

Is the Canonicus Question one of Honor and Integrity

“Did you really say that out loud?”

“Did you really say that out loud” has become a comic response and usually makes me laugh in social settings because we have become a culture that often hides from direct conversation – especially around ‘specific topics’. We would be remiss if we failed to acknowledge that the Canonicus property issue has a critical historical and theological question. Honoring promises and commitments are not just an individual issue but an organizational issue as well.

What are you talking about? Let’s look back at Canonicus history.

Canonicus was created in 1948 when the Sweet Family gave their farm for \$100.00 to establish a Christian camp for the RI Baptist. In 1980 the Baptist Camps of RI (a separate non-profit from ABCORI Inc.) transfers the property to ABCORI Inc. for \$1.00 for “All the assets real and personal that are conveyed as the result of this merger are to be used for Camping and Conferencing until such time as it is determined by the American Baptist Churches of Rhode Island in session that Camping and Conferencing is no longer feasible.”

The Sweet family didn’t sell at market value—they transferred the land for \$100 specifically to create a Christian camp. Was the Sweet farm worth more than \$100? Obviously Yes, it was a gift. Was it a gift with clear purpose or simply a random act of kindness? Obviously, a gift for specific mission.

Was the 1980 merger and transfer of land from Baptist Camps of RI to ABCORI for \$1.00 based on current land value. Obviously not, it represented a stewardship commitment for a specific mission of camping and conferencing. The 1980 merger wasn’t a typical sale—it was symbolic. ABCORI inherited a mission, not just an asset.

Some consider this to be a non-issue. Whereas others consider it to be a central issue because it brings into focus core values of our Christian faith – trust, integrity, commitment, and honoring our commitments. We celebrate the practice of marriage vows; the promise of love and kindness and fidelity toward our partner. Failure to honor our commitments and promises is unacceptable. We’ve all seen how failed commitments impact the couple.

Organizations run a significant risk as well because they depend on credibility. If one promise is abandoned, it casts doubt on all others. Honoring past commitments

is less about the past itself and more about safeguarding the future. Integrity means consistency between words and actions across time. Do commitments made in the past lose their moral weight over time?

What if situations change in the future? It depends on the promise – to consider marriage again – ‘in sickness and in health’. Circumstances changing the commitment itself? I don’t think so.

Organizational commitments are a bit more complicated and I find it interesting that the wisdom of 1980 recognized that ministry methods do change. The gospel never changes but how we communicate the gospel may shift from one method to another. Some folks have taken the final clause of the 1980 promise and pronounced ‘*camping and conferencing is no longer feasible*’. The burden is on the organization to demonstrate genuine infeasibility, not make a capricious decision based on simple preference or financial optimization. One must not create rationalizations to free one’s conscience from the promise that this land was given for a specific ministry purpose. If such a foundational promise can be set aside, it raises a broader question: what assurances can future partners, donors, or communities rely upon?

Difficult and challenging times is not the same thing as feasibility. Canonicus Ministries has provided clear evidence that camp and conference ministry is still impacting lives for Christ and is a feasible enterprise. Please review the data. Ask for another copy. And we are not alone in our messaging. Recently the Lilly Endowment announced a \$45.5 million dollar grant to improve and celebrate character development at summer camps. Why such a large grant? Because they have spent the last decade funding research on camp outcomes and they have the data to show what we have heard through ‘testimony’ for years. Camps and conferences impact lives – character development can happen in both Christian and secular camps. But what greater impact than the formation of spiritual character from the Christian camp setting.

Canonicus Ministries is a non-profit organization with a focused mission on “changing lives & communities with the good news of Christ”. As referenced in our proposal we are committed to serve ABCORI churches, other faith communities and the community at large.

The delegates of ABCORI have the opportunity to honor the intent of those who have preceded us and vote to transfer the property to Canonicus Ministries to continue American Baptist ministry.

One might ask why the Canonicus Ministries folks are going to do a better job at renewing the camp and conference ministry than keeping it under the direct control of ABCORI? Many reasons are outlined in our proposal in terms of experienced leadership, professionally crafted plans, financial commitments for success, and God's leading. And here is one more critically important reality.

The ABCORI organization's primary focus is to offer direct support to member church congregations. Their mission has been and will be diluted if they were to try to renew camp and conference ministry at Canonicus. Successful organizations have focused mission. When there are limited resources, organizations will not survive unless they focus on their primary mission. Unless we focus on specific lanes, we risk diluting our impact; we lose our mission focus and begin what is called mission drift or mission creep. Canonicus Ministries will be focused on camps and conferences and will fulfill our mission – standing strong in our heritage we will fulfill the moral duty of past promises and moving forward we will continue to impact lives for Christ.

Post Script:

As C.S. Lewis observed, "Integrity is doing the right thing, even when no one is watching." In this case, many are watching—members of the community, beneficiaries of the camp's mission, and those who believe that commitments made in good faith should endure across generations. The decision is therefore not merely procedural; it is moral.

1 Corinthians 4:2

"Now it is required that those who have been given a trust must prove faithful.

Exodus 20:12

"Honor your father and your mother..." made the top ten list.

Ecclesiastes 5:4–5

"When you make a vow to God, do not delay to fulfill it... It is better not to make a vow than to make one and not fulfill it."