

## AWAB Gathers in Denver and Boulder for Worshiping and Inspiring

by Ken Pennings

Responding to the theme of the 2005 Biennial of the American Baptist Churches USA, we “lifted up our eyes,” not just to the beauty of the mountains to the west of the host city Denver, but to the One from whom our help comes (Psalm 121). And we gathered joyfully for worship and encouragement with sisters and brothers of the Association of Welcoming & Affirming Baptists.

Many of us had come to Denver for the July 1-3 meetings with foreboding. There were rumors of a number of divisive ploys that would be attempted to exclude AWAB churches and to overturn

the basic Baptist principles of freedom of conscience and local church autonomy. A pre-Biennial article in *The Christian Century* suggested that even a denominational split was in the offing. Thankfully, these attempts largely failed, at least for the time being. In actions of the General Board, the debate on statements of concern, and in the major addresses by General Secretary Roy Medley and others, the message was consistent: we may not agree on certain issues – indeed may strongly disagree – but we do not want to allow these differences to break us apart (See the reflections by Wyatt Watkins on pg. 7 in this issue.)

The AWAB events during the Biennial were inspiring and uplifting. On Friday we gathered for our biennial business meeting. Here the membership learned that AWAB had retired its \$16,000 debt and had \$11,000 in the bank. That was good news. The ten churches that have joined AWAB during the past two years were recognized with membership certificates. They are: Jeff Street Baptist Community Church, Louisville, Kentucky; United Parish, Brookline, Massachusetts; Christ Church, Summit, New Jersey; Good Shepherd Baptist Church, Buffalo, New York; Wedgewood Baptist Church, Charlotte, North Carolina; Wake Forest Baptist Church, Winston-Salem, North Carolina; Peace Community Church, Oberlin, Ohio; Glendale Baptist Church, Nashville, Tennessee; Church of the Savior, Cedar Park, Texas; and Underwood Memorial Baptist Church, Wauwatosa, Wisconsin.

A highlight of past AWAB business meetings has been the awarding of the Randle R. Mixon Award for Christian Service. This year that award was joined

## Pennings Named Executive Director of Welcoming & Affirming Baptists

by David Gregg

With great pleasure I introduce to you the Reverend Kenneth L. Pennings who will serve as the executive director of the Association of Welcoming & Affirming Baptists (AWAB). Ken assumed leadership duties at the biennial meeting of AWAB held in conjunction with the Biennial of the America Baptist Churches USA, July 1-3 in Denver. The search committee and Council are convinced that, in these times of turmoil, opportunity, and discernment, Ken has been prepared for just such a time as this to nurture and grow the ministry of AWAB. He and

outgoing interim executive director Rev. Daniel Pryfogle worked together through much of June to coordinate the leadership transition and to transfer the AWAB office from Cary, North Carolina, to Madison, Wisconsin.

An ordained American Baptist minister, Ken’s ministry experience includes new church planting, fund raising, organizational development, coordination of social justice initiatives, and ecumenical educational opportunities. He holds B.A. (1979) and M. Div. degrees (1985) from Columbia International University in Columbia, South Carolina.

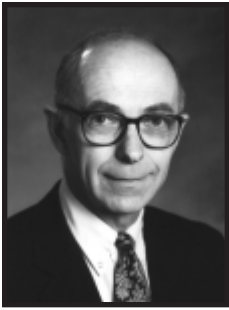
In speaking of his new challenge, Ken says, “At this stage of human his-



AWAB Pastor Craig Darling (Seattle, WA) presents the Barbra MacNair Award to Barbra MacNair.

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## Editorial

# For the Record

by H. Darrell Lance

Final preparations for this issue of *The InSpiriter* halted as we learned of serious and deeply distressing developments within the American Baptist family. Actions taken by the Board of Directors of the ABC of the Pacific Southwest and days later by a gathering in Lombard, Illinois, appear to have begun the long-feared departure of significant numbers of churches from the ABC over the issue of homosexuality. It is still too soon to know how all this will play out, but the breach appears to be irreparable at the national level; the centrifugal forces pulling the denomination apart have increased to the point of no return. What all this will mean for individual congregations, local associations, and the Regions is unclear.

Our first reaction must be one of sorrow and regret. No division in Christ's church is an occasion for joy. Those of us in the welcoming movement deeply believe that we have a message that will eventually be received by the whole church, but the reality is that only history will be able to judge; those of us living through these days, no matter what our viewpoint, see only dimly as in a mirror. If there are things that we could have done to avoid this moment without abandoning the gospel, then for that we must ask forgiveness.

The mission of the Association of Welcoming & Affirming Baptists is not to deal with broader issues of Baptist principles and polity nor specific denominational policies; there are others who are willing and highly qualified to articulate these concerns. However, since AWAB has been at the eye of the storm and has been the lightning rod for

those who oppose the welcoming theology, we do have a regard for how history will understand this moment.

Therefore I want to challenge several themes in the argument of the traditionalists which are being taken as givens by many observers but which I believe have distorted the debate and greatly contributed to this impending rupture.

The first theme that is repeated by the traditionalists—and also in the mainstream press—is that it is the policy of the American Baptist Churches USA that “the practice of homosexuality is incompatible with Christian teaching” and that it is the failure of the national staff and the General Board to enforce this policy that has created the current impasse. The enforcement failure is primarily manifest in the inability of the denomination to expel those congregations that are members of AWAB.

The polity of the ABCUSA at the national level is complex and cannot be untangled here. Some parts preserve the historic Baptist congregational understanding in which each congregation is free to work out its own theology and practice. Some parts have moved more toward an organic denominational or connectional polity with, for example, major responsibility for corporate matters vested in a representative body, the General Board (GB), rather than in the annual convention of churches. Not surprisingly, these differences create confusion and misunderstanding.

A central cause for misunderstanding is the status of actions taken by the GB. The GB determines policy for the national staff and program boards; its actions have no authority over Regions

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# Acts 1:1-11: The Gospel of Grief

by David Gregg

*David Gregg presented this message at the AWAB worship service in Denver on July 2. It has been slightly abridged here. The complete version may be found at [www.wabaptists.org](http://www.wabaptists.org).*

*David responds to the scripture reading in which Jesus appeared to and conversed with the Apostles after the passion, then ascended to Heaven before their eyes.*

**W**hat must that have been like? What a remarkable time! You could just walk with him and talk with him. He was right there, spiritually parenting you, raising you up like a mother hen her chicks. You could touch him. And you felt safe. Because you knew he would solve everything for you. He would open scripture to you in a way that made sense, often for the first time, and didn't your heart burn? And even if you made a mistake, misinterpreted something, or even did something wrong (like cutting the ear off a temple guard, say) he would fix it. Even the worst errors and betrayals, he would mend and forgive, and everything was okay again. What must that have been like!

Then, like a lightning bolt, like the unexpected death of a spouse, like the unexpected departure of a lover or a friend, he was gone. And even before you understood it intellectually, you knew in your heart it was going to be different from here on out.

Of course, our hearts broke. We had lost someone we loved. But our hearts broke for another reason, too. We lost the fantasy. We lost that feeling that everything was going to be all right. We lost that sense that we found in him, that God's love meant we had no worries. He had warned us it wasn't so. He said he had come to bring a sword, to divide us

as much as to make us one. He said that we would have nowhere to lay our heads. But we chose to ignore those parts. It's what happens in every unconscious relationship: we think we've got it made; we think we get a permanent pass on all the hardships of life, and especially on what we carry inside, the anxieties and insecurities, the guilt and the shame. And this time, it happened on a cosmic scale. The temple veil was rent. And we discovered one more time

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But grief is inseparable  
from what makes life  
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that in some fundamental way, we were alone, unprotected.

If you allow me to continue to be a bit mystical, I will tell you that I think this: Life is grief. Like Bob Dylan says, "When you think that you've lost everything, you find out you can always lose a little more." We make mistakes, and we experience violations. We suffer loss after loss, in ways both spectacular and mundane. And especially, over and over again, we have to lose the fantasy that someone else is responsible to make it all work out.

Life is not finally grief; grief is not the last word. But grief is inseparable from what makes life finally meaningful. If we cannot live the grief, we cannot live anything else either. When we avoid our grief, we have no choice but to invest more and more of our psychic energies in that fantasy. All I need is the right program, or the right church, or the right polity, or the right theology, or the right boyfriend, or the right whatever, and it'll be okay – for good. We create this savior fantasy that the right thing will save us.

Christianity is a religion that understands the grief of life. Think about it: Christianity is a religion in which the savior died. Maybe better than anyone, we ought to know what it means to grieve. One theologian I've read (I don't remember who) says that the cross is the best religious symbol imaginable, because it cannot be romanticized. It cannot be fantasized, and it cannot be made shallow or vapid or tame or dumb. The cross is where Christ died, and we can't get very far in this faith – not if we take it seriously – without reckoning with that.

But boy, we try. And our story in Acts 1:1-8 shows where it started, where that first temptation comes. Jesus had been warning his disciples that he would be leaving, and it was already a source of anxiety, a harbinger of grief. And so they asked, "When will you come back, bringing the reign of God?" He answered them, "It is not for you to know the times or the seasons." Another loss, not just of their savior, but of that illusion of prideful omniscience they had. Jesus then told them, "But you will receive power and the Holy Spirit," and I have to believe that was a source of loss and anxiety for them, too. If you have your own power, then you have to take responsibility in a new way. You can't keep relying on Jesus to do it for you.

Then, with that, he ascended into heaven on a cloud. The disciples stood and watched him recede into the sky, and they kept looking up, hoping for another sign, until angels arrived and confronted them: "Men of Galilee, why do you stand there looking up into heaven?" Or, as another translation has it, "Why are you standing there, looking up into an empty sky?! The Holy Spirit is pouring out among you – not from above, but in your midst." In that moment, the disciples had a choice: would they grow up and live, mature

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and responsible, in the Spirit, or would they continue looking up into the sky, worshipping the Sky God fantasy?

I have increasingly come to believe that the history of Christianity has been perverted time and again by our refusal to grieve the death of Christ. We don't want to grow up. We don't want to face the fact that the responsibility for our salvation and for the transformation of this world lies with us. It's easier to just follow the rules, and then Jesus comes back, scoops us up into his arms, and carries us up to heaven. So easy. So passive. And we know better: in our mature moments, we know that there are no guarantees. In our mature moments, we know there are no rules. There are only relationships: our relationship with our deeper self, our relationships with each other, and our relationship with God. That's a harder world to live in.

To have an actual relationship with God here and now, one has to give up that fantasy of the Sky God, unrelated, immovable, impassive, omniscient, omnipotent, and perversely unconcerned. God *is* God, the cosmic mystery, the Creator and Redeemer of all things. But God is not that Sky-God fantasy of a throne up yonder and all-is-right-with-the-world. So even true faith requires true grief – we have to lose the fantasy one more time. Jesus died. And we have to grieve. And only in that loss can we begin to see the ways in which Jesus is still alive and present with us.

Yesterday's AWAB business meeting must seem incongruous with my message today. Yesterday, we were celebrating one good thing after another, cracking jokes and lifting up successes. Today, my message is solemn, somber, almost depressing. But yesterday's joy requires this kind of solemnity. If we lose touch with our grief, our joy becomes brittle, and our hope turns shallow and brackish, like a stagnant pond.

There's a lesson here for our current struggles in the ABC/USA. Now, let me be utterly clear up front – I do not know what your calling is with respect to this current moment, whether to stay, or

leave, or something else. I'm often pretty clear on what my calling is, but I get turned around plenty, especially at the Biennial.

What I want to offer you is not an idea of what you should do, but of how to do it: whatever your energy is – to stay and to struggle, or to pick up and leave, or to wait it out – any of them can

**C**hristianity is a religion that understands the grief of life.



be a faithful response, and any of them can be idolatrous. It all depends on the fullness of your grief. Whatever you do, do it with grief. Without grief, the urge to stay and to struggle gets perverted into militant partisanship and endless strategizing.

Without grief, the urge to pick up and leave becomes self-victimizing surrender and passive-aggressive violence. In either case, we risk making decisions based on the idea that the denomination ought to be our paternalistic care-taker, our Sky God savior. Again, we find ourselves in denial that, in one sense, our savior died 2000 years ago to teach us once and for all that we have to grow up and learn to claim our own salvation.

Only when we have grieved, only then can we let go of the fantasy and face the reality of God's calling in this moment – to leave with regret, or to stay with regret. Either way, we will lose something. Only after we are free from *having to leave*, or *having to stay*, because we've done the work of that grief, can we be free *for leaving* or *for staying*.

When I am getting to know someone, I don't want to hear about their high points, their successes. Tell me about your grief, I think, and then I will know something about you. So let me tell you a little bit about my grief today. I live in Chicago, a progressive, tolerant city. And I live in a progressive, tolerant

neighborhood in that city. My school is progressive and tolerant, and no one cares there that I'm gay. The church where I work is progressive and tolerant, and the church where I'm a member is even more progressive and tolerant. I don't have any problems in my region. My family is completely supportive. My life looks like a kind of an approximation of that world we dream about, in which sexual orientation just doesn't matter. I walk around more or less free from fears of bashing, bigotry, or homophobia – except for one weekend every two years, when I come here, to the ABC Biennial. The Biennial convention is the only place I ever go when I fear because of being gay. I get anxious, even paranoid, during the weeks before. And it gets worse when I'm here. Every time I pass a person in the convention hall who doesn't have a rainbow sticker on his name badge, my blood pressure rises.

This morning, on my way down to breakfast in my hotel, I bumped into a friend on the crowded elevator. She asked me, "So what have you got planned for today?" "I'm preaching at the AWAB service," I said. And instantly, it seemed to me that the air in the elevator changed, that the energy shifted, and all those other people whom I didn't know, all those people without rainbow stickers, suddenly got hostile.

Of course, that's my own denial of grief talking. But it is thus an avenue to my grief. It would be easy for me to say, "I'm not going to the Biennial this year." And it would be easy for me to get rigid and say, "I'll go out of spite, and show them a thing or two." Of course, both of these things are said in the spirit of the pure fantasy of my grandiose and worthless-feeling self, the fantasy of some patriarch whose job it is to make the ABC safe for me.

"Lift Up Your Eyes" is the Biennial theme, from Psalm 121. I have to confess, I've been resistant to the theme from the first I heard of it. It sounded like one more invitation to get back into the worship of an empty sky. It sounds

like one more chance to externalize and avoid, to place our attention onto the Sky God, and live in denial again about the here and now. If we are all looking up, it makes it easier for people to give me an elbow in the ribs, I fear. I resist it because it feels like a failure to grieve what's going on. Of course, my resistance is *also* a failure to grieve what's going on.

So, as I prepared for my trip here, I tried to figure out how to get beyond this resistance. I asked myself, how did Jesus look up? Well, Jesus looked up like this: Jesus knelt down, washed the disciples' feet, and looked up at them in love.

In front of the woman taken in adultery, Jesus knelt on the ground, drew in the dirt until all the accusers had left, looked up at her and said, "Neither do I condemn you."

Jesus looked down for mud, looked up and put it on the eyes of the blind man, who was healed.

Jesus looked up into the tree and said, "Zacchaeus, come down, for I am dining with you today."

For me this weekend, this has been what it means to look up – it means to look up into the soul of another, a brother or sister in Christ, and to see the compassion of Christ in that person. It is to hear the sound of wind rushing, and to look up from my little preoccupations – the old book of old stories I've had my nose buried in – and see the Spirit moving among us, binding us together in love.

This is mature faith: not the God in the sky, but the baptism of the Spirit among us. God does indeed come to us from beyond ourselves, but not down from the sky. God comes to us from the great beyond that is the wholeness of the rest of life. God comes to me from you, and I hope I can get myself out of the way long enough to leave space in my soul for God to come to you through me, too.

This is what is meant by the living Christ, I reckon: we can be incarnations of the divine in this world and for each

other, the way he was an incarnation for us. Every time that happens, not in defeat of grief, but through it, that's resurrection. One has to die to claim new life, and so resurrection comes through grief.

The Bible has a word for this kind of moment, when truth is revealed in the midst of grief. The Bible calls it Apocalypse.

For some time now, I've believed that this is an apocalyptic moment for Christianity. Contemporary Christianity will be measured – it will be saved like the sheep, or it will be damned like the goats – on the basis of how it handles the question of the welcome of people like us. Apocalypse means revelation. And in this moment, the truth about Christianity in this generation will be revealed. Will Christianity find an ability to grieve, to acknowledge its losses, or will it continue this fantasy-world denial? Because if it can grieve the death of Christ, if it can grieve its own sin, then it can find room for us. And if

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not, it will have proven that it loves the darkness rather than the light.

Remarkably, this means that we are the measure of this. We who are gay, we who are lesbian, we who are transgender, we who are family members, parents, children, siblings, allies and friends. Every one of us whose life worked out queer by society's standards, we are the measure of things.

We are the least of these his brothers and sisters by which today's Christianity will be judged. Which means this

strangest thing of all: We are contemporary incarnations of Christ. We are the body of Christ. Our eyes are the eyes of Christ, and whomever we look upon, Christ has looked upon. They who have ears, let them hear: if they can hear us, then they have heard Truth, and it will set them free. If they can see God revealed in us, then they will know what it means to lose and to find, like the woman with her coin, and to be saved. They will lose their own lives, and all their fantasies about their purity and their rectitude. And they will find their lives, through us. Because it will be no longer we who live (make no mistake, we will lose everything) as they see it, but it will be Christ who lives in us.

Sisters and brothers, the grieving and the losing never end. Maybe the next thing we have to lose is the fantasy that this is all about us – that someone is trying to disfellowship us, to kick us out, to delegitimize us. Lies! We are fellowshipped – just look around this room! We are in! We are legitimate!

Maybe, when all is said and done, we have to let this be about them – about their need to lift up their eyes and see how Christ for them is embodied in us. And then, of course, we must lose again. Again comes the Apocalypse, when our world is turned upside down. After we let go of the idea that this is all about us, perhaps we will have to realize that this is indeed about us. So that then, in our grief of all that we've lost, we can see how, in whatever mysterious way that we are Christ for them, they are Christ for us, too. Then we will know the baptism of the Holy Spirit, the power of the Spirit coming to us, again.

Amen.

*The Rev. David Gregg, former chair of the AWAB Council, is a doctoral student studying aesthetic theology at the University of Chicago. He also currently serves as the interim pastor of the Community Church of Wilmette, Illinois (ABC).*

# AWAB Community Connects at the Biennial in Denver, CO



*AWAB pastors Marcus Pomeroy (Wayne, PA) and Paul Hayes (Noank, CT) at the AWAB worship service*



*AWAB pastors Mary Hammond (Oberlin, OH) and Jamie Washam (Wauwatosa, WI) visiting at the Alternative Baptists Display Space*



# FUN at the AWAB Retreat in Boulder, CO



*Alice Batcher Howard and Martha Garrison*



*Chris Boisvert, Barbra MacNair and Rick Mixon*



*Ken Pennings and Santa (Gary Harris)*



*Life partners Kevin Rose and Dan Von Pein performing a skit*





# Medley Biennial Address: Living Out the Paradox of Radical, Biblical Love

by T. Wyatt Watkins

The act of naming our demons is a decidedly biblical affair. It is also a strategy for spiritual health. In his keynote address at the ABCUSA Biennial in Denver in July, General Secretary Roy Medley served the cause of both biblical honesty and denominational well-being by decisively naming the “elephant” in the American Baptist house and posing a genuinely Baptist solution. There have been other Biennials, other opportunities to resist the temptation to sugarcoat the state of denominational fitness and skirt the issues confronting the wider body. In Denver, in the opening worship gathering, our general secretary followed the road less taken. He yielded not to temptation but placed the questions of tolerance, soul liberty, and radical love squarely in the center of conversation and debate. For this, we owe him a debt of gratitude.

Roy Medley is a self-avowed “conservative in matters related to human sexuality,” yet this confession functioned only to strengthen its corollary: his desire not to be “separated from those who in Christian conscience differ from me in matters of human sexuality.” The juxtaposition of these convictions, anathema to the far right, formed the core of Medley’s plea from the heart of Baptist identity – the notion that Baptists can suffer their sisters’ and brothers’ vastly different understandings of faith on the basis of radical biblical love. Living this paradox, Medley maintained, is the peculiar “gift and task” God has bestowed upon American Baptists.

To those who would erect the false choice of either biblical truth or Baptist principle, Medley countered that such a claim misunderstands “our mothers and fathers in the faith who, in setting forth what we today call Baptist distinctives, drew them forth from the study of scripture... (that) our tradition is immersed in scripture.” What Medley called this “profound intertwining of biblical authority with freedom to explore, examine, and even question” is indeed the genius of the Baptist way that led many of us to a thoughtful embrace of Baptist identity and polity in the first place. To hear it clearly and eloquently reiterated in a turbulent denominational and cultural moment, especially from a general secretary with a different understanding of human sexuality from my own, was faith-affirming.

Would I have preferred a clear endorsement of same-sex-oriented clergy and welcoming and affirming churches? Naturally. Would such an endorsement have gone unpunished? Undoubtedly not. But, ultimately, our general secretary accomplished something far more important. He offered to the broad middle of our denomination an authentically Baptist way to turn from the reactionary right and insist upon what Medley named, à la Chesterton, the “stormy loyalty” we owe one another on the basis of “radical love.”

Finally, Medley put this debate in a wider missional perspective. In a world where “1.2 billion people live in life-threatening poverty,” where “11 million children under five die each year, more than half from hunger-related causes,” where “AIDS is threatening to decimate whole countries and has caused 13 million children to lose one or both parents,” and where “67% do not know Christ,” we would do well to provide “the witness of people bound together in loving commitment to the difficult task of walking with one another in the midst of strong differences.”

It was only fitting that a self-styled “pastor for the denomination” should end a Biennial address with prayer, but this was prefaced by a memorable quote from Helen Barrett Montgomery, recalling an equally turbulent time in our history. Addressing the Northern Baptist Convention in 1922, then President Montgomery concluded: “We are in a great campaign... we must not disagree! We must not fight each other! We must unite to win. Let this convention be founded and proceed and end in prayer.”

But in the end, it was the gathered that extended hands and prayed for General Secretary Medley. God and Spirit were evoked in solidarity with his cause for unity, founded on this rare way of radical biblical discipleship and love—the Baptist way.

*T. Wyatt Watkins is the minister of worship and outreach at Cumberland First Baptist Church, Indianapolis, and a founding member and first violinist with the Indianapolis Chamber Orchestra. Wyatt is also the author of three books with a title due for fall release from The Crossroad Publishing Company. He is married with four school-aged children.*

## Spiritual Direction for LGBT Persons

AWAB member, Gordon Haynes, Prairie Baptist Church, Prairie Village, Kansas, has attempted to provide listings for spiritual directors who may work with gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender individuals. The list of resources compiled thus far is found at <http://sdiworld.org> under Web Library/General Collection, under the heading, Spiritual Direction with Gay, Lesbian, Bi-Sexual and Transgendered Persons. Spiritual Directors International, <http://sdiworld.org>, is “a global learning community of people from many faiths and nations who share a common concern, passion and commitment to the art and contemplative practice of spiritual direction.” Contact Gordon at [gordonandcindy@msn.com](mailto:gordonandcindy@msn.com).

# Pennings

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tory, homosexuality is a polarizing issue in many churches and denominations. We *will* find ways to include, embrace, welcome and affirm one another in the bond of Christ. I am committed to being faithful and staying the course in the midst of adversity."

Ken Pennings is a member of First Baptist Church in Madison, Wisconsin, where he has been active in numerous

education and social justice endeavors in his church and region. He currently serves as coordinator for local ecumenism of the Wisconsin Council of Churches, a position in which he will continue. He is the parent of a 21-year-old son and two teen-age daughters, and shares life with his partner John.

Finally, I want to acknowledge the hard work of the excellent committee that carried the search through to this successful completion: Peter Carman, chair; Jacki Belile, secretary; Craig Collemer; MaryJo Johnson; and Tim

Phillips. While the committee is confident that Ken Pennings is the right person to lead us forward at this moment in our history, we felt gratified and blessed by the high quality of the candidates who came forward. A number of them would have made fine executives for this organization.

*David Gregg chaired the AWAB Council until the July, 2005, Biennial, and served on the search committee, ex officio. This report is based on material prepared by Jacki Belile.*

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## Editorial

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or local congregations.<sup>1</sup> However, the public statements of the traditionalist wing fail to recognize this; they seem to believe that every entity that bears the name of American Baptist must be brought into line and made to conform to actions of the GB; however, the general secretary and GB have no authority to enforce conformity in this way.

A second weakness in the traditionalist position is its avoidance of the fact that there are two statements by the GB on the issue of homosexuality. The first, "We affirm that the practice of homosexuality is incompatible with Christian teaching," was adopted in 1992 as a resolution by the GB through a mail vote, perfectly legal at the time, but a procedure which did not permit the kind of debate and clarification which can produce adequate understanding. In the absence of debate, it could not, for example, be pointed out that the resolution is odd in that it is a quasi-creedal, declarative statement with no provision for implementation. Also it was not based on a pre-existing statement of policy, a requirement for resolutions.

The second resolution of the GB on this subject was passed in 1993 and reaffirmed and expanded slightly as a result of the Commission on Denominational

Unity in 1998. Thus it has the same status and authority—or lack thereof—as the 1992 resolution. It begins:

"Since our founding days, we American Baptists have heralded the Bible as central to our lives. Individuals have the right and responsibility to interpret Scripture under the guidance of the Holy Spirit within the community of faith. We have also come together to seek the mind of Christ on contemporary issues, **knowing that none of our corporate statements claims to speak for all of us.**" (Emphasis added.)

This resolution continues, calling upon American Baptists to:

1. Testify that Jesus Christ is the unifying presence in our denomination.
2. Explore the biblical and theological issues of human sexuality.
3. Consider using the resources identified and gathered by the ABC Commission on Resources on Human Sexuality.
4. **Acknowledge that there exists a variety of understandings throughout our denomination on issues of human sexuality such as homosexuality and engage in dialogue concerning these issues.** (Emphasis added.)
5. Respect and defend the individual integrity of all persons within our denomination and their Christian commitment as we engage the issue of human sexuality.

6. Pray fervently that as we honestly address these concerns we may seek unity and avoid divisiveness as we grow in our common mission for Jesus Christ.<sup>2</sup>

In light of all this, it would seem difficult to conclude that there is an "official" unified stance of the ABC in regard to homosexuality represented by the "incompatible" resolution and that the national offices and boards are irredeemably derelict in their duty by their "refusal" to enforce it. Simple repetition of these charges by the traditionalists does not make it so.

Another distortion that is present in the rhetoric of the traditionalist position arises from the claim that they are only presenting the clear biblical teaching on the subject of homosexuality and are not free to change it. The Bible says what it means and means what it says.

Certainly any claim to be presenting the biblical teaching must be taken with utmost seriousness; allegiance to the Bible is another of those hallowed Baptist principles which define who we are. It is accepted by both sides. However, the authority of the Bible cannot function until the Bible is interpreted. The question then becomes: Whose interpretation is to be accepted?

We all interpret the Bible, including those who claim they are simply presenting the clear biblical teaching. If the

# Tribute to the Rev. Daniel Pryfogle

by Kathy Stayton

The Alliance of Baptists was meeting in Dayton, Ohio, in April of 2004, and the Council of AWAB dovetailed its mid-year meeting with this event. We had hired Daniel Pryfogle to be our interim executive director; and at our meeting, where he was present, we realized we had no money to pay him. In fact, our debt was greater than we expected. Talk about embarrassment! One of the members of the Council challenged each of us to bring in \$300 by the end of the month, which we pledged to do. On this pledge, Daniel immediately started to work.

Daniel led us into an 18-month period of improving AWAB's financial health and focusing on the importance of our work. How? He tried to make as many visits to churches as possible by linking these visits with the necessary travel he did with Signal Hill Consulting Service, his main source of income, thus saving on AWAB travel costs. He listened to them, sometimes preached in their pulpits and reported regularly to the Council about the good work these congregations were doing. Daniel urged us not to be distracted by those trying to derail the work of LGBT-affirming congregations.

Daniel communicated this local and regional good news to AWAB's constituency through *Associational*, the new e-letter; fund-raising letters; and through the Council members back at their home churches. Dolores Street Baptist Church in San Francisco, after a conversation with Daniel, provided funding for the publication of four issues of *The InSpiriter*. The reinstatement of regular issues revived AWAB constituent support.

Finally, Daniel's enthusiasm about AWAB's mission was caught by a discouraged Council, and, I suspect, by all in AWAB. Good news is contagious. AWAB's light might have dimmed in the past because of demoralizing denominational battles and an overworked Council, but is again shining brightly. It is up to all of us now to keep the light shining brightly. Thank you, Daniel!



Former interim director  
Daniel Pryfogle

*Kathy Stayton is the newly elected chair of the AWAB Council. She is a member of the Central Baptist Church (W&A) of Wayne, Pennsylvania*

Bible needed no interpretation, our services of worship would consist only of biblical readings; there would be no need for a sermon to interpret the text. No two sermons preached on the same text will be alike, because no two people are alike. We all experience the world differently. This sum total of our experience, all those experiences of life in the broadest sense, is what James Smart once called the "interpretative context." This varies from person to person, from group to group, and from age to age. People who assume that they are just reading what the Bible says are usually unaware that people in different periods have read the same text and given it a very different meaning. Few people today would quote the Bible to justify slavery, or to argue for the divine right of kings, or for denying women anesthesia during childbirth; and yet at one time or other, the Bible has been read as supporting all of these things.

So all reading of the Bible takes place in some limited, partial, distorted interpretative context or other. The phrase "The Bible plainly says" in fact means "The Bible plainly says when interpreted by me or when interpreted by my pastor or by my favorite theologian – or, most determinative of all – when interpreted by my favorite English translation." (All translation is interpretation.) For example, as Dr. Lamar Cope pointed out in the last issue of *The InSpiriter*, there are problems in the Greek vocabulary of I Corinthians 6:9 that most English translations fail to communicate. And yet this passage is confidently interpreted by traditionalists to oppose a welcoming theology. What makes this debate so frustrating is the unwillingness of the traditionalist position to realize that to have an authoritative Bible, one must first have an authoritative interpreter. Who decides who that will be?

"The practice of homosexuality is incompatible with Christian teaching." As a summary of much of the past 2000 years, this is not an inaccurate statement. It is largely true descriptively, but is it also true prescriptively? There was a time when one could say accurately, "The ordination of women is incompatible with Christian teaching." Jesus promised that when "the Spirit of truth" came, that Spirit would guide us into all truth. It has happened before, and it will happen again. As the Puritan divine John Robinson said, "God hath yet more light and truth to break forth from the Word."

<sup>1</sup> This is stated explicitly in the materials of the ABCUSA: see [www.abc-usa.org](http://www.abc-usa.org), "Who We Are," "Policy Statements and Resolutions."

<sup>2</sup> The full text may be seen at the ABCUSA website cited in the note above. Under "Policy Statements and Resolutions" scroll down to "Human Sexuality (Calling for Dialogue on Issues of)." The "incompatible" resolution is found under "Homosexuality." ■

# Biennial

—continued from page 1



AWAB pastor Tim Phillips (Seattle, WA) presents the Randle R. Mixon Award to H. Darrell Lance.

by a new one, the Barbra MacNair Award for Christian Witness. Barbra herself was appropriately the first winner of the award established in her name, and Darrell Lance received the Mixon Award. The awards and the citations delivered by the presenters brought laughter, memories, and standing ovations. In addition, David Gregg, outgoing chair of the Council, honored former AWAB director Brenda Moulton in absentia with words of appreciation for her outstanding professional and pastoral leadership in AWAB, and displayed a lovely stained glass art piece in the shape and colors of AWAB's logo which was presented to her later. There was much applause in honor of Brenda!

## SAVE THE DATE!

**June 26-29, 2006**

***Tapestry: Live, Laugh, Love & Lead***

**University of Indianapolis,  
Indianapolis, Indiana**

For all LGBT/Allies in AWAB,  
Alliance of Baptists, Disciples  
of Christ, & UCC

At the business meeting, Council members going off the Council\* were recognized and new Council members elected. Those finishing their terms were Dale Edmondson, David Gregg, and Kevin Rose. Newly elected or re-elected Council members are listed on pg. 11 of this issue of *The InSpiriter*.

Delivering a final word as outgoing interim director, Daniel Pryfogle addressed the group with a stirring challenge. As one member said, "If nothing else good happens at the Biennial, this talk was worth my coming."

The AWAB worship service, attended by about 300 people, was definitely spirit-filled. David Gregg, outgoing chair of the Council, gave a very provocative sermon (see pp. 3-5 of this issue). Rev. Brian Scott, pastor of the New Community of Faith (W&A) in San Jose, now part of the Philadelphia Baptist Association, presented a professional-quality PowerPoint presentation of the doings of AWAB churches around the country, with lots of pictures, captions, and movement. A stirring call by Darrell Lance to financial commitment resulted in a generous offering of \$2,200, a full 10% above the amount hoped for. The rousing hymn "We are marching in the light of God" had people out of their seats, waving banners, snaking through the aisles, and encircling the room. Truly a fine service!

Following the Biennial, about thirty people gathered at the "Lgbt and Allies Retreat in the Rockies" on the campus of the University of Colorado in Boulder, July 4-7. Rev. Rick Mixon, interim pastor at First Baptist Church of Granville, Ohio (W&A), led participants on an exploration of the themes of the book *Faith Beyond Resentment*, by Dr. James Alison. Rev. Jacki Belile, pastor of Grace Baptist Church in Chicago (W&A) led worship.

Retreat participant Martha Garrison reflected on the retreat: "I was struck by three things in particular about this

retreat: a) how worshipful, Jesus-focused, and God-centered it was, not only in the daily worship services, but in the early-morning meditations, in conversations, and throughout the workshops; b) how truly accepting of diversity we all were: attendees were gay, lesbian, bisexual, straight, transgender, married, single, partnered, looking, and happily living alone – no one seemed to rely on labels. We were there for a common cause: inclusivity and reflection about how to move forward as Baptists; and c) there were no people of color attending. These three observations point to both our promises and our problems, theological, sociological, and political."

I returned from the Biennial with pride in our denominational leaders, particularly Roy Medley. I returned proud of our Baptist identity and heritage, and those who set the standard of that heritage. And, I returned to a movement of congregations which have already done much of the work for themselves that the denomination is just starting to do – naming the issues, claiming our values, keeping relationships in the love of Christ, even when doctrinal differences are obvious. We are not together because we agree. For AWAB congregations, and the denominations that serve us, we are together for the sake of achievement in Christian mission. As long as we keep our eyes lifted toward that lofty goal, we will stay together as an expression of God's love for the world.

\*Between Biennial meetings, the affairs of AWAB are conducted by the executive director and a Council comprised of eleven members. Three are ex officio and eight are elected for two-year terms for a maximum of three terms.

*Contributing to this story: Chris Boisvert, Martha Garrison, Darrell Lance, and Ken Williams.*



## From the Executive Director: Ken's Pennings

by Ken Pennings

I am delighted to be AWAB's new executive director! I'm so grateful to be walking the road that has been paved for me by the capable leadership of AWAB's past directors, Brenda Moulton and Daniel Pryfogle, and AWAB's past Councils. Many thanks to these dedicated leaders!

I'd like to partner with you and your congregation to create and expand ministries of inclusion for lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (lgbt) people and their allies.

To do that, we need to get in touch and stay in touch with each other. Why not use up some of those "free" minutes on your phone plan, and introduce yourself to me (608-255-2155)? I'm eager to hear about the good things God is doing in and through you and your congregation in extending the gift of welcome to others in your community.

AWAB's vision is to discover, celebrate, and nurture the great work of God that is already going on in the lives of our individual members, our member congregations and our partner organizations. AWAB's ministry is where its members are! When we chat, please share with me your story of God's amazing grace working in and through God's precious lgbt and allied children. With your permission, I'll pass the story along to others who will be encouraged and instructed by it.

Consider those who feel quite isolated and removed from the larger welcoming movement. Hearing or reading your story helps them move out of their loneliness, fear, and discouragement into a place of serenity, courage, and strength.

In addition to getting in touch and sharing your story with me, I hope you'll share your gifts, talents, and skills with me. AWAB has one half-time staff person . . . me! There is a tremendous amount of work to do that AWAB's Council and I can't possibly do by ourselves. If you have two hours a week, two hours a month, or two hours every other month to contribute to AWAB's ministry of inclusion, please volunteer! And of course, your contributions of money, office supplies, office equipment, auction items and give-aways are needed and appreciated, indeed!

This thing we're doing together (called AWAB) isn't only about "organization," but also about "organism." We are the body of Christ. There is something organic about AWAB that yearns, longs, insists, at times screams out to live as it will live. I shudder to think that we might squelch that precious life by relying on standard operating procedures as if we were merely an "organization."

Would you be reading *The InSpiriter* right now if you regarded AWAB as merely another organization? People connect with AWAB because they see it as a life-giving organism, organized according to the natural gifts, talents, passions, interests, skills, and vision of each of its members.

Now as you consider how to share your life in, with, and through AWAB, I urge you to consider sharing our corporate life together by your participation in the national gathering being planned with some of our ecumenical partners – the United Church of Christ, Disciples of Christ, and Alliance of Baptists – June 26-29, 2006, at University of Indianapolis, Indianapolis, Indiana ([www.uindy.edu](http://www.uindy.edu)). The event is called **Tapestry: Live, Laugh, Love & Lead**. Hope to see you there!

### The Council of the Association of Welcoming & Affirming Baptists

Chris Boisvert, Concord, California: Webmaster; Editor, *Voice of the Turtle Online*

Bill Cox, Austin, Texas

Brian Dixon, San Francisco, California

Diane Hooge, Minneapolis, Minnesota

Sandi John, Reston, Virginia

Darrell Lance, Rochester, New York: Editor, *The InSpiriter*

Mikhail Mashudi, New York, New York: Treasurer

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Jim Singletary, Salem, Massachusetts

Kathy Stayton, Wayne, Pennsylvania: Chair

### The InSpiriter

Established in 1996 as a ministry of the Association of Welcoming & Affirming Baptists, *The InSpiriter* is distributed free of charge. Although there is no subscription fee, contributions are always needed. Please send your tax-deductible gift, payable to AWAB, to AWAB, P. O. Box 259257, Madison, WI 53725. To be added to the mailing list – or deleted – contact Ken Pennings, [mail@wabaptists.org](mailto:mail@wabaptists.org), or write him at the above address.

## The InSpiriter

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Please remember to send us your new address (or any corrections). The Postal Service will not forward *The InSpiriter* but returns it to us with a charge for each piece. Send address changes to AWAB, P.O. Box 259257, Madison, WI 53725 or e-mail your changes to [mail@wabaptists.org](mailto:mail@wabaptists.org).

## NEWS YOU NEED

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### **AWAB Online...**

Explore AWAB's web site at [www.wabaptists.org](http://www.wabaptists.org)!

Read *Associational*, a periodic newsletter from executive director Ken Pennings at [www.wabaptists.org/associational.htm](http://www.wabaptists.org/associational.htm) To subscribe, send an e-mail to [e-subscribe@wabaptists.org](mailto:e-subscribe@wabaptists.org) with **SUBSCRIBE** in the subject line.

For commentary, thoughts, and stories, read *The Voice of the Turtle*, at [www.wabaptists.org/voto.htm](http://www.wabaptists.org/voto.htm). Or go to [www.wabaptists.org](http://www.wabaptists.org) and click on *Voice of the Turtle Online*. Also, some back issues of *The InSpiriter* are posted online.

### **The Institute for Welcoming Resources**

AWAB is a proud supporter of the Institute for Welcoming Resources (IWR), an ecumenical group which works to create resources for the welcoming movements in eight mainline Protestant denominations. Our representative to the IWR board is the Rev. Ken Sehested; and the Rev. Howard Bess has served as interim director of the organization. Check out their useful web site at [www.welcomingresources.org](http://www.welcomingresources.org).

### **The AWAB Office Has Moved!**

As of July 1, 2005, the office of the Association of Welcoming & Affirming Baptists moved westward. Please now send all contributions and mailings to: **AWAB, P. O. Box 259257, Madison, WI 53725**. The e-mail address remains the same: [mail@wabaptists.org](mailto:mail@wabaptists.org). Or to contact executive director Ken Pennings directly, write him at the above address, call him at 608-255-2155, or send e-mail to [ken@wabaptists.org](mailto:ken@wabaptists.org).