



The InSpiriter

A publication of the **Association of Welcoming & Affirming Baptists**

The National Voice for LGBT Baptists

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"Certain Standards" **A sermon by Rev. Amy Butler** **Calvary Baptist Church** **Washington, DC**

Scripture: Acts 10

We've been talking here at Calvary for some time—it has been years, actually, that this conversation has been going on—about how we, as the community of Christ at Calvary Baptist Church will institutionally deal with the issue of homosexuality in the church...in *our* church.

For those of you who are visiting today, you should know this is not our normal worship fare; this sermon is part of an ongoing discernment process within our community, and the deacons have asked me to address the issue from the pulpit.

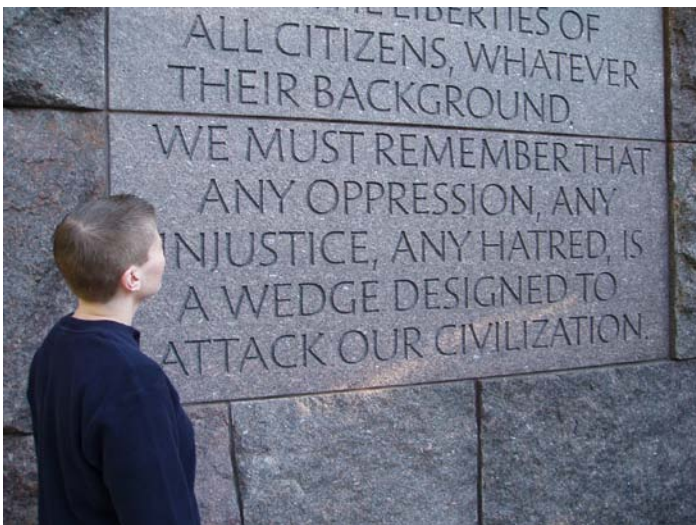
At first thought the task seemed a little, well, distasteful to me. Frankly, nobody likes to talk about sex in church anyway, but preparing a sermon from a topical starting place is not my normal style. See, as a preacher my discipline is to open the texts assigned for the week and to mine them for a word from God. And yet, I have to say I think

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AWAB Council: Bringing the "tablets down from the mountain"

by Jill McCrory and Helen Bishop



Heather Rittenhouse, AWAB Council Chair, at the FDR memorial in Washington, D.C.

In the third chapter of Exodus, Moses, tending his flock as shepherds do, looked up and saw something strange:

¹ Now Moses was tending the flock of Jethro his father-in-law, the priest of Midian, and he led the flock to the far side of the desert and came to Horeb, the mountain of God. ² There the angel of the LORD appeared to him in flames of fire from within a bush. Moses saw that though the bush was on fire it did not burn up. ³ So Moses thought, "I will go over and see this strange sight—why the bush does not burn up."

This was the image that came into the minds of AWAB Council members who met in Atlanta in January, as they were discussing just how amazing it is that an Association exists with the mission of being "a national voice for LGBT Baptists." Thanks to a generous grant from the Arcus Foundation, AWAB had the resources to hire a consultant who could help AWAB strengthen that voice from whisper to roar by looking at its structure, policies, governance, and Council work. As they met in Atlanta to plan how to achieve this by the end of the year, they thought of the Association's staff and

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Editorial

“Independence Day”

by JoAnne C. Juett

Since this issue comes at the end of spring and the beginning of summer, it probably arrives near the celebration of America’s Independence Day. I am reminded of the powerful words of the second paragraph of that official Declaration of Independence:

We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness.

I suspect I would not be wrong in thinking that most Americans seldom give serious thought to this very significant proclamation, a statement that carries great weight in its still influential bearing on the laws that govern our country. Yet, these “unalienable Rights” agreed upon by the founders of our country are crucial to the welcoming movement today.



Rev. Irv Cummings (Old Cambridge Baptist Church, Cambridge, MA - W&A) (far right) joining his fellow clergy with the Religious Coalition for the Freedom to Marry in an early-morning march to the State House

Let us set aside the obvious sexism of the declaration and accept that all “people” are created equal. This would mean, of course, that the term “people” is inclusive of LGBTQ. Next, if indeed these rights are unalienable, then, by definition, they are “not to be separated, given away, or taken away.” Rights that are unalienable, then, would be, for Christians, God-given rights that humanity cannot deny humanity. Our right to a full life, to freedom, and to at least the opportunity to obtain happiness on our own terms (with respect to the unalienable rights of others) are guaranteed by our Creator. Unfortunately, there are in our society many who want to play God themselves, and they have worked tirelessly to control

and deny the basic rights of people who are different than they, most especially those who are LGBTQ.

A full life, freedom and happiness for LGBTQ people are denied every day in this country. Those who identify themselves as LGBTQ often do not experience the freedom to express that identity publicly, nor can they obtain the same benefits in private or public service as their heterosexual counterparts. LGBTQ in most states do not have the freedom to marry or have their civil unions recognized, to have or adopt children, to self-identify in the military, or to obtain domestic partner benefits. How can someone have a full life when s/he is denied personal authenticity? How can one be happy when s/he cannot even be her/himself, let alone establish a meaningful relationship with another who can only multiply that happiness?

I am reminded that Jesus’ first sermon was all about happiness. As he spoke from that mountain, he began by encouraging those who were oppressed that indeed God guaranteed them happiness (“beatitudes” derives from the Latin *beatus* or happy): “Happy are those who mourn, are those who are pure in heart, are those who are now persecuted.” Jesus consoled the victims of hatred and prejudice with his assurance that indeed THEY were the ones who could, should and would be happy. This is not the momentary, fleeting happiness we experience when things go right for us; this is the deep joy and satisfaction when we know for certain that things are right with God, with others, and with ourselves. I suspect this is the type of happiness meant by Jefferson as well.

Thomas Jefferson probably didn’t have anything in mind about the LGBTQ community (although movements were afoot in both England and France to “decriminalize” homosexuality—in fact, France made this move by 1791), but he did intend to write a document wholly dedicated to freedom for those who were oppressed. Now, two and a half centuries later, we still grapple with the fact that not all of our citizenry can fully possess their truly unalienable

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The Association of Welcoming & Affirming Baptists is composed of Baptist churches, organizations, and individuals who have gone on record as being welcoming and affirming of all persons, without regard to sexual orientation or gender identity, and who have joined together to advocate for inclusion of gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender persons within Baptist communities of faith.

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our deacons are correct. It's time for us, if we say we are serious about following Jesus, to look hard at how we are going to deal with this issue that is dividing almost every Christian denomination today.

I am not talking about the question of whether or not we welcome gay people to worship with us ...as far as I can tell that is not a question here at Calvary; we're pretty insistent here about welcoming everyone who seeks relationship with Jesus Christ.

No, I am talking today about the full integration of our homosexual brothers and sisters in Christ into our community of faith on every level of expression. That is, those who live and serve and worship among us, recognized in the full expression of who they are, of who God created them to be.

This issue is a hot-button issue, you can't deny it. Even those who haven't cracked open a Bible in years can tell you that tradition, conventional wisdom, everything they ever learned at church makes them think that homosexuality is really bad—in fact, it's one of the worst sins a person could commit, right? And that when we accept homosexual persons into full expression of life and faith in our community, well, we're violating certain standards for Christian behavior.

The problem for those of us bound and determined to follow Jesus is that what he asked of us runs head on into this strict exclusion of people. Jesus, as you know, was a radical INCLUDER. Truth be told, a dissonance like this one is uncomfortable, and it calls us to look deeper. So, as we struggle it's best for us to start by looking at what the Bible says.

While different scholars hold different views and interpretations, it's pretty widely agreed upon that there is a total of six passages in the Bible that address homosexuality.

Of the four passages in the Hebrew scripture two are stories of destruction that include horrifying, brutal sexual violation,

some of it homosexual. These passages, Genesis 19:1-29 and Judges 19:1-30, are two of several "texts of terror" (as theologian Phyllis Trible would call them),

biblical stories of human evil lived out to its devastating extreme. Honestly, reading these texts is not a happy experience. They detail horrific events, but what they don't do ...not at all... is address the issue of sexual identity, as some claim that they do. Violence, evil, human pain—yes, they cover those. But they do not cover sexual identity, heterosexual, homosexual or otherwise.

The third and fourth mentions of homosexuality in the Hebrew scripture are

found in the Levitical code, specifically in Leviticus 18:22 and 20:13. Here we must note, before we start looking at these passages, that as many have pointed out, it is an irresponsible hermeneutic to look at the Levitical code and insist on its compliance ...if you're going to comply selectively.

In other words, if you're going to take one rule as essential, well, you'd better be ready to take the rest on, too. When you read the Levitical law you will see that these passages in Leviticus state clearly that homosexual activity is punishable by death. They are, however, right smack in the middle of other rules—even other sexual guidelines. For example, the Levitical code calls for a man to take several wives, but not to marry two sisters at the same time. A man can get in a lot of trouble if he happens to talk with a woman who is having a menstrual cycle, and the cutting of facial hair—a man's beard—is strictly prohibited. The consumption of foods like shrimp and pork is forbidden, and the code declares abhorrent the wearing of clothing made of any kind of mixed fibers.

The truth of the matter is that, in the time the Levitical code was adopted, the future of the Jewish people was dependent on vigorous procreation. While homosexual behavior existed, of course, there was no concept of what we know to be valid today: homosexual orientation. Frankly, the luxury of discerning sexual orientation did not exist. The four passages in the Hebrew scripture

addressing homosexuality do not address orientation, and we should be very careful about selective application of ancient laws to a modern context.

This all seems a little silly, and in a way it is: Christians do not and have not ever accepted adherence to Levitical law as requirement for Christian faith. It seems quite an irresponsible and even dishonest handling of the Hebrew text to pick and choose and apply selectively. And so, looking at all the evidence, it seems to me that Hebrew scripture does not provide any easy answers for us.

And so we turn to the New Testament, the revelation of Jesus Christ whom we claim to follow, for more guidance. It seems like the most prudent way to explore this topic in the New Testament is to start with the Gospels, with the witness of Jesus. When we do that we quickly note that Jesus said nothing about homosexuality. Not one thing.

Jesus, as you know, was no shrinking violet. He spoke out vehemently and repeatedly against what he perceived were the evils of his day. He blasted the Pharisees and called for relief for the poor. He overturned convention—even Jewish law—and welcomed women into his inner circle. He reached out to touch and to heal those who were untouchables. Jesus, as you know, was a radical who was not afraid to call a spade a spade. And he said nothing about what so

many have determined to be the most heinous of sins—homosexuality.

But Jesus' silence, though notable, is not the only New Testament evidence on the matter. Because Jesus never mentions it, the total New Testament witness on the subject of homosexuality is found in 1 Corinthians 6:9 and Romans 1:18-29.

In the 1 Corinthians passage Paul lists a whole litany of sexual sins, including what many translators have called "homosexual offenders." Here Paul lists, along with other sexual violations, the act of homosexual prostitution, clearly an act that debases human value as do all the other acts of sexual violation listed here, among them heterosexual prostitution and adultery. I think we can all agree that sexual violation of any sort is sinful...at best. So, in fact, we are in agreement with

"It's time for us, if we say we are serious about following Jesus, to look hard at how we are going to deal with this issue that is dividing almost every Christian denomination today."

"Jesus, as you know, was a radical INCLUDER."

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Mid-Atlantic States AWAB Gathering April, 2008 "Sexuality and Gender"

by Kathy Stayton

It is the morning of April 18, 2008 at Central Baptist Church, Wayne, Pa.

The drama, *And He Ran Screaming* is to be performed this evening with a technical rehearsal scheduled for 1:30 p.m. But, workers are still painting doors, completing some electrical work in the ceiling of a newly renovated hall complete with portable stage. They say it will be ready.

A dry erase easel in the entry hall shows what is happening where on Friday and the arrows point: upstairs, a community children's orchestra rehearsal; downstairs, Main Line Youth Alliance (MYA), a suburban LGBT and allied youth group of 30 to 40 youths who meet at the church every Friday night; to the left, AWAB Conference Reception and Drama. Welcome to Central Baptist reality.

The rehearsal with Jeffrey Barnes, playwright and actor, starts finally at 2:30 p.m., with more than a few distractions in the room! Deb and her 8 year old daughter, Leah, and a friend are making tickets for the drama—different sizes and shapes with words in their young printing like "CBC Loves Drama" or "Drama Ticket" with little stick figures of females or males, or hearts, or borders. Deb is making special bordered complimentary tickets to give to anyone in MYA who wants to attend.



Heather and Kathy put packets together to give to conferees. Yvonne, from Drexel Hill Baptist Church, a neighboring AWAB church, brings three handmade large welcoming banners, complete with framing poles-- one banner for outside, and two for the entry hall where the Resource Table is set up. James R. is on a rickety stepladder to attach one frame to a pipe.

Vince makes signs while Charlotte goes on a "vegetarian sandwich ingredients" run. Jean and Ralph bring in the food and drink for the Friday reception and meals on Saturday, using the new kitchen's new commercial refrigerator. And, Jeffrey and Bill, the technician, ARE rehearsing. Activity abounds!

CBC's new hall looks beautiful! Six round tables with brightly colored table cloths, each in a rainbow color, are ready with center pieces of small begonia plants surrounded by colorful stick figure cutouts of males and females. The registration table is in place. Chairs are facing the new portable stage, and the hall is ready by 6:30 p.m. when Terry, registrar, arrives with 60 narrow rainbow lanyards, which she had made, attached to name tags. She spreads them out in a circle around a table, ready for those who had pre-registered. James J. arrives to help out at the table. Leah is ready to hand out drama tickets to those who pay at the door, but is too shy to do so.

By 7:00, food and drink is set on the buffet table for the reception and people begin arriving! Seventy people! Excitement is in the air. Lights are dimmed at 7:50 p.m., and bright ones now shine over the stage. Marcus Pomeroy and Laurie Sweigard, CBC pastors, welcome everybody, and Kathy Stayton introduces Jeffrey Barnes. The conference program starts!

With humor, reflection, heartache and joy, and intermittent use of video projection, Jeffrey shares his life and faith as a gay man, looking back at

his childhood and adolescent experiences through the medium of a drama that took him a few years to write to satisfaction. Then he leads the discussion. How the audience responds! Many identify with his experience. The young people from MYA and one of the facilitators who chose to come to the play are extremely appreciative and moved that he speaks

JUST AS I AM

Just as I am, as you made me,
True to my own identity,
A child of God for all to see,
O Loving God, I come, I come.

Just as I am, not quite like the rest,
Each day a joy, and yet a test;
In all these moments, I am blessed
By you, O God; to you, I come.

Just as I am, though tossed about,
With many a conflict, many a doubt,
Fightings within and fears without,
O Loving God, I come, I come.

Just as I am, your arms hold me,
Where e'er on the spectrum I may be,
My full-life test my ministry,
O loving God, I come, I come.

Words by Doug Norton
Accompanist
at AWAB Mid Atlantic States
Conference
Central Baptist Church
Wayne, PA, April 19, 2008.

of faith. Comments and questions come easily. There are some tears and lots of personal sharing. By 9:15 p.m. the audience disperses, but people linger to talk with one another. What an exciting start!

Saturday, April 18, 2008: "A Fabulous Day!" writes a conferee on an evaluation. What happened to make it a "Fabulous Day"? Lots!

The subject matter, national and denominational life, is timely. Information

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Paul here.

The Romans passage is the one that is most frequently quoted when the issue of homosexuality is raised.

Again, the homosexuality Paul makes reference to here is wanton, irresponsible behavior of pagan temple prostitutes, behavior described as “burning with lust.” We read this passage honoring the historical context in which it was written. And we compare Paul’s words to what we know of our homosexual brothers and sisters who labor alongside us in the work of the Gospel, who live peaceful, committed and loving lives, who most certainly are not running around behaving in ways that “burn with lust” or that violate other people.

Again, Paul is talking about temple prostitution, a part of society that is totally foreign to you and me, in much the same way that loving, committed relationship between two persons of homosexual orientation was totally foreign to Paul.

“When I was converted I learned that there were indeed certain standards for relationship with the God of the Universe . . . the standards of living our lives doing justice, loving mercy and walking humbly with God, or as Jesus said, loving God and loving my neighbor. “

So. What I’ve just recounted here is the total biblical witness on the topic of homosexuality. With careful study it’s clear that these six passages either address cultural and historical situations that differ from our

own or their translation and meaning are ambiguous at best. The bottom line is this: we do scripture a disservice when we use it to address issues it was not written to address. And I would even go so far as to say that we use the Bible irresponsibly when we ask it for answers to questions about sexual orientation or loving same-sex relationships. The Bible does not address this topic at all, other than to hold up for us God’s high standard of radical love expected from all people.

As people of faith, when we tackle a hard issue like this one, we want to be very careful to look closely and prayerfully at the scriptural witness. And we also want to be careful that we don’t use scripture to defend a position we hold because it’s a position we’ve always been taught.

Peter had the same exact dilemma [Acts 10]! While Peter was still puzzling over the vision he’d seen, who showed up at his doorstep but the representatives of Cornelius...with the news that their master had sent them because he’d heard from God that they, Peter and Cornelius, were to meet?

Oh, this must have been so hard for Peter. And it wasn’t hard because Peter was a good-for-nothing bigot who couldn’t overcome his prejudice.

No, it was hard because everything Peter had learned about God and about relationship with God was suddenly being challenged—turned on its head. And it wasn’t just his personal opinion that was being called into question. The standards of

holy living that Peter endorsed could be substantiated with Hebrew scripture and Levitical law. He knew from tradition that he should never interact with Gentiles. He’d learned his whole life at the feet of the Rabbis in the synagogue that any sort of mixing with non-Jews was absolutely abhorrent to God. It wasn’t just a whim for him...it was fundamental to his understanding of God.

But, convinced as he was of his beliefs, Peter had a heart that’s ultimate desire was to follow God. And somewhere in the confusing message of the dream and the ensuing invitation of Cornelius, you have to believe that Peter realized: “come to think of it, Jesus had challenging messages like this for us all of the time!” And maybe, just maybe, Peter understood that God was asking him to look at the world—to look at his faith, again—in a whole new light—just like Jesus had always challenged him to do.

And, Peter, to his eternal credit, took the challenge of conversion that God offered him that day. He heard the voice in the dream and imagined what letting go of his black and white convictions of who God is would mean for his life. He took the risk of listening to the ever-speaking voice of God and stepped into the fear of conversion. And as he did, he met this Gentile Cornelius and decided that including him did NOT go against God’s standards. In fact, Peter’s conversion made him shockingly realize that his attitude of exclusion was the very thing that didn’t meet God’s standards. Look at verse 28: “You yourselves know that it is unlawful for a Jew to associate with or to visit a Gentile; but God has shown me that I should not call anyone profane or unclean.” Peter came to suddenly see that this was really the exacting standard God required of him.

And Peter converted. Peter...Peter! I feel your pain and ambivalence. I grew up knowing without a doubt what was wrong and what was right. I learned that God was an exacting God who expected a certain kind of life from me—a life carefully delineated at church. I knew that missing the boat—that not meeting these standards—meant certain destruction, and I learned my best how to live my life to be sure to do everything right.

But then, like Peter, I was offered the opportunity for conversion. Not for lowering the standards I knew God expected, but by opening my heart to the possibility that God’s love was wider and stronger, bigger and more embracing than I could ever possibly have imagined. My conversion started with the realization that when I hold onto what I’m sure that I know about God, my hands end up clenched hard and tight, knuckles white, muscles straining.

When I was converted I learned that there were indeed certain standards for relationship with the God of the Universe ..the standards of living our lives doing justice, loving mercy and walking humbly with God, or as Jesus said, loving God and loving my neighbor.

In my conversion I learned that God’s high standards were not in any way dependent on my grip. Instead, my closed and tightly held fists were just that. Closed. Closed off to the fresh wind of God’s Spirit; shut off from the work that God still had to do in my heart; exclusive and small, gripping just a little piece of God’s all-encompassing love for this world.

See, Peter learned that relationship with God cannot be contained in whatever

AWAB Welcomes Dr. Helen H. Bishop as Project Coordinator for ARCUS Grant



Dr. Bishop, a published author on leadership development issues, is a Certified Association Executive (CAE) with the American Society of Association Executives. She has worked with a variety of not-for-profit organizations to improve structures and increase their capacity. She is a credentialed Religious Educator with the UUA, and is currently running

her own consulting firm working with not-for-profit boards and organizations working on LGBT issues.

Dr. Bishop writes:

*And what does the LORD require of you
But to do justice, to love kindness,
And to walk humbly with your God? (Micah 6:8)*

"I first learned something of what these words from Micah call us to do in the mid-1960s, growing up in racially segregated towns in Missouri and Illinois. Until I was in eighth grade, all the children in my schools were white. I met African-American people in my church, one of the few integrated congregations in Jefferson City, MO at that time. I admired how well Josephine Wright played the organ – we were the same age, but there was no way I could play like that! I liked going to Josephine's house, because her parents loved opera and there were always records playing there.

Until I went to the University of Missouri, however, I didn't feel called to the work of justice. The dormitories were rigidly segregated, and I heard about African-American students who could get into the university, but couldn't find a place to stay. I couldn't figure out why God would want some people excluded for such a ridiculous reason as the color of their skin, so I began to learn how to organize, write letters, and confront administrators to desegregate the dorms."

"Of course there was another justice issue I thought about, much closer to home than racial justice. I already knew that I was lesbian, and I also knew that even the progressive church I attended earlier might work to end segregation, but regarded homosexuality as a sin and an abomination. I came to believe that I couldn't make a life for myself in this country, so I joined the Peace Corps, went to Ethiopia and then to Europe, where I

lived for nearly 15 years."

"When I returned to the United States in 1978, some things had changed, but acceptance of homosexuality wasn't one of them. I earned a doctorate in organizational leadership from the University of San Diego, and became active with faith communities that wanted to change that. I was part of the group that developed the Welcoming Congregation program for the Unitarian Universalist Association. I became interested in how churches operate, and discovered that I have a calling to lay leadership and organizational development. Since then I've worked with churches and synagogues of all sizes, and in many faith traditions, including helping to organize the centennial celebrations of the Parliament of the World's Religions in Chicago in 1992."

"I was delighted to learn of the existence of the Association of Welcoming and Affirming Baptists from friends of mine serving on a task group to put together three successive "Love Welcomes All" conferences in Hendersonville, a thriving town in western North Carolina. I was even more thrilled when I learned that AWAB was looking for someone to work with them on their structure and governance, so they could truly serve as "the national voice for LGBT Baptists." I couldn't have been happier when the task group looking for a consultant interviewed me and offered me the chance to work with AWAB. I believe the work we're doing to strengthen the organization demonstrates how to bring the words of Micah to life. Everyone involved in AWAB is doing justice, loving kindness, and walking humbly with God, and I'm privileged to work with all of you in this great cause."

"I couldn't have been happier when the task group looking for a consultant interviewed me and offered me the chance to work with AWAB."

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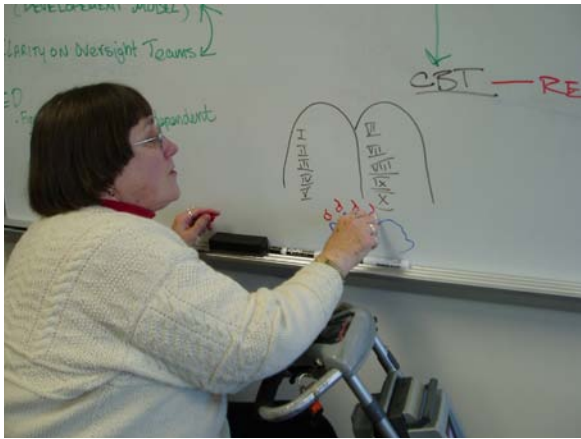
it is that we believe about God. I know that's hard to hear...but it's true.

God is bigger than our qualifications, and God offers you and me the possibility for conversion as we constantly learn to open our hands and let go...let go so that the Spirit of God can create something new...let go so we can recognize certain standards of faith in people we'd never imagine could believe...let go...so that, like Peter, our hearts can be converted, again and again and again.

Our scripture lesson today is most definitely NOT asking us to abandon "certain standards" we have for Christian faith. No, it's asking us to do something much harder than that.

Today we're being asked to recognize those qualities of faith in the most unlikely places...and to open our hands and our hearts to conversion, so that we might live out the radically inclusive love of God that gathers all sorts of people to the table of Christ.

It's at that table, you see, seated right next to all kinds of unlikely Christ-followers, where we are cleansed and nourished, then sent out again to live into the standards God expects from us: to live justly, to love mercy, to walk humbly with the God who has set a place at the table for everyone. In fact, God has even set a place for you and me. Thanks be to God.



Dr. Helen Bishop illustrating the stone tablets

members looking up, seeing a bush burning yet unconsumed, and with one voice, they noted that: “The bush still burns in 2008 for the people supporting AWAB.”

New Project Coordinator, Dr. Helen Bishop added: “I felt privileged to be part of that conversation, even as we used dry-erase markers to draw the burning bush on the project timeline. I’ve worked with congregations and faith-based organizations since 1990, when I completed a doctorate in organizational leadership. My background as a Unitarian Universalist taught me how congregational polity shapes the perspective around governance, structure and authority, and my work on the district and continental level provided me with a good deal of experience with Councils, staff and volunteers.”

“Trying to look after a region that covered five Midwestern states also made me familiar with the role that distance learning could play, bringing people together over vast distances using electronic and telephone-based communication techniques. I took classes and passed a rigorous examination sponsored by the American Society of Association Executives, becoming a Certified Association Executive at the end of the program. All of this background, shaped by my commitment to faith-based work and informed by Scripture, are proving to be a good match for this project with AWAB. I am delighted to be part of the Association as its staff and volunteers work to strengthen its capacity to bring its mission to life, hearing God’s voice today in that burning bush. It’s a privilege to be working with you.”

Jill McCrory, Leadership Development Coordinator, observed: “As we moved through our planning meeting the metaphor of Moses kept recurring to us. Our work as the Capacity Building Grant Team means that throughout this year we will present new policy and structure to the Council for approval. We will bring our own version of the tablets down the mountain. These are the governance “laws” that will guide the organization through its next season of growth.”

“Like Jethro, we are recommending a structure in which leaders work with teams. Like Miriam, we sing with joy as we cross each river of progress. The metaphor seemed to go on and on and encouraged us through a day of planning and through the following weeks of governance work. Let us pray that God’s spirit continues to go before us in the wilderness as we go forward.”

continued top of next column

Jill McCrory is the president of Leadership Outfitters, Inc. a leadership development and consulting company with offices in Washington, DC, Los Angeles, Boston, and Hartford. She is working with the AWAB Council on the strategic planning effort. She is a ministry intern at Luther Rice Memorial Baptist Church in Silver Spring, MD and a seminary student at the John Leland Center for Theological Studies in Clarendon, VA. See information about Helen Bishop on page 5 of this issue.

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about Sexuality and Gender is presented with humor and authenticity and knowledge by Bill Stayton. How much we learned! Most of us didn’t even know what we didn’t know about Sexuality and Gender! It is a safe space for audience interaction. God of love and acceptance is in the room.

The closing worship and communion demonstrates inclusive love, and Peggy Campolo speaks to us about grace. Many participants leave inspired, excited, and hopeful.

Diligent communications by Kathy Stayton brought nearly 70 people to the conference. In addition to those from CBC, two other AWAB congregations attended: FBC, Moorestown, NJ, and Drexel Hill BC, Drexel Hill, Pa. Most others not in CBC were from other denominations and from non-AWAB Baptist churches. One of them wants to start the process to become an AWAB church.

From a retired American Baptist pastor, this message came by email: “The sessions last Friday and Saturday were truly personally and spiritually refreshing and very practically helpful. It has been a long time since I have sensed the full and open redemptive power of that kind of inclusiveness. I regret that our daughter [who is in a same sex relationship] was not available, but she and I have talked since the weekend, and she is very eager to share whatever learnings [her mother] and I have gleaned from that time. Part of what happened to me is the realization of the need to dig deeper into some of the literature you shared.... Gratitude for you [Bill Stayton] being you, your progeny being who they are, and for expanding my sense of how truly large is the Kingdom of God.”

Kathy Stayton is a member of Central Baptist Church, and former Chair and current Secretary of the AWAB Council.

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rights. As Christians, we must be at the forefront of making sure that the basic rights of life, liberty and happiness are guaranteed for our LGBTQ community. How can we believe other than that God calls us to ensure that everyone has a right to be themselves, to find happiness with a chosen partner, to grow a family, and to have access to the same benefits as other citizens? Let us not allow more “Independence” days to go by without ensuring that the very truths of which Jefferson writes are indeed self-evident for every person in our society. Only then will all be truly blessed.

AWAB Member Congregations

Making the decision to become a member of AWAB is rarely easy for a church or organization. Becoming welcoming and affirming of LGBT persons often requires wrestling with tough questions, risking conflict with others through intense and passionate conversations, and being willing to open oneself to new ways God is present in the world. In addition, the threat of being disfellowshipped as a congregation for becoming W&A is an all-too-frequent reality for many who consider that step.

Therefore, we are honored in this space to highlight those churches and organizations that stand boldly and publicly for LGBT equality and inclusion in Baptist communities of faith. We celebrate the witness of each one, recognizing that all of us are stronger when we stand together. For each member institution included in this listing, and for all of AWAB's individual members as well, we give thanks.

Heather Rittenhouse, Chair, AWAB Council

(Please check information carefully; send additions/corrections to ken@wabaptists.org.)

ALASKA

PALMER

Church of the Covenant (ABC)
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hdbss@mtaonline.net
Howard H. Bess, Pastor

CALIFORNIA

BERKELEY

First Baptist Church (ABC/Alliance/BPFNA)
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(510) 848-5838
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COSTA MESA

Fairview Community Church (ABC/UCC/ Evergreen Asso)
2525 Fairview Rd. 92626
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OAKLAND

Lakeshore Avenue Baptist Church (ABC/ Alliance/BPFNA)
3534 Lakeshore Ave. 94610
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LABC4Jim@pacbell.net
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SAN FRANCISCO

Dolores Street Baptist Church
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SAN JOSE

New Community of Faith
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SAN LEANDRO

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COLORADO

GRAND JUNCTION

Koinonia Church (ABC/Brethren)
730-25 Road 81505
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CONNECTICUT

NEW BRITAIN

South Church (ABC/BPFNA/UCC)
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NOANK

Noank Baptist Church (ABC)
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WASHINGTON

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(ABC/Alliance)
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GEORGIA

ATLANTA

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EVANSTON

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INDIANA

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MAINE

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Community of Reconciliation (ABC//DOC/PCUSA/UCC/UMC)
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WAUWATOSA

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Jamie P. Washam, Pastor

From AWAB Executive Director

Ken's Pennings



Is Your Church Both Welcoming and Affirming?

This summer, AWAB's Massachusetts affiliate participated in Boston's interfaith Pride Service and staffed an AWAB information table at the Pride Parade. Similarly, five Baptist Churches walked together as a contingent in the Capital Pride Parade in Washington, D.C. and served communion at the festival the next day.



Far left: Rev. Jamie Washam (Underwood Memorial Baptist Church, Wauwatosa, WI - W&A) and third from left: Rev. Ken Pennings at Milwaukee Pride's interfaith ceremony

Other Baptist congregations have demonstrated their welcome & affirmation of LGBT people in creative and colorful ways, like hosting a concert of the local Gay Men's Choir, advertising in local gay publications, providing meeting space for a local LGBT-friendly group, and offering scholarships to local LGBT students pursuing training and/or careers in Biblical studies and Christian ministry.

All of these are important ways to support LGBT inclusion in Church and Society. Fundamentally, however, what demonstrates that your church both welcomes and affirms LGBT people?

Hopefully, the following is true of your congregation:

1) **LGBT people are welcomed as full members of the church.** When LGBT people become members of the church, they know they can freely participate in the ordinances of baptism and the Lord's Table, have their children dedicated, serve in key areas of leadership, and have their family picture included in the pictorial directory. Every privilege of church membership afforded one member of the church is afforded to all members of the church.

I enjoyed hearing a Baptist minister speak of the Sunday when two women walking forward hand-in-hand responded to an invitation to join the church. This was new in the pastor's experience, and he quickly resolved he would welcome this couple like he would a heterosexual couple. The pastor greeted them warmly, directed them to the church clerk who wrote down their names and contact information, and then presented them to the congregation for membership. The pastor was inwardly thrilled that a lesbian couple felt they could be completely "out" in the public assembly of the church, but expected to take some criticism from certain members of the congregation for his decision to present the couple for membership. Only later that day did he learn from the church clerk that the women were not lesbian lovers, but sisters.

I long for the day in Baptist congregations all across America when it's no

AWAB DC Capital Pride Participation Grows

by Jill McCrory

Who would have thought that what started out as a few of us from Washington Plaza Baptist Church (WPBC) marching with the PFLAG contingent at Pride in 2004 would have resulted, four years later, in having our own contingent of five Baptist churches with 40 marchers? I remember standing with Rev. Sandi John and Dean Jenkins, pastor and music minister of WPBC at the time, and Rev. Michael Bledsoe pastor of Riverside Baptist Church, celebrating the fact that we had two churches marching with PFLAG in 2005. In 2006 we marched again and hoped that soon other churches would join us. Last year we added Ravensworth Baptist Church to our mix and for the first time had our own contingent in the parade. This year, we've added Covenant Baptist Church and Calvary Baptist Church. What a thrill to have all those Baptists in one place marching in support of our LGBTQ community.

It is quite an experience when we round a turn and folks realize that there are Baptists in the parade. We've heard "you've got to be kidding" and "I don't believe it" in addition to some comments I can't express in a public newsletter! People are still so shocked that there are Baptists who are welcoming and affirming.

I'm so proud to be a part of this movement. Being a representative of the Association of Welcoming and Affirming Baptists is truly a blessing and an honor. I look forward to the day that we hear parade goers say; "Oh, yea, here come the Baptists, they've been welcoming forever, look there are hundreds of them!" That is my wish and my prayer.

(see info about Jill McCrory on p. 7)

Ken's Pennings continued on 12

The InSpiriter

The Association of Welcoming & Affirming Baptists
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Madison, Wisconsin 53725

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Ken's Pennings continued from 11

surprise at all when same-gender-loving couples walk forward hand-in-hand in response to an invitation to join the church.

2) LGBT couples may have union ceremonies (or marriages in Massachusetts & California) performed by the senior staff of the church in the sanctuary.

I was so sorry to hear a gay couple say, "Our church claims to be welcoming and affirming, but when we approached our senior pastor about performing our union ceremony, he punted

the ceremony to the associate minister and stipulated that the ceremony could not take place on church premises." No wonder the couple decided to attend church elsewhere.

3) An LGBT church member responding to God's call to

professional Christian ministry is supported and encouraged in her call, and is free to pursue licensing and ordination through the church. The church also champions her cause with the local association and larger region.

If God is calling you, an openly gay person, to pursue professional Christian ministry, persist in finding a Baptist church that will support your call. There are churches in a number of geographic regions of the United States where you will be able to pursue your call.

4) An openly Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual or Transgender person might be hired as senior pastor of the church.

Over twenty AWAB congregations have hired openly gay clergy for senior and/or associate positions. Glendale Baptist Church, Nashville, TN moved from being "a closeted supportive community, to a community testing the waters, to a church that is out and proud of it!" (*The InSpiriter*, Vol. 11, No. 1, Fall 2006). On Oct. 24, 2004, Glendale called as co-pastors Rev. Amy Mears and Rev. April Baker, who has a life partner. Thanks be to God for the pastoral leadership of LGBT-Allied clergy in our movement!

Perhaps you cannot say that all four are true of your church at this time. That's okay. But there's no time like the present to start making your welcome and affirmation of God's dearly-loved LGBT people more convincing and complete.



Bob Hellwig (left) and Gordon Whitaker (right) after their union ceremony on May 24, '08, at Watts Street Baptist Church, Durham, NC