations retain discretion in allocating mission funds, choosing whether to support all or selected denominational initiatives. Similarly, councils and boards function as forums for discussion and guidance rather than legislative bodies. Their resolutions express collective discernment but carry no binding authority over local churches.

Finally, contemporary ABCUSA practice applies local autonomy through a balanced model of autonomy and interdependence. While congregations remain fully self-governing, they voluntarily participate in regional, national, and international cooperation for evangelism and social outreach. This model reflects an evolved understanding of autonomy, not as independence from others, but as freedom exercised responsibly within a shared mission.

**Lessons from history that are useful in formulating a definition and interpretation of the principle of local autonomy within the context of the CPBC.**

***First, balancing autonomy with structured relationships.*** This aligns with the insight about balancing autonomy and interdependence. The ABCUSA model respects local church autonomy while promoting collaboration. The finding

underscores the CPBC's need for a structured relationship, similar to the ABCUSA's framework, where the CPBC, Kasapulanans, and the local church operate within a clear structure that promotes cooperation. The CPBC can develop guidelines that balance autonomy with engagement, reflecting the covenantal approach seen in the ABCUSA.

**Second, embracing congregational autonomy and collaboration in the Baptist tradition.** This mirrors the insight that local autonomy must be respected but can benefit from interdependence. The ABCUSA's model shows that while churches govern themselves, they still rely on collaboration for shared resources and strategies. This finding highlights the devolution of centralized control by assigning matters like statement of faith, education of pastors, and ordination of pastors to the CPBC and its related institutions.

**Third, contextualization: weaving Filipino culture into local autonomy.** This finding reflects the insights on integrating Filipino cultural traits, such as barangay and bayanihan, into CPBC's framework. Just as the ABCUSA model encourages cooperation while respecting autonomy, the CPBC can draw on the communal spirit of Filipino culture to strengthen local autonomy and collaboration. The vine and branches metaphor of Jesus complements this, symbolizing unity and interdependence.

**Fourth, promoting interdependence among local churches.** This aligns with the insight that interdependence is crucial for collective growth. The ABCUSA model illustrates the benefits of churches working together, and the finding suggests that the CPBC should develop mechanisms for mutual support. Emphasizing interdependence, like the bayanihan spirit, will strengthen the denomination and ensure that churches contribute to the collective strength.

## DISCUSSION

**The Birth of the American Baptist Churches.** In 1707, the formation of the Philadelphia Baptist Association took place, comprising five

congregations in New Jersey and Pennsylvania. This initiative led to the establishment of more associations of local churches, resulting in approximately 48 such associations across the United States by the year 1800. During the 19th century, Baptists began collaborating in national organizations with specific focuses, primarily centered around overseas missionary efforts. In 1824, the American Baptist Publication Society was established, followed by the formation of the American Baptist Home Mission Society in 1832 (Goodwin, 2002).

The slavery issue reached a critical point in 1845 when the American Baptist Foreign Mission Society declared that individuals holding slaves could not be appointed for service. Additionally, the American Baptist Home Mission Society decided that separate conventions for the northern and southern regions were necessary. Consequently, the Southern Baptists formed their independent organization in 1845, known as the Southern Baptist Convention. The mission and publication societies continued to operate independently in the North and West until their integration into the Northern Baptist Convention in 1907 (Vedder, 1907).

During this historical period, the American Baptist Missionary Union (ABMU) decided to provide funding for Braulio Manikan and Eric Lund to carry out missionary work in the Philippines. Subsequently, American missionaries from the Northern Baptist Convention arrived in the Philippines (Bunda, 1999).

In 1950, the Northern Baptist Convention underwent a name change to the American Baptist Convention. Further organizational adjustments occurred in 1972, resulting in another name change to American Baptist Churches USA (ABCUSA, 2022).

**American Baptist Churches' Understanding of Local Autonomy.** When the Baptists arrived in North America, they continued to connect to churches with kindred spirit. The Baptist churches of Middletown, Piscataway, Cohansey, and Philadelphia gathered for baptism,

ordination, celebrating the Lord's Supper, and worship (Stewart, 1997). On September 25, 1742, in Philadelphia, they organized themselves into the Philadelphia Baptist Association and formulated a confession of faith (Philadelphia Baptist Association, 1818).

The significance of the Philadelphia Baptist Association touches on at least five main aspects of Baptist church life in America. First and foremost, the Association serves as the foundation for all major Baptist entities in the United States. Second, it serves as a quasi-national Baptist association for many years. Third, others adopt its organizational structure as new associations were founded. Fourth, the Association serves as a source of guidance and solidarity. Many new organizations retained a close relationship with the "mother association." Fifth, the Philadelphia Baptist Confession was the most influential of all Baptist confessions in the United States until it fell to disuse in the 19th century (Stewart, 1997).

The Philadelphia Baptist Association's principal objective is to consult together about such things as are wanting in the churches and take the required steps to set them in order. The association does not compel churches to accept its advice and guidance; however, churches are expected to seek assistance from the association. Local churches would send their delegates to the assembly of the association. These delegates have deliberated matters and would make corresponding resolutions. The local church is supposed to follow its delegates' judgment. However, the association also made it plain that the Baptists believed that the association lacks clear authority to deal with issues within local churches (Hiscox, 1894).

At the request of the Philadelphia Baptist Association, Benjamin Griffith wrote "A Short Treatise of Church Discipline" (Griffith, 1743) to explain further the role of the association. In summary, the Association has limited authority over local churches, maintaining the autonomy of each church. It cannot control ordination, censure, or excommunication, as these are responsibilities of the local church. However,

local churches are expected to seriously consider the Association's counsel and implement agreed-upon policies. While the Association's decisions are collaborative, not hierarchical, rejecting its advice can lead to the loss of fellowship with other member churches. Membership is based on shared faith and practices, and the Association can withdraw fellowship from churches that deviate from these standards, ensuring doctrinal stability and accountability (Stewart, 1997).

Baptist foreparents clearly held a balanced perspective of the church. They firmly believed in both the local and universal church and maintained a balance of this perspective in their faith and practice. The local church was viewed as an embodiment of the church of Christ and thus fiercely protected. They also view their association as an expression of the universal church.

Despite increased cooperation and interdependence during the first half of the 20th century, autonomy has remained the defining characteristic of the American Baptist Churches. Upon its establishment in 1907, the Northern Baptist Convention is entrusted with an extremely restricted set of responsibilities.

A Manual of the Northern Baptist Convention prepared by the Executive Committee in 1918 declares the following:

*The Northern Baptist Convention declares its belief in the independence of the local church, and in the purely advisory nature of all denominational organizations composed of representatives of churches. It believes also that, in view of the growth of the Baptist denomination and its extension throughout our country, there is need for an organization to serve the common interests of the entire denomination as State and district organizations serve their respective constituencies.* (A Manual of the Northern Baptist Convention, 1918).

This declaration clarifies the role of the denominations as advisory in nature. The

denominational reorganizations occurred in 1950, when the Northern Baptist Convention was renamed the American Baptist Convention, and in 1961 interdependence and coordination made progress, without posing a challenge to the autonomy of the congregations.

Over the years, the balance of giving authority to the ABCUSA as a denomination has been discussed. In 1983 the ABCUSA made a significant step to define the association's role and the local autonomy of the church. A report states:

*Even though the opportunities for coordination and interdependence were increased, neither by intention nor by new bylaw provisions were the appropriate autonomies of covenanting or affiliating organizations changed. Rather, these modifications recognized and clarified the nature of the relationships of the 42 cooperating American Baptist organizations (1 General, 4 National and 37 Regional or affiliating Organizations). The creation of a basic Covenant of Relationships and a series of Statements of Agreements underlines that fact. No single, all-inclusive denominational entity emerged as the "American Baptist Church" (The American Baptist, 1983)*

This desire for a balance of freedom and order resulted in their having no centralized authority for all decision-making within the denomination. The areas of life and mission that were to be coordinated were described by a voluntary Covenant of Relationships and its related Statements of Agreement.

The denomination's history shows a shift to interdependence in the latter part of the twentieth century. It would be incorrect to read such movement as a rejection of the Baptist concept of autonomy. Rather, American Baptists have improved the meaning of autonomy by creating important measures toward modifying the balance between freedom and order. While the balancing point may shift over time and among covenanting parties, Baptist tradition and intention will continue to include both

autonomy and interdependence, without one overcoming the other.

In 1983, with the move towards more interdependence, the ABCUSA made a Covenant of Relationships among American Baptist churches and American Baptist organizations. The document clarified the following:

*Any of the 42 eligible American Baptist organizations, seeking to order its life in accordance with the Scriptures under the guidance of the Holy Spirit, is free to enter and affirm the Covenant of Relationships or free not to enter into the Covenant of Relationships. Any American Baptist organization which has entered the Covenant of Relationships is free to seek to amend it or to withdraw from it at any time (The American Baptist, 1983).*

The Covenant of Relationships is not a legal document that binds the churches and organizations. Rather, "it is temporal and provisional statement of the balance of freedom and order which many American Baptist organizations freely choose for working together to carry out the task of Christian mission and ministry" (The American Baptist, 1983).

The Covenant of Relationships clarifies the following areas: Statement of Agreement on the American Baptist Mission Fund, The General Staff Council, and American Baptist Organizations.

The Statement of Agreement on the American Baptist Mission Fund presents a balance between the local autonomy of American Baptist congregations and their connection to a wider denominational network. The agreement allows for flexibility in designating contributions. Congregations can choose to share their shares with all participating organizations or restrict them to specific ones. This grants a degree of autonomy to individual congregations in supporting wider missions; however, the scope of autonomy remains within the framework of approved denominational missions (The American Baptist, 1983).

The American Baptist model balances local decision-making with accountability to the denomination. Congregations enjoy flexibility in contributing but adhere to shared denominational goals and oversight. This model shows how local autonomy exists within a defined framework. Furthermore, the ABCUSA made the following agreement on the General Staff Council:

*The General Staff Council provides a forum for the discussion by its members of matters of concern to American Baptists, fosters collegiality and accountability among its members, and nurtures a spirit of unity and cooperation. Actions and statements of the General Staff Council are advisory in nature, and when duly adopted, they express the mind of the General Staff Council (The American Baptist, 1983).*

While the actions and statements of the General Staff Council are not binding, they represent the collective viewpoint of the council. The Staff Council view normally considers the local churches' view; thus, it can be seen as advice on which direction the ABCUSA, as a denomination, should go. The resolutions of the Staff Council can be adopted by local congregations.

The ABCUSA also made a covenant on American Baptist Organizations:

*Each American Baptist organization is autonomous, and the board of directors of each has legally defined powers and responsibilities with respect to the management of its affairs and property, none of which is altered by the Covenant of Relationships...American Baptist boards in inter-board relationships have no power to legislate in the legal sense. When, under the Covenant of Relationships, these boards enact Policy Statements and Resolutions, they have only the power and the responsibility to express the sense of their members, duly elected and duly delegated pursuant to the Covenant of Relationships, on matters of concern and importance to American Baptists. When Policy Statements and Resolutions are adopted by a board, they*

*express the mind of that board, and the covenanting parties agree to give them due respect and weight and be guided by them in a spirit of unity and cooperation under the Lordship of Christ (The American Baptist, 1983).*

This covenant affirms the independence of each American Baptist organization. Their boards hold ultimate authority over their own affairs and property. Inter-board relationships cannot dictate policies for other organizations. Their statements and resolutions only express the collective understanding of their members within the framework of the Covenant of Relationships.

The ABCUSA Covenant Relationships of 1983 is a step toward defining the relationship between the denomination and the local American Baptist churches and the American Baptist organizations.

As of 2024, the website (<https://www.abc-usa.org/>) of the American Baptist Churches offers a description of local autonomy. It affirms the Covenant Relationships of 1983. It mentions the belief in autonomy as a key distinctive of the Baptist denomination. Churches have the option to collaborate through associations or conventions; each church maintains its autonomy and is not subordinate to any external leadership. An examination of its historical background reveals the concept of local church autonomy based on a conviction in the priesthood of all Christians and the supremacy of Scripture. Every believer has immediate access to God and the capacity to independently interpret Scripture. A local congregation is not subject to the authority of any other organization, such as a bishop or church hierarchy when it comes to interpreting Scripture. The website states the ABCUSA belief on "Autonomy and Interdependence":

*While embracing autonomy from the state, American Baptists long have affirmed the principle of interdependence. This recognizes that the Holy Spirit is at work in congregations and other organized bodies and that great things can be done in God's name through*

*cooperation. In American Baptist Churches, the cooperative efforts of approximately 5,000 congregations, 33 regional organizations and a number of national and international agencies have resulted in fruitful accomplishments in evangelism and social outreach (ABCUSA, 2022).*

Balancing self-governance and joint action, the American Baptist Churches USA (ABCUSA) embraces both autonomy and interdependence. The American Baptists emphasize separation from state influence, a historical pillar of their identity. It is in this context that autonomy and interdependence are understood. They also believe in collaboration, with which many things could be done. This translates into a structured framework where congregations, regional bodies, and national agencies cooperate, to achieve impactful evangelism and social outreach. This balance offers flexibility to individual congregations while amplifying their reach through joint efforts, fostering a shared identity and purpose.

**Insights from ABCUSA and Implications to the CPBC.** The ABCUSA's understanding of local autonomy offers valuable insights for the CPBC in its quest to understand and contextualize local autonomy within a wider denominational scope. Henceforth, the following are the key takeaways:

First, in balancing autonomy and interdependence, the local autonomy of the local congregation must be respected. Congregations have the right to govern themselves, manage their affairs, and interpret scripture independently.

Second, the local congregations can benefit from interdependence. The ABCUSA model demonstrates the advantages of cooperation and collaboration among churches. Sharing resources, expertise, and strategies can increase impact and achieve greater good. The CPBC can learn from the barangay and bayanihan culture of the Philippines, which can be used to further improve local autonomy and interdependence.

The term "barangay" is derived from the word "balangay," a type of boat used by early Filipino settlers and is the pre-colonial traditional boat of the Philippines (Camus, n.d). The term was later adopted to refer to the smallest administrative unit in the Philippines, consisting of 50 to 100 families under a Barangay Captain or a headman (Merriam-Webster, n.d.). The connection between the traditional boat and the modern administrative division symbolizes unity, cooperation, and community, reflecting the importance of collaborating and working together as one extended family or community. The bayanihan culture refers to the spirit of communal unity, cooperation, and helping one another. The term is derived from the Filipino word bayan, meaning "community" or "nation." Bayanihan is often associated with the tradition of a community coming together to help a family move their house to a new location. In the traditional bayanihan practice, the entire community gathers to physically lift and carry the entire house, often made of bamboo and nipa palm, to its new site. This task is challenging and difficult but can be accomplished through the collective effort and cooperation of the community. The literal act of moving houses is less common in contemporary times, but the spirit of bayanihan remains an important aspect of Filipino culture that emphasizes the value of unity, cooperation, and mutual community support (Unating, 2006).

Third, a framework for collaboration can be established. The ABCUSA's Covenant of Relationships provides a clear framework for cooperation while respecting individual autonomy. The framework for collaboration can be flexible and adaptable to evolving needs and circumstances. The CPBC could consider a similar covenant outlining areas of collaboration and shared responsibility. Taking a clue from the spirit of barangay and bayanihan, collaboration and accountability among churches and CPBC can be outlined.

Furthermore, the General Staff Council in the ABCUSA serves as an advisory body, fostering discussion and offering guidance without imposing decisions. The CPBC could consider

similar structures for collective deliberation and recommendation. What could be the advisory body in bayanihan? Is this advisory body a team or part of the leadership who are skilled or expert in transferring houses and know the way to the new location of the house or how many steps will it take to reach it? This body may also discuss the general plan and see how it can be implemented effectively and efficiently so that the house is transferred safely and in a timely fashion.

The ABCUSA model has a structured communication channel. Establishing clear channels for communication and information sharing between local churches and denominational bodies is crucial for effective collaboration. The CPBC can deliberate and decide on a structured communication channel. What is the communication pattern or channel of bayanihan from the initial plan, during the implementation, and post-implementation of transferring a house? The bayanihan approach to moving a house thrives on a dynamic communication style. It begins with discussions within the community, with communication flowing through a mix of individual suggestions and group decisions. During the move itself, a designated leader ensures everyone moves in unison through clear commands, often involving hand signals or shouts. The situation dictates adjustments, so ongoing communication between the leader and helpers is crucial. Finally, after the successful move, the community reflects on the process through informal discussions, potentially shaping how they communicate during future bayanihan events. This emphasis on clarity fosters a successful bayanihan experience.

By carefully analyzing the ABCUSA model and tailoring it to its specific context, the CPBC can develop a framework for fostering collaboration and achieving shared goals while respecting the autonomy of local churches.

The Bayanihan model exemplifies the importance of collaboration. In moving a house together, everyone is chosen based on their strengths. They work in unison, listening

attentively to the leader's commands. A single misstep could jeopardize the entire effort, potentially causing the house to collapse and injuring or even killing those involved. This highlights the need for collaboration, balanced with autonomy and interdependence. By working together effectively, it can avoid accidents and achieve a common goal, which is a journey towards a new fertile location or spirituality, to a more abundant life (John 10:10).

To sum up, by examining the historical examples from the American Baptist Churches USA, this study offers valuable insights for the CPBC to develop a framework for local autonomy that fosters a vibrant and collaborative community of churches. This framework should be carefully considered and contextualized to the unique realities of the Philippines and the member churches within the CPBC. It should empower individual churches to flourish in their specific contexts while also contributing to the collective strength and unity of the denomination.

**Conclusion.** This study explored the principle of local autonomy, focusing on the practices of the American Baptist Churches USA. By examining historical narratives, the research uncovered valuable lessons for the CPBC, particularly in balancing autonomy and interdependence. The findings highlight the need for contextual sensitivity in defining and interpreting local autonomy within the CPBC's context. Drawing on Filipino cultural traits like Bayanihan and Barangay, the study envisions a model where local churches are both empowered and interconnected, fostering an inclusive church structure that encourages self-governance while maintaining collaboration.

In conclusion, local autonomy for the CPBC is about balancing self-governance with connection, collaboration, and cooperation. It empowers local churches to flourish in their unique contexts while remaining part of a wider community of faith, like the interconnectedness described in 1 Corinthians 12:12-27, where the body of Christ is comprised of many parts, each with its own function.

Local autonomy for the CPBC is also about empowering local churches to govern themselves in areas such as worship practices, ministry programs, leadership selection, and financial management. However, this autonomy is not synonymous with isolation; local churches remain part of a broader community of faith, connected by shared values and the mission of the CPBC. While local autonomy grants the freedom to innovate and address the unique needs of their communities, it does not equate to absolute independence. Churches are accountable to the denomination, expected to uphold core Baptist principles and maintain alignment with the collective mission of the CPBC.

Furthermore, local autonomy is not an excuse to disregard the authority of the CPBC, particularly in areas such as doctrinal teaching and the ordination of pastors. Instead, autonomy exists within a framework of cooperation and mutual support. Local churches are encouraged to engage in dialogue, share resources, and collaborate with other churches and the denomination as a whole. This balanced approach to autonomy, rooted in Filipino values of cooperation and community, allows churches to thrive independently while contributing to the collective strength and unity of the CPBC.

**Recommendations.** Building on the significance of this study, the following recommendations are offered for the benefit of various stakeholders:

**CPBC.** This study provides valuable insights into the concept of local church autonomy. By understanding its historical background and core principles, the CPBC can utilize these findings to inform their ongoing efforts to improve their organizational structures.

**Kasapulan.** The Kasapulan can leverage the knowledge gained from this study to develop strategies for supporting local churches in structuring themselves based on the principles of local autonomy.

**Local Baptist churches.** This research empowers local Baptist churches to explore practical applications of local autonomy within their own organizational frameworks. Church members can also gain a deeper understanding of their role in shaping and improving their church's structure.

**Researchers and scholars.** This study offers valuable findings on the historical and contemporary understanding of local autonomy within Baptist churches. Researchers and those interested in the principle's impact on church growth can utilize this knowledge to further explore this important concept.

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