



What is the Spirit Saying to the Churches?

by Willie J. Seals, Jr.

"If anyone has ears to hear, listen to what the spirit is saying to the churches."--from the Book of the Revelation

A bit of history was made in a western Massachusetts town on Pentecost Sunday, June 4, 2006.

I was finally called to be the pastor of First Baptist Church in Greenfield, Mass (ABC/USA).

I am the first openly gay and first person of African and Asian descent to be called as their pastor. What also may be of interest is that the church is not part of the Association of Welcoming & Affirming Baptists.

How did this happen? Especially after missing the call by a one vote margin on Sunday, May 14?

The proxy votes were not counted that day which would have put the votes in my favor. On Pentecost Sunday, at the church's semi-annual meeting, the matter came up for a vote and the congregation decided, by a 75% margin, for those proxy votes to be counted toward my call. So I was called.

This decision is definitely a milestone moment. It has its beginnings in the summer of 2005, when I received a call from the search committee chair to check my interest. That fall, I received the church's profile. After reviewing it, I submitted my information, and was asked a few months later to come to

Greenfield for an interview. It was important for me to be out to this church. I had no idea how the search committee would receive this information. I prayed about it and felt a sense of peace about things. During the interview, I found an opportunity to share about myself openly, and learned of people's hopes for the church to become a more welcoming place to all. I left excited about the possibilities to be in ministry in such a place.

I soon learned I was the unanimous choice of the search committee to be the candidate. When the search committee finally sent a letter to the congregation presenting me as the candidate, it mentioned that I was single, but not that I was gay. While this later became an issue, they told me they wouldn't have mentioned orientation if the candidate were straight.

However, a member or two who received that letter "Googled" my name and found out I am openly gay and a LGBT activist. That happened one week before my arrival for candidate's weekend and the vote. Controversy ensued over my candidacy solely because of my orientation. The search committee informed me of the matter, and I also spoke to the area minister about it. Both were supportive. To their credit, the search committee continued to unanimously support my candidacy.

The Sunday before my arrival, a few people interrupted worship and spoke of their displeasure with the church calling a gay pastor. The search committee reaffirmed my candidacy at that service, emphasizing my gifts and skills to lead their

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Rev. Craig Collemer and husband Gary LaParl

Those Inviting Front Doors

by Craig Collemer

The church home of the First Baptist Church in Beverly, Massachusetts has eight glass front doors that look out onto the world and invite the world to look in at us. The symbolism of these doors is a powerful daily reminder of our call to be in but not of the world. Last May these doors took on new meaning for me.

Gary, my partner of fifteen years and I were to be married according to the laws of the Commonwealth of Massachusetts--still the only state in the country to provide us with this basic civil right. We planned a quiet ceremony affirming the covenant we had made fourteen years earlier during a Covenant Service held at Grace Baptist Church in Chicago. At that time we covenanted with each other and God to be faithful partners. This marriage ceremony, however, would provide us the same legal rights afforded all heterosexual couples. In keeping with our desire for a quiet ceremony, we did not announce our service in the newspapers or any other media outlet.

All was well until four days before the ceremony, when I received word from the Beverly Police Department that they had received a copy of a fax from the Rev. Fred Phelps of Westboro Baptist Church in Topeka, Kansas announcing the intention of his congregation to protest at our wedding. The fax was a vile piece of hate mail. I could not comprehend that something so hateful

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Editorial

by JoAnne C. Juett

Fear. Beginning a new year, contemplating all those resolutions, evaluating the past year, should lead one to excitement and new resolve—but I think these rather succumb to uncertainty and fear in short order. We humans don't do so well with uncertainty, and 2006 brought us lots of it—not that I want to be a naysayer in this editorial, but I do think giving pause for what concerns us might be helpful in forging more positive paths in 2007:

- Massachusetts, the one state where marriage is legal, is now facing the possibility of legislation that could overturn their pioneering possibilities and spirit.
- In Wisconsin, along with several other states, we saw “marriage amendments” marginally pass into law.
- Denominations, such as our beloved ABC-USA, are deeply divided, and many blame (wrongly so) the divisions on the issue of homosexuality. (Far be it from most of us to admit that denominational structures speak little if at all to true matters of spirituality!).
- Troubles exist abroad and at home in rebuilding battered nations, cities and communities—troubles that drain resources that could be used to bring dignity and hopes of equality for many.
- And, the list goes on.....

And so, even as we faithfully make those resolutions to lose weight, exercise more, and eat more healthily, how do we face such overarching fears?

First, we remember that the “fear factor” is part and parcel of our spirituality. Not that we should be afraid of God or God's power—we should always stand in awe of that, of course; but, facing the unknown is always a fearful event. Look at all those biblical angelic visits that prompted a lot of fear and trembling—in the long run, most of those brought awesome visions, great joy, and exciting possibilities. What was the key? The powerful presence of

God (however we experience that); that power that some invoke to frighten and manipulate is really the power for good and great things to happen!

Secondly, we must be courageous and willing to forge ahead, even against the odds. I have a dear friend who vowed that if the marriage amendment passed in Wisconsin, that she would move to Canada. So, what does she do now?! Whatever she decides, it will take a lot of courage. If she leaves, she will have to summon the courage to move to a new place and begin a new career and life. If she stays (which I hope she does!), then she will need the courage to face those who will question her decision and to face the new challenges this new amendment will bring her state.

Thirdly, we must embrace and celebrate all the good and all the positive. AWAB has new members! We are moving ahead with very positive ways to bolster our financial support, especially for the long-term. We have positive energy and synergy, inspiring more and more people to come out as LGBT or Allied and providing more communities of support.

Yes, for all the darkness, there is always a great light. As I write this editorial, I remind myself that I am in the season of Epiphany—the time of celebration of light, that great metaphoric image of goodness, knowledge, and hope. It's my favorite season, even if it does come in the midst of winter in Wisconsin for me! Epiphany allows me to look beyond the despair of failures and setbacks of previous months to find hope and possibility in the year ahead.

That's what I wish for all of you—hope and fulfillment of great visions for this year. **Just read the many articles in this issue to feel the excitement of what is possible!** May God's presence be with you, guide you and empower you through these coming months in your individual journeys and as we walk together in celebration. Great things are yet to come!

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Fall 2006 Gatherings of Welcoming & Affirming Baptists

by Ken Pennings

North Carolina, September 2006:

Though the North Carolina Baptist Convention has moved to disfellowship churches that are inclusive of LGBT Christians from their region of the Southern Baptist Convention, our North Carolina AWAB churches are expanding ministries of inclusion for LGBT's! At the September gathering of W&A Baptists at Binkley Memorial Baptist Church, Chapel Hill, NC, many shared publicly what it means for them to belong to Welcoming & Affirming congregations! I wish you all could have heard the stories of courage, joy, gratitude and faith!

A straight ally of LGBT's, and a member of Myers Park Baptist (Charlotte), shared how the church journeyed to approve its W&A statement "Open to All, Closed to None," and join AWAB in 2006; how Myers Park values AWAB for its networking, advocacy, education and support; how AWAB is "a good way to help people find a church." She continued, "For many progressive churches, being a member of AWAB is the only legitimate way for them to relate to the ABC/USA."



Julia Hoyle & Patty Michaels at the NC gathering of W&A Baptists

"More are recognizing we are indeed a safe place," shared one of the pastors of Pullen Memorial Baptist Church (Raleigh). "Adding transgender people to our congregation has helped our church look more like the family of God. Belonging to AWAB has helped us diversify."

A gay member of Pullen Memorial shared "Our union ceremony at Pullen cemented us together as nothing else

has ever done. Up until that point, we both felt like one of us could walk away. That's what belonging to a W&A church means to me!"

A gay member of Binkley Memorial shared, "I left the church when I came out, and stayed away for many years. But I began to miss the power of worship, the inspiration of sermons, the intimacy of fellowship in the Christian family. So I began looking for a church. I wanted my church family to reflect the same diversity of the larger community in which I lived. I found Binkley to be such a church."

A lesbian member of Binkley shared, "What's really cool for me is that the fight is over! Being at Binkley is being able to come home. It's a glimpse of heaven. When I was ill, the outpouring of love was amazing. My partner received support she wouldn't have received in any other church."

A member of Watts Street Baptist Church (Durham) and a straight ally shared, "I'm inspired by Rosa Parks who said that there is no power in society that could damage her more than her own unwillingness to be who she is. AWAB churches help people to be who they really are, to live undivided lives."

See what I mean? The stories are compelling and magnificent!

Northwest Gathering, October 2006:

Now on to Seattle for October's Gathering of W&A Baptists hosted by Seattle First Baptist Church & University Baptist Church, featuring a mini concert by *Diverse Harmony* - the nation's first gay/straight alliance youth chorus (which performed at the opening ceremonies of the Gay Games in Chicago). We were moved to tears by the songs and testimonies of these high school students, who are standing in the gap for justice,

peace and equality for all!

And something happened at the Gathering none of us quite expected, definitely a movement of Spirit...people opening up and sharing deeply personal parts of their lives with others in the room, which of course, only happens in a safe space, guarded with a pledge of confidentiality.



Diverse Harmony Youth Choir ministering at Seattle First Baptist

Texas Gathering, October 2006:

Next stop: Austin, Texas, for the Open Circle Retreat for LGBT-Allied People. This Gathering of W&A Baptists included the extraordinary preaching of Rev. Heather Rittenhouse, a member of the AWAB Council, and a whole day of stimulating workshops, panel discussions, and story-telling.



Heather Rittenhouse speaking passionately for the expansion of ministries of inclusion during a panel discussion in Austin, TX

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could come from an organization that calls itself a Christian church (yes, after thirty-three years of ministry I am still naive when it comes to some of my colleagues in ministry). If you are fortunate enough to be unaware of the Rev. Phelps, he has turned his life and ministry into an expression of hatred for all gay/lesbian/bisexual/transgendered persons. Not only has he demonstrated across the nation against homosexual persons, he has also taken to picketing the funerals of members of our military who died in Iraq because he believes “God has become America’s terrorist, killing and maiming American troops for fag sins.”

Among the many plans made to provide a safe atmosphere for our guests, including the hiring of numerous police officers as recommended by the police of chief, we sent an e-mail to our congregation informing them of Rev. Phelps’ intentions. In this e-mail we invited our guests to enter the church through the back door if they did not want to be subjected to the hate-filled signs and chats of Rev. Phelps and his followers. If you’ve witnessed one of his demonstrations you never want to see another one.

This congregation that possesses a diversity of opinions on any and every subject, including homosexuality, (they truly are Baptists!) refused to be relegated to the back door by hatred and fear.

As Gary and I greeted our guests as they arrived, two grace-filled moments occurred. First, not knowing what they would find when they arrived, guest after guest came in through those eight glass doors at the front of the church. This congregation that possesses a diversity of opinions on any and every subject, including homosexuality, (they truly are Baptists!) refused to be relegated to the back door by hatred and fear. Their gentle but

purposeful walk in the front doors was a grace-filled moment and reminder of the power of love to gently but firmly overcome hatred. I was most touched when three women in their eighties all came through the front doors with their heads held high. As our guests entered through those front doors the love that permeated our church narthex was more than palpable...it was all encompassing.

The second grace-filled moment occurred when Gary and I heard singing emanating from a spirit-filled candlelight song and prayer vigil held across the street in front of the doors of the Unitarian Universalist church. Over a hundred high school students, college students, as well as young and older adults from the Beverly community and beyond gathered to give witness to God’s love for all people. Those present were Congregationalists, Methodists, Episcopalians, Unitarian Universalists, Friends, Jews and those who are not affiliated with any community of faith. Gary and I were so moved by this loving witness we spontaneously walked across the street to express our gratitude. Yet, I found I couldn’t utter a word. There were no words for such an occasion. We simply listened to their singing, smiled, bowed to them, and silently offered our prayers of thanksgiving. The public witness of this gathering of diverse individuals standing before the front doors of a church was more powerful than any demonstration of hatred could ever be.

In the end, Rev. Phelps and his followers did not show up... which was another grace-filled moment in itself! However, the loving spirit of our God was present in the hearts, minds and bodies of those who walked through our front doors and those who sang next door. There could not have been a more loving presence surrounding us when my colleague in ministry, Rev. Beth Loughhead, Gary and I walked into our sanctuary to stand before our family, friends and God. I knew without doubt that we were in the presence of God’s people and God’s redeeming love.

Thank God for congregations that demonstrate a loving presence through their front doors!

Craig A. Collemer, D. Min., is pastor of First Baptist Church Beverly, MA

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Gathering, November 2006:

The final AWAB Gathering of 2006 was hosted by Drexel Hill Baptist Church, Drexel Hill, PA, a congregation that recently joined AWAB. What festive decorations! All the colors of the rainbow in balloons, streamers, lights, signs, candles, flowers and banners welcoming us back home (the theme of the weekend)! The three days in Drexel Hill were marked by lavish hospitality, extravagant welcome and exuberant joy! A highlight for me was the teaching of Steve Parelli, the director of Other Sheep (www.othersheepexecsite.com), on the “texts of terror” from the Epistle to the Romans, chapter one.

Without a doubt, the best thing I could have done my first year on the job as AWAB’s director was to participate in the eleven “Stops” of “The Expanding the Welcoming Church Movement 12-Stop Tour.” In my travels, I was able to visit 23 of our 65 congregations, meet scores of pastors and lay leaders, and come to experience and appreciate first-hand the energy and vitality of our AWAB congregations! Can we double the number of Regional Gatherings of W&A Baptists in 2007? How about it?! A Gathering in your own community?!

Philly



Welcome sign at Drexel Hill Baptist Church

W&A Congregations in Profile: Underwood Memorial Baptist Church, Wauwatosa, Wisconsin

<http://www.underwoodchurch.com>

“We are the diverse community of Underwood. We are families. We are singles. We are married couples. We use walkers. We are Boomers, Busters, X-ers, and Boomlets. We are toddlers. We are teenagers. We are veterans. We are residents. We have been Baptist, Catholic, Episcopalian, and agnostics. We grew up churched and unchurched. We grew up fundamentalist. We grew up liberal. We come from many nations and many ethnic backgrounds.”

So reads the “welcome sign” on Underwood Memorial Baptist Church’s homepage. This sign is a gateway to UMBC’s exciting faith community, and it arises from a past rich with a heart for justice.



Members from Underwood worked with Habitat for Humanity to help construct homes for those less privileged in the Milwaukee area.

Underwood Memorial Baptist Church arose out of the struggle for justice. In 1843, a group of members of the Greenfield Baptist Church (now First Baptist) in West Allis separated over the question of slavery. Initially the Hart’s Mills (Wauwatosa) church was part of

a circuit of four churches served by the Greenfield pastor, Elder W. R. Manning. On October 11, 1845 the Wauwatosa Baptists became an independent church.

One of the new church’s first acts was to deny membership to anyone owning slaves or supporting slavery. The church members also worked to elect antislavery candidates to public office, helped to fund an abolitionist newspaper, *The American Freeman*, and gave refuge to fugitive slaves. Harriet Denny Underwood’s family was among the first to engage in this illegal but righteous activity.

In 1842, the year Harriet married Enoch Underwood, her mother and stepfather, Lucinda and Samuel Dougherty, hid Caroline Quarelles for several weeks on their farm in Pewaukee. Caroline had fled slavery in St. Louis and was the first person conducted by the Underground Railroad through southeastern Wisconsin to freedom in Canada. Harriet and Enoch also kept a station of the Underground Railroad in their house in Wauwatosa to shelter fugitive slaves.

Enoch Underwood became the first permanent pastor, serving for almost forty years. His ordination in December 1849 was not recognized for several years because of the slavery issue. In 1853 the congregation changed its name to First Baptist Church of Wauwatosa.

Later in 1906 the church renamed itself in Rev. Underwood’s memory. The congregation has erected three church buildings, all of which remain to this day. The meeting house completed in 1853 was the first church building of any denomination in Wauwatosa. It was moved to the Wauwatosa Cemetery, first being used as a chapel and later a storage shed. Plans are being made to restore the building to its earlier state.

The second edifice, erected in 1888, is now home to the Latvian Lutheran church whose members fled the Soviet invasion and occupation of Latvia. The present building, across the street from the old church, was dedicated in

1954. All three buildings were designated as Milwaukee County historic landmarks in 1991. The elevator was installed in 1998, making the building handicapped accessible.

At Underwood Church’s 150th anniversary in 1995, the church was fortunate to see all this history come to life as descendants of the Underwood family and the Quarelles family were united for the first time, through the efforts of the late Jean Lavold, Church Historian, and Dr. Reid Trulson, pastor at the time.

UMBC members have consistently been involved in ministries which seek to bring justice to all people.

The ministry which began with giving shelter to fugitive slaves has continued in other forms throughout the church’s life. After World War II members sponsored people from Germany, Holland, and Japan for resettlement in the United States. Since then people from Cuba, Vietnam, Romania, Liberia, the Congo, and most recently a Somali Bantu refugee family, have been helped to establish a new life here as they fled repression in their home nations.

Church members have consistently been involved in ministries which seek to bring justice to all people. The church family is active in ministries that offer a hand up rather than a handout: Habitat for Humanity, the Milwaukee Christian Center, Project Focal Point, and the Restorative Justice program. Underwood Church is a welcoming and affirming body of believers, welcoming sexual

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NATIONAL AWAB GATHERING/ABC-USA 2007 BIENNIAL MEETING JUNE 29-JULY 2, 2007

Friday, June 29 –

2:45-4:45 PM – Jeffrey Barnes performance and audience talk-back: Woodward Hall (Calvary Baptist Church)

6:30-7:00 PM – Rainbow Choir sings outside plenary event space

Saturday, June 30 –

9:00-11:00 AM – AWAB business meeting: Calvary Baptist Church sanctuary

11:00-11:15 AM – informal fellowship, browsing AWAB exhibit table in and around sanctuary

11:15AM-12:30 PM – AWAB worship service: Calvary Baptist Church sanctuary

12:30-2:30 PM – AWAB luncheon event.:Schallenburger Hall (Calvary Baptist Church) (**Registration form this page**)

2:30-4:30 PM – Jeffrey Barnes performance and audience talk-back: Woodward Hall (Calvary Baptist Church)

5:00-6:45 PM – AWAB exhibit table at Roger Williams dinner event

Sunday, July 1 –

6:30-7:0 PM – Rainbow Choir sings outside plenary event space

Monday, July 2 –

6:30-7:00 PM – Rainbow Choir sings outside plenary event space

AWAB Luncheon

\$15 per person

Please fill out this form, detach, and mail with check no later than May 15

Name: _____

Address: _____

Phone: _____

Number attending: _____

Amount enclosed: _____ (No. x \$15)

Please detach this form and send to:

AWAB Luncheon

Ken Pennings, executive director.

P.O. Box 259257

Madison, WI 53725

AWAB Business Meeting

Items for the 2007 Business Meeting will appear in the Spring issue of *The Inspiriter*. Please be sure to read these carefully if you are attending as a voting member.

AWAB Seeks Nominations for Two Awards

Every two years, the AWAB Council is privileged to honor two individuals whose efforts to improve the path of GLBT people of faith have been inspirational and transformative. We are currently seeking nominations for these two awards, to be presented at the AWAB gathering in Washington D.C. in June 2007.

The Randle R. Mixon Award for Christian Service is given to an individual whose work has helped to increase the inclusion of sexual minorities within Baptist bodies and has served to

advance the cause of justice by educating congregations and organizations about sexual minority and gender identity issues.

The Barbra MacNair Award for Christian Witness is given to an individual whose life has inspired understanding and acceptance of lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender people by opening dialogue that would not otherwise be there, opening the eyes of those who might otherwise turn away, and, by example, helping to advance the affirmation of everyone, regardless of sexual orientation or gender identity.

Please submit nominations to AWAB at ken@wabaptists.org by February 28, 2007.

AWAB To Hire Field Organizer

by Ken Pennings & Carol Wise

In their fascinating book, *Love the Sin* (NY University Press, 2003), authors Janet Jakobsen and Ann Pellegrini state, "... we think homosexuals (and their advocates) have been asking for far too little. Lesbian and gay advocates have been asking for tolerance and equal rights, not freedom and equal justice." This insight is capturing the imagination of AWAB and our partnering organizations in an invigorating and creative fashion. We are moving from an understanding of ourselves as a sanctuary-providing movement to one that boldly advocates for justice and change within oppressive church institutions. Emerging is a strong sense of confidence in our ability to join with supportive non-LGBT people, and together work at creating religious institutions that are more humane and welcoming & affirming of all. We are becoming increasingly aware of the kinds of skills and strategies that are required to effectively engage and change unjust practices and policies, and of our need to develop and hone those skills if we are to be successful in creating lasting and effective change.

The Association of Welcoming and Affirming Baptists (AWAB), The Brethren Mennonite Council for Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgender Interests (BMC), the Gay, Lesbian and Affirming Disciples Alliance Inc. (GLAD) and the Welcoming Congregation Network of the Community of Christ (WCN) have received a grant from the Arcus Foundation to help carry forth the work of freedom and equal justice that Jakobsen and Pellegrini envision.

With the consultation and mentoring of the Institute for Welcoming Resources of the National Gay and Lesbian Task Force Foundation (IWR), **the four organizations will jointly hire a full-time national field organizer for a three-year project to increase the number of supportive congregations in each denomination through faith-based community organizing training, strategic initiatives and educational campaigns.**

At the end of the three-year project, we will know we have been successful if:

1. There has been a 10% yearly increase in the number of welcoming and affirming congregations in each of these movements.
2. We have held 9 faith-based community organizing trainings and yielded 150 active lay persons working in teams of about 15 in eight different regions in the country to strategically increase the numbers of welcoming and affirming congregations.
3. We have a team of about 30 youth and young adults working nationally to expand the work of these four programs.
4. We have developed specific programs in each of the four traditions that work within their denominations to lift up pro-LGBT voices and advocate on behalf of LGBT folks.
5. We have developed a model of ecumenical

collaboration that can be used by other denominations to leverage their collective power.

Faith Based Community Organizing Leadership Training is AWAB's strategy for increasing the number of faith-based communities which openly welcome and affirm people of all sexual orientations and gender identities. The Trainings will be intense 3+ day hands-on workshops intended to give participants the skill-set and knowledge-base to build local or regional "Core Teams" equipped to expand welcoming & affirming programs within area congregations.

Rev. Carol Wise is Executive Director of the Brethren Mennonite Council for LGBT Interests

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minorities and families in all their forms. UMBC's desire is to grow as a multicultural and multiethnic congregation where ALL people feel welcome. [As a part of this growth process, UMBC joined AWAB in 2005.]

Underwood Memorial Baptist Church is striving to offer community and the world living proof that Jesus Christ is the peace who makes strangers into friends, who breaks down the dividing wall, between persons (Ephesians 2:12-14).

The following is a message sent in the Summer of 2006 to the Underwood Congregation from their present pastor, Jamie Washam--the hope of these words embodies the spirit of Underwood Church:

During our recent mission trip in Haiti, I participated in evening prayers with the boys living in St. Joseph's home. Most of the boys come to the home from the streets, where people daily told them, in word and action, how little they were valued. Recognizing this, the family at St. Joseph's practices daily affirmations. The five o'clock prayer service begins with "bravos." Each person present receives three affirmations or more by the others gathered there. One of the young men translated, so those of us who couldn't speak Creole could still understand. Over and again, what most of the boys praised one another for were gifts of time. "Bravo to you for playing with me today." "Bravo to you for sitting right beside me." "Bravo for being a good dancer." "Bravo for having a beautiful smile." "Bravo for doing a good job cleaning up this morning." One boy, who'd only arrived at the home the day before was stunned when he heard his name being called out, and his person praised. He looked shy, then glowed. No one left there the same way they entered in. We then moved into scripture and prayer. What a beautiful way to punctuate the day.

When you spend your day looking for ways to praise and call out the good in one another, you find it. I challenge each of you to cultivate this practice. Seek out what's right with the world. Let someone know they are loved, beautiful, and how they managed to make your day. Be sincere and generous in your appreciation. Don't be stingy with your gratitude. Tell someone of your admiration. Let your light shine, and your blessings radiate.

*Peace,
Pastor Jamie*



From the Executive Director

Ken's Pennings

The discovery of AWAB has been a watershed moment in my faith, as was my introduction to University Baptist Church."

As we look back on 2006, we celebrate the expansion of AWAB's ministries of inclusion for LGBT-Allied people! We celebrate:

- Ten regional gatherings of Welcoming & Affirming Baptists throughout the US;
- *Tapestry*, a national gathering of LGBT-Allied folks identified with the Baptists, the UCC and the Disciples of Christ;
- *Mentoring Connections*, a ministry of linking one AWAB congregation with another for support and encouragement;
- A Development Team to help identify major donors, provide education in planned giving, and write grants;
- The merger of the Institute for Welcoming Resources (IWR) with the National Gay & Lesbian Task Force;
- Movement-Building through the Welcoming Church Program Leaders (WCPL) and The Bishops and Elders Conference.

"Not only do I have a congregation I can call home, but I now belong to an association connecting Baptists and other denominations across the nation."

-Roy, University Baptist Church

"Years ago I was introduced to UBC as a congregation which had been disfellowshipped from the Southern Baptist Convention because it ordained an openly gay man. Even knowing that, I still found it hard to believe a congregation could be Baptist and inclusive. So when I came out gay and moved to Austin, I did not even consider UBC as a potential church home. And maybe I'm glad I didn't make that move six years ago. I was not ready for a church to accept me because I was not ready to accept a church."

"When I was finally introduced to UBC this summer, I knew from the first Sunday I set foot in the building, that the body of believers who called that place home, was truly Christian. I spent a month considering the move of my membership to UBC before I finally did it because I wanted to be certain. I have never looked back. This weekend, discovering the Association of Welcoming and Affirming Baptists,

in many ways was an explosion of my faith."

"As a child, I always thought I would be a minister. As a teenager I reasoned I could never be one because I was gay. After this weekend, I have hope that I may be able to impact people in service to the Lord again."

"Thank you."

-Roy

In 2007, AWAB will continue to expand ministries of inclusion for LGBT-Allied people! We're thrilled about receiving a grant from the Arcus Foundation to hire a full-time field organizer who will conduct trainings in faith-based community organizing for "Core Teams" (see related article on page 7). Core Teams will create and implement action plans to increase the number of Welcoming & Affirming Baptist congregations.



Bishops & Elders Conference, Dallas, TX, Sept. '06

And the goal of all of these exciting ministries was changed lives! We celebrate stories like this one sent to me by a gay man named Roy, who attended the gathering of W&A Baptists in Austin, TX last November:

"Thank you and the board for your presence here in Austin this weekend.



At a Dallas, TX, press conference, held in conjunction with The Bishops & Elders Conference, Rev. Rebecca Voelkel, Director of Institute for Welcoming Resources, speaks against the scapegoating of GLBT people in national elections

With your volunteer help and generous financial gifts, AWAB will move forward in 2007 to create In-Care for Seminarians, A Profile & Placement Service for LGBT Ministry Professionals, New Church Starts, and Inclusive Baptist Youth Camps.

We're also hoping to double the

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Spirit continued from 1

church, which the congregation commissioned them to do. People were asked to keep an open mind. It was decided later that the area minister would be present for the vote the following Sunday. Things seemed to be turning contentious. I still felt led to come, even if at this point it was to serve more as a prophetic witness and maybe not as their next pastor.

I had already completed the sermon I prepared to preach that Sunday, before the brouhaha, which was based on the lectionary text from I John 4:7-21 (NRSV), which says in part: *“Beloved, let us love one another, because love is from God; everyone who loves is born of God and knows God. Whoever does not love does not know God, for God is love...if we love one another, God lives in us, and God’s love is perfected in us....because God has given us God’s Spirit...There is no fear in love, but perfect love casts out fear...Those who say ‘I love God,’ and hate their brothers or sisters are liars; for those who do not love a brother or sister who they have seen, cannot love God whom they have not seen.”* It really seemed to me and others that the Holy Spirit was trying to speak in this situation!

I met with people at a dessert reception Saturday evening. People were cordial. Many shared their support of my being called. Yet no one who had an issue with my orientation asked me any questions. I led worship Sunday without any incident.

Then came the vote. The discussion that took place before the vote revealed a lot of ugly prejudices and biases among some in the congregation, and greatly hurt others in the congregation who thought their church was a welcoming place. (There are some African Americans and a gay couple who attend the church).

Much like Jacob’s wrestling match one night with God in the desert, churches are being called to wrestle with God in becoming more inclusive and welcoming places for all of God’s people.

People supporting my candidacy were very upset. The search committee resigned. Many who supported my candidacy seriously considered leaving the church entirely and starting anew. They also boycotted worship the following Sunday as a matter of principle and attended a scheduled meeting afterward to discuss next steps. After a two-and-a-half hour discussion, I was told the church overwhelmingly voted to continue the process and decide at their semi-annual meeting (June 4, Pentecost Sunday) to vote on whether proxy votes would be counted.

So, there it is. I decided to accept this call. The decision was not easy, for a variety of reasons. I never asked the search committee to continue this process after the May 14 vote. They did it on their own, out of conviction that I was the right

person to be their pastor. They stayed in touch with me and asked if I would still consider if there was some way I could be called. I said yes. After going through the process this far, and having felt called to this church before this conflict erupted, I felt inclined to see it through.

It’s providential that this call took place on the Sunday Christians celebrate Pentecost. What is the Holy Spirit saying to the churches? Just as the early followers of Jesus wrestled with the idea of God’s Spirit dwelling in people they considered outsiders, and then welcoming them into Christian fellowship, the church of Jesus Christ continues to wrestle with what God is saying when it comes to welcoming and including Christians who are gay, lesbian, bisexual or transgender (GLBT).

Much like Jacob’s wrestling match one night with God in the desert, churches are being called to wrestle with God in becoming more inclusive and welcoming places for all of God’s people. To borrow a line from Joan Chittester’s book on Jacob’s experience, *Scarred by Struggle, Transformed by Hope*, today’s churches may find themselves scarred by the struggle of wrestling with God’s Spirit in determining what role LGBT people will have in the life of the church. The question remains, after churches are scarred by the struggle, will they seek to be transformed by hope--the hope that God’s Spirit is doing a new thing in desiring to see GLBT people fully be who they are, serving God and serving communities of faith in seeking God’s love, peace, grace, mercy and justice for all.

Ken’s Pennings continued from 8

number of regional AWAB gatherings from eleven to twenty-two! How about an event in your area?!

Have you made your New Year’s Resolutions? Please resolve the following:

In 2007, I will increase my giving to AWAB!

- I will volunteer my time for AWAB!
- I will plan an ‘AWAB Sunday’ at my church!
- I will attend the Alliance of Baptists Convocation (April 13-15, 2007), or the ABC-USA Biennial (June 29-July 2, 2007), as a representative of AWAB!”



ALLIANCE OF BAPTISTS

2007 Convocation

April 13-15, 2007

**Calvary Baptist Church,
Washington, DC**

**Theme: Every Now and Then
Celebrating the Alliance’s 20th
Anniversary**

**Keynote speaker: Harvey G. Cox,
Hollis Professor of Divinity, Harvard**

BAPTIST YOUTH CAMP: NOT YOUR TYPICAL YOUTH CAMP

by John Kent, Director

You probably can recall those experiences in your life that were so engaging and profound that you could hardly wait to share them, only to realize that the moments were often too sacred and deeply engraved to make much sense to folks who did not have the same or similar experience. This seems to be the case for many in reflecting aloud on the phenomenon of Baptist Youth Camp.

But telling the story is a must. In the words of Santi Matthews, youth minister with W&A congregation Pullen Memorial Baptist Church in Raleigh, NC, “We almost can’t settle ourselves ’til our stories can settle on someone else’s ears.”

**The “good news”
of BYC is all about
stories of home, of love
and acceptance, and of
faith.**

Baptist Youth Camp began over sixteen years ago with a group of friends and colleagues who were authentic and intentional about youth ministry, and who wanted to help create a safe and creative environment where young people could grow in understanding of themselves, the created world and the Divine in fresh, experiential and broadly engaging ways. Through the years sixteen congregations from five states have been involved with BYC, always as a cooperative and collaborative partnership.

Today, Baptist Youth Camp, held in Laural Spring, NC, functions as a covenant relationship between seven churches in four states, with approximately 130 youth and adult guides. After two in-person planning meetings and two conference calls for the Planning Team, youth camp occurs one week each summer at the beginning of July. A seven year “lectionary” cycle guides the planning, a cycle that includes the biblical themes of Creation, Sabbath, Exodus, Exile, Life and Teachings of Jesus, and Acts. Embedded in and emerging from lectionary themes, perennial emphases expressed and reflected in this community are finding a sense of home and place in the world, peacemaking, and challenging attitudes of violence, homophobia and exclusion.

The theme for BYC 2006 was Exile, and we spent a good bit of time during the week symbolizing and living with the idea of being uprooted and cast away from that which is familiar and comfortable, and learning to build community in the midst of strangeness. We built (bird)

houses, planted (flower) gardens, and indeed found ways to give voice to our prayers and to “sing our songs in a strange land.”

In many respects, Baptist Youth Camp might look like a traditional church youth camp: We have experiential and reflective Bible study; we worship together in the evenings, although in BYC our youth non-traditionally plan and lead the corporate worship experiences; we hike, canoe, sing, play, do arts and crafts and videography together; we have a bonfire, a dance and a variety show. When it rains, we play cards, basketball and volleyball indoors, or read and write, or if we are really completely bored, try to have a good movie to watch. And yet even to a casual outside observer, BYC is not a traditional church youth camp.

In both mission and practice, Baptist Youth Camp exists as a community where young people and adult guides can be authentic and accepted: students and teachers, male and female, gay and straight, athlete and artist. For many, it has become a family, and the reunion is in July. It is the place where one youth from Louisiana says she feels like she can be and share her true self with others, especially her peers, and can expect to be loved, accepted and affirmed in it. It is the place where one high-school junior from North Carolina says he realized he was Christian. It is the place where a senior, also from North Carolina, could personally share in the context of proclamation his efforts and struggles to change attitude, culture and society as an open, Christian gay young person and Eagle scout. It is the place where three gay musician/songwriter/worship leaders have shared that they have found a place of ministry and service, having lost them in other “Christian” communities. And, as I know has been shared here before, it is the place where you can dance with whomever you would like! BYC is the place for many youth and adult guides to come home, come out, and come to Jesus!

Worship centerpiece designed by BYC participants



WELCOME TO AWAB! Seven Churches and One New Chapter Join AWAB in 2006

*Circle of Mercy, Asheville, NC
First Baptist Church of Jamaica Plain,
Jamaica Plain, MA
Myers Park Baptist Church, Charlotte, NC
Woodside Church, Flint, MI
Broadway Church, Kansas City, MO
Community Church of Wilmette,
Wilmette, IL
God's Harbor Community Church,
St. Louis, MO*

*Willemette Valley AWAB Chapter,
Salem, OR*



Ron Green Joins AWAB Council as Chair of Finance Committee

Guidance for AWAB between biennial business meetings of its member churches is provided by a Council of elected and appointed representatives. When a vacancy occurs on the Council between biennial meetings, the Council is empowered to make a substitute appointment, following the guidelines for the composition of the Council provided in our by-laws.

We are pleased to welcome Ron Green to the Council to succeed Brian Dixon. Ron comes to us with a tremendous wealth of experience chairing finance committees of non-profits. He is from Myers Park Baptist Church, Charlotte, NC, and is on the faculty of Winthrop University. Ron is a great addition to our Council.

AWAB Needs Your Immediate Reply!

Beginning in 2007 only members of the Association of Welcoming & Affirming Baptists or subscribers to *The InSpiriter* will continue to receive the publication. To ensure that you will continue to receive *The InSpiriter*, please complete this form, clip, and mail to: AWAB, P.O. Box 259257, Madison, WI 53725

Please check only one and complete information below:

I am already an individual member of AWAB, and contribute financially annually __, quarterly __, or monthly __ (for a one year subscription to *The InSpiriter* - 4 issues).

I would like to become an individual member of AWAB (for a one year subscription to *The InSpiriter* - 4 issues).

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Additional Donation: \$ _____

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Please check and complete all that apply:

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I would like to receive AWAB's monthly online newsletter *The Associational* at the following email address (please print clearly): _____

We regret that if you do not reply you may no longer receive *The InSpiriter*.

The InSpiriter is also available online at
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Your envelope and postage are greatly appreciated!

Thank You!

The InSpiriter

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AWAB IS GRATEFUL FOR ALL ITS SUPPORTERS!!!

2006 BUDGET - \$71,000

2006 INCOME - \$59,918

DIFFERENCE - \$11,082

In 2006, eight of AWAB's congregations contributed over \$1000 each (35.6% of AWAB's total annual income).

- Of these eight, two contributed over \$5000 each (18.4% of AWAB's total annual income).*

In 2006, five of AWAB's individual members contributed over \$500 each.

- Of these five, one contributed over \$1,200.*

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