



The InSpiriter

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

The National Voice for LGBT Baptists

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AWAB PLANS TO OPEN BAPTIST YOUTH CAMP IN SUMMER 2008

In July, 2007 AWAB received a grant from the Carpenter Foundation to open a new Baptist Youth Camp in the summer of 2008. Based on the success of

the BYC held annually in North Carolina, AWAB is looking to replicate Baptist Youth Camp (NC) nationally.

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AWAB Welcomes New Congregation

Baptist Youth Camp explicitly works around LGBT issues in the context of faith. Teens attending Baptist Youth Camp will explore how to find a sense of home & belonging in the world, how to work for peace & justice, and how to challenge attitudes of violence, homophobia, heterosexism and exclusion.

Baptist Youth Camp welcomes everyone – camp administrators, camp counselors & campers alike – regardless of sexual orientation, and provides a safe, affirming and creative environment for teens to discover & express their true selves (straight, gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgender, queer-questioning).

Baptist Youth Camp exists as a community where young people and adult guides can be authentically themselves: student or counselor, male or female, gay or straight, athlete or artist.

AWAB is convinced that it is the next generation that will resolve the issue of inclusion of LGBT people in the life, mission and ministries of Baptist congregations. It is vitally important that teens connected with Baptist congregations



Baptist Youth Camp Director, Tim Dean

start talking about LGBT issues that are challenging Baptist denominations today. Baptist Youth Camp will be a place where teens can enter into that conversation confidently, and without fear.

The AWAB Council has chosen Rev.

Timothy W. Dean to direct this new camp. Tim has served as Minister of Youth and Missions at Myers Park Baptist Church, where he was an active leader in the North Carolina Baptist Youth Camp. Tim currently lives in Ithaca, NY, and he continues to be active in various roles in the Alliance of Baptists.

Tim has secured Camp Potawatomini, a YMCA camp in South Milford, IN, for the week of August 17-22, and he is now in the process of enrolling interested youth and counselors. When these plans have been finalized, AWAB congregations and other interested groups will receive information about how their youth and interested adults can become involved. Financial support for the new Baptist Youth Camp is always welcome by AWAB, as well as prayers and help in

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“AWAB is convinced that it is the next generation that will resolve the issue of inclusion of LGBT people in the life, mission and ministries of Baptist congregations.”



Editorial

by JoAnne C. Juett

Baptist Youth Camp Reflections

“Jesus took with him Peter and James and his brother John and led them up a high mountain, by themselves. And he was transfigured before them, and his face shone like the sun, and his clothes became dazzling white.” (Matthew 17.1-2)

I will never forget that beautiful morning I sat atop a hill overlooking the Appalachian mountains in North Carolina. The fog was slowly burning away with the warm touch of the emerging sun, the mist of the early morning was damp on my exposed arms and legs, and hints of life pierced the serenity



of the moment. The leaves and the fog reflected the brilliant sunlight, the “dazzling white” of the presence of my spiritual ancestors. God was in that place, but so, too, the souls of weary pilgrims across the land and indigenous peoples who believed in the power of the very earth on which I sat. Yes, there was a power concentrated at the top of the mountain, pulsating, shuddering in its eagerness to burst forth into the world.

I knew I was someplace special; I really had known it long before I came to that sacred space, but I felt it more strongly than ever before. It wasn't just the sublime beauty of that precise moment, but it was how that moment fit into the context of my week at Baptist Youth Camp that spoke to my soul early that morning on the mountain. I had labored to convince my congregation that this camp was the “right” place for our youth, because I knew that the history of the congregation spoke to shared values of inclusivity and equality. We had traveled many miles over two grueling days to join our progressive Baptist friends at this North Carolina camp, and we had been welcomed and embraced as though we were family, rather than simply new friends joined by common beliefs and values. Everything about our experience at BYC gave the youth and

us, the counselors and leaders, a sense of place, a security of knowing that others not only shared our firm belief that Jesus loves us precisely because of our individuality, but that we all were in a place where we encouraged individuality, embraced the reality of our very being, and practiced our spiritual values rooted in inclusiveness, equality, and justice.

From leading energizing bible study groups of very insightful and perceptive young people, to the moving youth-led worship services that joyously exhausted us all emotionally and intellectually, I knew we were filled to overflowing with a spirit that would lead us down from this mountaintop experience with strength and grace to successfully and creatively face the challenges below that we had managed to briefly set aside in that marvelously welcoming cocoon called Baptist Youth Camp.

Every moment of every day flowed with excitement, from the stupendously silly after-breakfast skits to the frenzied evening activities; capture the flag and dancing garnered the “favorites” votes! We found the spirit of what it means to be Christian as we banded together in team events, planned art for worship, sang with beloved leaders such as Anna Hutto, and cried on each other's shoulders as we hung up our burdens on a sprawling tree dotted with paper

“Yes, there was a power concentrated at the top of the mountain, pulsating, shuddering in its eagerness to burst forth into the world.”

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(photo provided by the Leader-Telegram, Eau Claire, WI)

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AWAB Pastor Performs Commitment Ceremony at Asheville Pridesfest 2007

Rev. Ken Sehested was asked to officiate at a covenant vow ceremony for 12 couples at the close of Asheville, North Carolina's PrideFest on Saturday, 13 October 2007. Here is the text of his homily.

Greetings. On behalf of the organizers of today's gay pride festival—and of these couples who now stand before you—welcome, each and every one, to the close of this festive parade.

Every genuine freedom march is a kind of ritualized renewal of commitments of various sorts. We march in the streets to communicate with the palaces, demanding that those without voice be given one, insisting that justice be granted where it has previously been denied.

But we don't just make demands. We also make promises. And among those promises are the ones being signified and blessed in this sanctuary, as we surround these couples who conclude this party with a public recognition of the promises they have made to each other—vows which they invite each of you to overhear, to attest and to bless.



Chapel at Western North Carolina Community Health Services, site of the covenant vow ceremony

We all know the vows being said here today still lack public recognition and sanction. The relationships already forged by these couples cannot be registered in the courthouse. But that shouldn't be such a surprise; courthouses have always been a bit suspicious about what goes on in sanctuaries. People of faith often make governing authorities nervous. The freedom of gayfolk to marry is a struggle that's still on our agenda.

But there's another kind of freedom which no authority can sanction. You see, in its deepest sense, freedom isn't something you find—it isn't something someone gives you. Freedom (to paraphrase Will Campbell) is something you assume and practice. And then you wait for someone to come take it away from you. And the amount of resistance you put up is the amount of freedom you possess.

Freedom is one of those fashionable-but-slippery words that

is used frequently nowadays. A lot of rascals hide behind it. In my life I've had many occasions to travel outside the U.S., and I can assure you that most people in the world don't think kindly about our nation's claim to be the beacon of freedom. Freedom has come to be the disguise for our willingness to invade other countries under the pretense of self-defense. Freedom is the justification for dominating other people's economies, under the guise of "free enterprise." And, in our interpersonal relationships, freedom has come to mean: Don't ask me to make commitments. All these realities are tied together. They are the expressions of

the same confusions and betrayals. Each is an assertion of hubris masquerading as valued principle.

Some of you have probably heard this expression: "Without a vision, the people perish." It's a verse from scripture, in the book of Proverbs (29:18).

"The truth is, the only real freedom we have is the freedom to make commitments..."

But note this modern translation: "Where there is no prophecy, the people cast off restraint" (NRSV). That is to say, when no one lifts up the dream of the beloved community, everyone pursues their own narrow self-interest.

The truth is, the only real freedom we have is the freedom to make commitments, to chose where, and with whom, and for what purpose we will invest our lives. It's a nice sentiment to say, "Oh, I want to love everybody." But you can't. To love someone means to spend time with them, lots of time. It means be consistent and persistent. Which is why the wording of traditional marriage vows talks about commitment "in sickness and in health, for richer or poorer." There's a day-in, day-out quality to such relationships that requires an open-ended commitment.

The candleholders on the table were made by my dad. He was a diesel mechanic. When he retired he turned his engineering skills into creating homemade artwork. The thing about these candleholders is that they were made from everyday stuff. He didn't order the materials from a specialty store. He didn't travel to some faraway, exotic place to get them. I'm pretty sure one was made from a grapefruit juice can. The small ones are probably pork-and-bean cans. Covenant vows are spoken from the commitment to consistency and perseverance amid the grapefruit juice and pork-and-bean cans of life.

I'm sure many of you were fans of the TV show "West Wing." You remember, somewhere along the line—I can't recall exactly when—we viewers found out that Martin Sheen's character had previously been diagnosed with multiple sclerosis. It was kept secret; and when the truth came out, many of his closest associates were very angry with him.

In the last season of that show, as the disease finally began to affect Bartlett's physical abilities, I remember this one scene especially. The President and his wife were dressing early one evening for a banquet of some sort. Because of his frailty, the President was having trouble getting his trousers on. His wife noticed, came across the room, and helped him. He was very embarrassed, of course, even ashamed. As his partner finished buckling

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North Carolina Baptist Youth Camp 2007: A “Sacred Community”

contributed by John Kent, North Carolina BYC Director

The generation of Facebook and MySpace teaches us that even in the most technological, virtual and seemingly impersonal ways, we still long for community. For many of us, the call is to sacred community, a call that we likely hear only occasionally in a lifetime. Baptist Youth Camp serves as sacred community for me, and the good news is spreading.

With the new partnership of First Baptist Church in Granville, Ohio, Baptist Youth Camp now functions as a covenant relationship between eight churches in five 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 cycle include finding a sense of home and place in the world, peacemaking, and challenging attitudes of violence, homophobia and exclusion.

The phenomenon is of BYC spreading even farther! Thanks to grant funding to AWAB, veteran and formative BYC staff member Tim Dean, former Minister of Youth with Myers Park Baptist Church in Charlotte, NC, is working toward the development of a new Baptist Youth Camp from his new geographic home in Ithaca, New York. For all of us involved in this life-giving venture, it is exciting that more youth, congregational staff and adult mentors in many parts of the country might be able to develop and live in sacred community. With the possibilities of new collegial staff connections, sharing resources of vision, curriculum and planning, we find the Spirit moving in ways that none of us can truly contain or control.

The broadly understood theme for BYC 2007 was “The Life of Jesus,” and our week together was entitled “Getting in the Way.” We were invited to reflection on what it means to be a disciple in the Way of Jesus. The play on words, however, is also significant, as following Jesus often finds us “in the way” of culture, prejudice, authority and empire. And so it is with community-building.

We envision authentic community where young people and adult guides can be accepted, affirmed and empowered: students and teachers, male and female, gay and straight, the athlete and the artist. We are a family, growing-up, growing together, growing apart, coming together, coming out and moving-on. Our reunion is in July. With the presence of Spirit



T-shirt design for BYC 2007

and trust in one another, we each live, work, worship, play and lead, and come away with attitudes and perceptions that have been inexplicably transformed.

And that, to us, is sacred community.

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leaves holding our thoughts and prayers.

I did struggle with how I could leave this special and sacred space. As I sat atop that mountain in the waning hours before we had to journey literally and figuratively down that mountain, I reflected on what I could take with me from my spiritual haven. I had the youth, young people for whom my respect and love had somehow grown exponentially that week; I had colleagues and peers with whom I had bonded in inextricable ways; and above all I had my memories—visions, feelings, and myriad intangible reminders that God was not just in THAT place, but was EVERY place I would travel from that moment on (and had been there all along!), places I would and could travel carrying blessings of hope for a world that can and someday will be just like that wonderful sacred world of Baptist Youth Camp—a place where everyone has infinite value and worth, a place of freedom of self and justice for all, a place where God’s love knows no boundaries or limits!

Reflections on Baptist Youth Camp, 2007

Andrew Wilson, Julie Remillard, and Jimmy Rountree
BYC Campers from Northminster Church, Monroe, LA

Excerpts from "Blessing New Voices," shared in Northminster worship service, July 15, 2007

Andrew Wilson

When being asked on the way back from youth camp this year if I, along with Julie and Jimmy, would like to reflect on my experiences at Baptist Youth Camp (BYC) over the years I've been there, I couldn't pass it by. As much as I wanted to do it, I had no idea what I would say, or how I should attempt to put my thoughts of my eight or so years at Northminster and the six years at BYC. Baptist Youth Camp over the years has had many lessons, in fact a different one for each year that has covered every aspect of my life I could think of, even if it wasn't intended.

This year's camp theme was "Getting in the Way." And, yes, it had more than one meaning, but that all depends on how you look at it. So for this reflection I intend to "get in the way" by telling you my story of my experiences with God, and I hope you can relate yourself or someone you know to it.

...I look back and ask myself how BYC has affected my life. Besides the fact that I haven't had a normal 4th of July in seven years, it has been a huge part in my life because it's something I look forward to every year. Getting to see friends I see once a year and doing new things each time is a refreshing break from everyday life. This isn't your standard "Jesus Camp." It's filled with people who just want to have fun while being influenced by their peers as well as their mentors. Having fewer restrictions on your mind seems to let you produce your own opinions about life and leave camp feeling a little more confident with yourself.

I, for one, have made my own opinions on who we call God and about the people we come in contact with everyday. I believe that our God isn't one who wants to drill us on a book to see how well we know it, or if we follow it word for word. I would hope that we use this book to guide ourselves in everyday life and not be afraid and live in fear for every little wrong thing we do.

And as far as the people we come in contact with, they influence you just as much as someone trying to preach to you would. Whether what they have to say is positive or negative, it should be taken with gratitude and looked at in more than one way. A friend once told me how she needed to get away from this city so she could be reminded that there are still nice people in the world. I told her that there are good people all around you everywhere you go. You just have to be willing to look at them as good people. BYC is filled with a variety of people from funny to serious, and from self-conscience to carefree. I look at all these people and think, how could any of them be bad? They are all different, and what is the point in judging them all?

This past year being my last one at BYC, I hope to keep in touch with some of the people I met in North Carolina, and I hope to hear about their journeys in life. So, as I plan to enter the real

world and start my journey, I plan to try and keep this opinion I have of all the people in this world a positive one.



The theme of BYC the first year I went in 2001 was "Hear on the Mound, Build on the Rock," which in a nutshell to me meant build your foundation on a strong backing, instead of on loose soil. I see Northminster as my rock, and I hope to build much more upon it.

Julie Remillard

One of the best parts of being a youth at [Northminster Church] is BYC. Every summer from the age of thirteen until this year, I have gone. When I tell people I'm going to church camp, they're usually kind of sympathetic. All of my friends stopped going as soon as their parents stopped making them go. I actually plan my summer around this one week. BYC is not just camp, but people don't usually get that. At BYC, we don't make crafts and pray. We discuss real world issues and real experiences that people have gone through and how these things affect us and our views on religion and Christianity.

This year was my last year, and our theme was "Getting in the Way." I first thought that was kind of a weird theme. Getting in the way of Jesus? Are we supposed to do that? But, this was one of those double entendre things. We learned about what it meant to get in Jesus' Way... in the capital W sense.

What are things we do to be more like Jesus? Standing up for ourselves and our beliefs, being aware of world-wide struggles, and doing what we can to help not just our community, but helping with problems on a global scale as well.

We also discussed getting in Jesus' way... with a lowercase w. Certain things we do and think are huge blockades in Jesus' Way. For some people it was their job, their past experiences, and mistakes they've made. BYC and this church have influenced my life so much. I think I'm way more open-minded and independent than I was before I came here. Here I have developed my own ideas about the way religion works, and it's okay if no one else agrees with me. I've learned to accept people for who they are and not to judge them.

That's what Christianity is supposed to be. We're supposed to

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From AWAB Council Chair, Heather Rittenhouse

Finding Hope in Division

“Do not suppose that I have come to bring peace to the earth. I have not come to bring peace, but a sword. For I have come to set a man against his father, and a daughter against her mother, and a daughter-in-law against her mother-in-law; and one’s foes will be members of one’s own household.” (Matthew 10:34-36)

If AWAB were to conduct a survey in *The Inspiriter* of our readers’ favorite and most beloved passages of scripture, I imagine we would receive a considerable number of votes for texts exuding overt messages of warmth and hope – Romans 8, Psalm 23, Joel 2, Isaiah 40 and the like. I would venture a guess that, in all the responses we might get, no one would name the text from Matthew 10 cited above as their personal favorite. No one, that is, except me.

At first glance, this seems like a difficult passage to like. Who wants to hear that Jesus’ self-proclaimed mission was to set people on edge against one another, to sow discord, to encourage division? Where, for heaven’s sake, is there any hope for our lives in that statement? For many of us, especially those of us who identify as LGBT or allies, we know all too well the sting of division in our families. We feel deeply the wounds of exclusion inflicted upon us when we came out to our mothers and fathers, to our sisters and brothers, to our pastors and church leaders. A great number of AWAB churches have experienced this separation as well through the sword-

Congregation in front of Myers Park Church



slicing actions of disfellowship from their larger association or region. The wounds remain open and gaping; the chasms between us are deep, and the resulting pain is real. How, possibly, could Jesus be all about that?

My initial wrestling with this passage came in the wake of my own coming-out experience. For my family, learning not only that I am lesbian but also that I continue on in my Christian faith more firmly committed than ever has been too much for them to reconcile. In our case, my life as a lesbian minister of the gospel has blown open a hole in our relationship that may never be closed. The words of Jesus have come true in my life: “I have not come to bring peace, but a sword.”

These words came flooding back to me again these past months with

“For many of us, especially those of us who identify as LGBT or allies, we know all too well the sting of division in our families.”

the news that Myers Park Baptist Church in Charlotte, North Carolina, an AWAB member church, had been disfellowshipped from the North Carolina Baptist Convention. Granted, this news came as a shock to very few who had been following the unfolding saga of this church over the past year or so, for this situation has been brewing for some time.

During their convention meeting in 2006, the North Carolina Baptists had voted to remove from their communion any church that affirmed or endorsed homosexual behavior and, to my understanding, encouraged churches to rat on each other and bring names of offending churches to light. To their

credit, Myers Park averted the ugliness of such a scenario by writing a letter to the convention and outing themselves as welcoming and affirming of LGBT persons.

In doing so, they stated that they refused to allow their consciences to be coerced by the exclusionary demands of the convention. In their study of the scripture and guidance by the Holy Spirit, they had determined that their role was to embody the community of a new creation, where their doors were open to all and closed to none. They were convinced that part of God’s dream is to make all things one; thus, they remained committed to a ministry of reconciliation that provides a healing witness in a world of divisions and hatreds. In effect, they announced their intention to remain true to that conviction, even if that put them at odds with the North Carolina Baptists.

Which brings us right back to the words of Jesus as recorded by Matthew. For a good many of us who have experienced that divisive edge of our faith in Jesus and who have been separated from our churches and larger denominational alliances of faith because the movement of God’s spirit in our lives has taken us in a different direction, we do not feel much comfort in that place. We have been nurtured in our faith to believe that unity is desirable, forgiveness is required, and arguments among God’s people are to be addressed and overcome in the spirit of love and cooperation. Then, what in the world do we do with this declaration from Jesus? Aren’t we supposed to turn the other cheek, forgive one another, and just get along? How can we accept that divisions in the church are not only inevitable, but a predicted outcome of Jesus’ presence in our lives? What hope can there possibly be for us in that?

For me personally, Matthew’s passage struck me between the eyes as if I had a target on my forehead precisely at the moment I was dealing with my own family issues around my coming out. I knew deep within my soul that I was following God’s path and being true to myself, that denying my lesbianism

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would be to deny my own existence, that I could only honor God by being fully and completely who I was created to be. How then could my family not see that? How could these people who were intensely spiritual, devoted followers of Christ not see the truth that was screaming out from me? I spent many hours of

“...I could only honor God by being fully and completely who I was created to be.”

desperate worry wondering how we would bridge the chasm, how we could be on the same page about God again.

Then the innate beauty and comfort of this passage began to seep into my mind and heart. I started to see that Jesus made this statement not as a call to arms or a violent

stand of defensive vengeance; rather this was an assessment of the reality that God would give us all different flashes of God’s self and that some of us would not be able to handle that God could speak differently to another. To the majority of my family, the notion that my being a lesbian was both accepted and ordained by God was inconceivable. For them, God simply could not operate in that way. All my efforts to this day to convince them otherwise have not budged them from that basic spot.

Thus, the lesson of this text for me is that we must all choose to be true to the life God gifts us to have. Ultimately I am more responsible for that than for anything else. So family and friends may ask me, “How can you do this to us? How can you be so selfish? How can you turn your back on the life we had all hoped for?” And my answer will be that I know that for me to choose life as God reveals it to me will mean that there will be people who cannot deal with that choice. They may call me hateful, and they may take up the sword against me, but I cannot let that stop me from following God in the way that I feel called to do. Taking such a stance is costly, for doing so goes against the grain and is often met with violent resistance from those whom we love most. Yet Jesus’ words remind me that none of this is a surprise to God and that God is already ahead of me, waiting with comfort and hope for me to live fully into that which God has for me.

I sense from the quiet peace and evenhanded response of Myers Park Baptist Church to the actions of the North Carolina Baptists that they have found respite in these words of Jesus, too. In so many ways, we as individuals and as corporate bodies of faith cannot plug the holes of discord that are opened when our ways of seeing and experiencing God are different from those who have been in relationship with us for so long.

The cautionary side of this passage is that we are not to be about intentionally creating those divisions, either. However, the hope I take from Matthew 10 is that God knows and expects that we won’t always get along, for such is the nature and power of God’s radical and transformative message. Our task in those moments is to keep seeking God, keep listening to one another, and keep on being the people of God as best we know how. In that, there is tremendous freedom for us to be released from the expectations of those who do not see God as we do. For this gift from God, I am truly grateful.

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love our neighbor and respect the choices of others. Christianity is not about recruitment and making sure everyone follows Jesus. That’s not our job. It’s about helping those in need and being compassionate towards everyone. We’re not the ones to decide who deserves our help and compassion. That’s not what Jesus did, and that’s not what this church has taught me to do. I’ve loved growing up here and I’m really going to miss it.

Jimmy Rountree

Because I have had trouble feeling comfortable with my beliefs at a predominately Southern Baptist school, it has been more important for me over the last seven years to feel comfortable at BYC. While I have accused evangelical Baptists of going to church on Sundays for weekly refreshers to self-righteous egos, I have recently realized that I am guilty of the same principle, but on a yearly level. BYC has provided me with a much-needed yearly renewal to my faith which is constantly tested by the overly preachy atmosphere that dominates north Louisiana.

If I were to focus on a single characteristic of BYC to emphasize, it would be the openness of the community. Instead of trying to conform all of the campers to a single mindset, counselors are happy to help nurture the many different faiths that come there. Many campers love to openly talk about their beliefs and learn from each other. Because I have been so enchanted by the spiritual community at BYC, I spent my last two camps in the worship planning group. This summer, I had the chance to deliver a sermon that I had written during the camp’s evening worship based on [Luke 4:1-12]...

...In my own faith, I believe that all people have an overabundance of spirituality that can be channeled into love

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Worship experience at BYC

AWAB Board Working Toward Clarifying Vision of the Future

by Jill McCrory

Since crafting a new vision statement in June, 2007 the AWAB Council has been exploring what must happen in order to be “the national voice for LGBT Baptists.” AWAB, like any organization that expands its vision and refines its purpose, must examine its strategy for achieving that vision and fulfilling the purpose. In conference calls and face-to-face meetings, AWAB leadership, which represents AWAB churches and members, has started to build a strategic approach for the next few years.

So, what does this mean and how does it affect AWAB churches and individual members? Hopefully, it means that what people experience when they interact with the organization positively reflects its vision and purpose. Simply put, AWAB must now demonstrate their “brand promise.” Just like the major recognizable brands out in the marketplace, non-profits (and even churches) have a brand image and a brand identity.

- Brand identity is how you want people to perceive you. This is the promise you make to your members of *who you are and what you will deliver.*
- Brand image is how people actually see you, and, unfortunately, this does not always match brand identity. This is because people form brand image directly from their experience with you.
- The AWAB Council knows that everything the organization says and does sends a message and contributes to others’ perception of the organization. As your voice in the governance of the organization, the Council will forge what the ideal message is and explore how it can be consistently communicated.

How you communicate the mission and values of your organization has a huge impact on brand image. This is wrapped up in the culture of the organization and drives what is communicated to others. Your brand reflects what is practiced and earns you a “reputation” or brand, whether you are consciously building a brand or not.

For example, if your church says it is “the friendliest church in town” yet ignores new people when they visit, you are not



Council Chair Heather Rittenhouse with AWAB consultant, Jill McCrory

fulfilling your brand identity. In fact, if this behavior continues, you will soon build an alternative brand image of unfriendly which



AWAB Executive Director Ken Pennings and Pastor Ashlee Wiest-Laird leads a discussion with the Massachusetts AWAB chapter on December 8 at the parsonage of First Baptist Church of Jamaica Plain (Boston).

competes directly with what you are trying to communicate. A good example is Southwest Airlines which has been very successful in building a brand identity around fun and team. The flight crew communicates this in everything they do, from singing the welcoming announcements to wearing less formal uniforms.

Some organizations find they have to rebrand in order to fulfill their mission. AARP is an example of an organization that, because the values and lifestyles of its members were changing, had to subsequently change the key messages they were sending. Aging baby boomers did not respond to the “retired persons” image that AARP represented. Take a look at the AARP website, and you will see images of “younger” seniors that express a key message of active aging boomers enjoying themselves.

So, what is next? The AWAB Council recently met in Atlanta to take a closer look at how they are leading the organization. As part of this effort, they considered what key messages AWAB is sending to their churches, members, and the public.

The Council takes the new vision statement very seriously. They recognize that being “the national voice” means being even more vocal, such as speaking to national issues with comments or answers. This and other strategies will help increase AWAB’s visibility and result in being recognized by the media as the representatives of LGBT Baptists nationally.

The council also envisioned providing press kits, podcasts, and other information to AWAB churches to give them a voice, adding new AWAB churches throughout the country, providing churches tool kits to enable them to have the welcoming and affirming conversation, and creating a national community with regional events.

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AWAB leadership knows that these are lofty goals, but they have faith that through several initiatives that are underway they will be able to achieve national recognition as “the voice” for LGBT Baptists.

AWAB wants to ensure that not only AWAB members, but those outside the organization understand that AWAB is a strong voice for LGBT Baptists and plans to demonstrate this in every way possible.

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.



Convocation Schedule Highlights

- **Friday**, March 28, Registration begins at 3 p.m.
- **Friday**, welcoming reception for all ages at 5:30 p.m.
- **Friday**, first worship service at 7 p.m.
- **Saturday**, continental breakfast, the Annual Meeting, workshops and excursions. The day concludes with evening worship and fellowship.
- **Sunday** morning begins with workshops and concludes with worship with the congregation of St. Charles Avenue Baptist Church.

These are just the highlights. Please visit the Convocation page at the Alliance of Baptists web site (<http://www.allianceofbaptists.org/convocation2008.html>) and download the brochure for the details.

Mentoring Connections Project

by Betty Detwyler

The **Mentoring Connections Project** of AWAB has eighteen (18) churches signed onto the project. On the fourth Sunday of the month we light candles in prayer and support of churches and individuals who are experiencing difficulties around LGBT issues. Churches are notified for whom to pray and the recipients are notified that they are being prayed for.

One of the first endeavors for this project was to ask the pastors of Peace Community Church in Oberlin, OH to contact Woodside Church in Flint, MI. Woodside Church was dealing with being disfellowshipped and Peace Community Church had experienced the same situation. One of the pastors and some members of Peace Community Church traveled to Woodside Church with a candle which was presented to the congregation during a worship service. Since then the two pastors have become good friends and colleagues and the churches have maintained a meaningful relationship.

An example of individual support is the mentoring relationship being developed between the pastors of First Churches in Northampton, MA and Greenfield, MA. First Baptist Church in Greenfield has called a gay pastor and is discussing joining AWAB.

All of the above are ways that we can support one another as we work together to further the welcoming and inclusion of all our brothers and sisters, particularly the LGBTs. **COME JOIN US IN PRAYING FOR AND SUPPORTING ONE ANOTHER!**

You may contact Betty Detwyler at bdetwyler@nycap.rr.com or by phone at 518-346-6849. Let us know how we can support you too!

Join the Alliance of Baptists in beautiful New Orleans for the 2008 Convocation.





From AWAB Executive Director

Ken's Pennings

A Reflection on the New Baptist Covenant

What a gift the New Baptist Covenant was to us!

Last month, Baptists from around the nation came together across lines of difference to take part in the New Baptist Covenant celebration in Atlanta. Former presidents Jimmy Carter and Bill Clinton headlined the event, which stressed the importance of unity and harmony as well as the amelioration of suffering around the world.

When AWAB learned about the encouraging plans for the New Baptist Covenant celebration last year, we applied to be listed as an official participating organization. However, the event's leaders notified us that they could not list AWAB as an official participating organization, because they didn't think they could hold together the large coalition of Baptists needed to create a new Baptist voice in North America and address the issue of sexual orientation at the same time.

Of course, we disagreed with their point of view. We believe it IS possible to maintain a broad base of Baptists AND address sexual orientation at the same time. We believe it's possible because we believe in the Gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ. We believe that the Gospel unites us as the ONE family of God, the ONE people of God, the ONE body of Christ. In Christ, there are no outsiders. Only insiders. The organizers of the New Baptist Covenant clearly agonized over the decision, but in the end they decided that it was too soon to make inclusion of gay people a part of their vision of unification.

At first, when the leaders of the event turned down our request, we were tempted to anger and frustration. We are God's people just like they are God's people. We love Christ just as much as they love Christ. We are following Jesus just as they are following Jesus. We uphold Baptist principles just like they uphold Baptist principles. We are committed to peace and justice in the same way they are committed to peace and justice. How could they turn us down?

Our knee-jerk reaction was to ask, "Should we travel to Atlanta, pound on the door shouting, 'Let us in! Let us in! You have no right to keep us out!'" And if no one answered the door, should we stand in the streets and protest their abuse?

Then Rev. Tim Phillips, one of our AWAB pastors, a gay man whom God used mightily in the past to start an inclusive baptist church in Chicago, Illinois, a man who is now giving spiritual leadership to an inclusive Baptist congregation in Seattle, Washington, cautioned us saying,

Can we not participate in this movement using the values of freedom and social justice as a vehicle for our message?

Rather than create an adversarial relationship with this new motion in Baptist history, we can contact our friends who WILL be part of the New Covenant and ask how they will work to represent the concerns of loyal Baptists who are part of the AWAB network.

We can act as if we ARE part of this movement -- whether the organization recognizes that fact or not; i.e., champion their statements on freedom and justice as they develop and demonstrate their connection with our own mission; encourage the use of their resources as they fit our ministries; keep track of those churches that play a role in the New Baptist Covenant and establish contacts with them as a 'mission field' for AWAB's message; celebrate this movement toward a new way of Baptist life; and imagine a future that will have to include us and our concerns.

It seems to me that if we build a response of protest we will only prove that we are operating from the outside rather than persistently and gracefully demonstrating that we are, in fact, on the inside -- they just don't get that yet.

Tim's wise advice turned us around! We committed ourselves to graceful engagement from within...to be present among our Baptist sisters and brothers and to carry on our shared mission, the mission of bringing the reign of God to earth as it is in heaven. Along with our Baptist brothers and sisters we would be a part of creating a new wineskin to hold the new wine the Holy Spirit is pouring out upon us, in us, and through us.

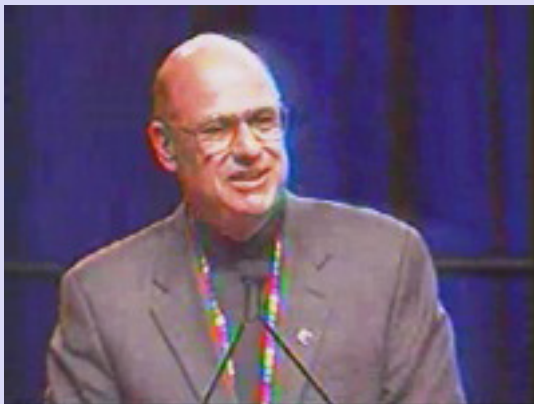
Some Baptists have spent their energy attacking gays and keeping them outside of the Church. In so doing, they have demonstrated that unity among Baptists is not their main goal. We, however, feel differently. Rather than focusing on exclusion,

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we are spending our energy on graceful engagement from within. And we are seeing very good results. At the New Baptist Covenant gathering, we witnessed abundant signs of hope.

During the three-day event, President Jimmy Carter noted that Baptists hold diverse opinions about gay people and best-selling novelist John Grisham called for the church's inclusion of gay people.



Tony Campolo wears a rainbow stole as he speaks at the New Baptist Covenant

Reverend Tony Campolo wore a rainbow-colored stole. Hundreds of participants sported rainbow stickers on their nametags to proudly reveal their support for gay people.

The emergence of a number of gay-affirming voices at the celebration makes it clear that we can experience God's hospitality with the confidence of freedom-loving Baptists everywhere.

Our story as LGBT-Allied people is a story of persecution, exclusion, and woundedness. We know what it's like to be scorned, rejected and excluded from our families, churches, and jobs. We have sat around for hours and hours crying big tears and licking deep wounds, but then the day came when we rose to our feet, and said, "We can't sit around licking our wounds any more. We've got jobs to work, holy covenantal marriages to uphold, children to raise, and churches to lead."

It's not our job to convince anyone of our right to these things. God has granted us these rights. We are faithfully taking responsibility for the things God has given us to do! We are taking seriously our jobs, our marriages, our children, and our churches just like everyone else. We can't wait for people to give us permission to do any of this! We already have permission! Some just don't know it yet.

At the New Baptist Covenant we didn't act as outsiders trying to get in. We registered for the event; showed up at the event; participated in the event. We acted responsibly, reasonably and lovingly in the hope that others would eventually come to realize that we really are the kind of people they will want to invite to their gatherings. When people asked us why we were there wearing our rainbow stickers and stoles, we said to them, "We're here because we belong here."

The New Baptist Covenant has been a gift to AWAB. It has cautioned us against building adversarial relationships with others. And it has taught us the value of graceful engagement from within.

Welcome! **New AWAB Member Church**

Virginia Highland Church

743 Virginia Ave.

Atlanta, GA 30306

(404) 348-4830

virginiahighlandchurch@yahoo.com

Tim Shirley, Pastor

Affiliations: ABC and UCC

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for anyone or anything. God wants freely given love instead of love provided by dependence on some external force. Jesus rejected artificial love received through fear of hunger, fear of miraculous power, or fear of authority. What he gave us is the freedom to create our own personal models of Christianity through which we can successfully channel our spirituality to love God, love our neighbors, and follow the Way of Jesus.

Permission for reprint granted by Northminster and the authors.

Editor's Note: *Although Northminster is not currently an AWAB member, they have been an integral part of BYC since my ministry there in the early part of this decade. Because of BYC campers like Andrew, Julie and Jimmy, along with my son, Jarred Juett, I have an ongoing connection with and love for BYC--I hope these words will likewise inspire many of our readers.*

Mission project during BYC



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his belt, Bartlett looked pleadingly into her eyes and said, "This is why they make you take vows, isn't it?!"

This is what vows are for. This is why we make promises. Because none of us are at our most brilliant, sexy and entertaining selves all the time! We don't live our lives in party attire and crafted hair all the time. In fact, we all have the occasional morning breath, unaffectionate days and irritable episodes. That's why we make covenants of fidelity. And that's why we ask witnesses to take part in overhearing these promises, for we all need support and encouragement from a larger community. So now let's attend to these couples as they renew the vows that brought them to this time and place.

Ken Sehested is co-pastor of Circle of Mercy Congregation, an AWAB member church. Rev. Jerene Broadway, a hospital chaplain in Asheville and long-time AWAB member, was his co-officiate.

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spreading the news about this exciting opportunity.

AWAB is grateful for the generous grant from The Carpenter Foundation and the opportunity to lead in the ongoing transformation in the lives of young people with regard to LGBT people and the life of faith.