

We are an Accepting Church: Why Bother to Join The Association of Welcoming & Affirming Baptists?

By H. Darrell Lance, editor, *The InSpiriter*

"We have always been a church that welcomes everyone, including lesbians and gays. Why should we go through the motions of joining some 'Association of Welcoming & Affirming Baptists'?"

A reasonable question.

Joining the AWAB is certainly something that should not be taken lightly. Issues of sexuality in general and homosexuality in particular carry such emotional freight in our culture that many congregations are too fragile to broach them. And those that are strong enough to look at the issues squarely need time to allow the inevitable fears and reservations to surface, be articulated, and dealt with in a respectful and compassionate way. After all, homophobia is one of the most deeply ingrained of all our cultural prejudices. People can recognize with their minds that it is irrational, but getting that insight connected with their heart and feelings takes more time. As one thoughtful pastor of a church that will probably eventually join the Association puts it, "If the process goes too fast, it glosses over feelings. Once the vote is taken, people think 'That's over and done with;' and the deep feelings that are under the surface don't get dealt with." The goal in moving toward W&A membership, after all, is not to win a vote but to change people's minds – and that takes time.

But that brings us back to where we started: Why put a church through all this? If we are a congregation that in practice is open to gays and lesbians, why rock the boat? Why open the door to potential controversy where none now exists?

First of all, the proposal that a church join the Association of Welcoming & Affirming Baptists forces it to raise the issue of sexuality in general. That church members have sex lives is one of those things one would rather not think about, like the sex life of one's own parents. But church members are human beings who, like everyone else, must cope with "the awesome powers of eroticism," to quote John Boswell's memorable phrase. The church can help its people – and especially its young people – learn healthy and responsible attitudes toward sexuality; or it can leave the job to television and the advertising industry.

The issue of homosexuality cannot be dealt with well unless it is placed in the context of human sexuality in general. The average American is abysmally ignorant about sexuality, apart from a few facts about plumbing. Before a church adopts a statement about becoming welcoming and affirming of persons of different sexual orientation, it would do well to start at the beginning: What makes us male or female? Is reproduction the only role of sexuality? What shapes our ideas of appropriate roles for males and females? What about sexual harassment and abuse? What does responsible sexual behavior look like? Rare is the church that delves deeply into such topics in its routine program of adult education, so the study that is needed to frame and adopt a statement of inclusiveness on sexual orientation enriches the understanding of all church members about what a central part of their humanity is all about.

A second reason for moving toward the adoption of a specific statement on sexual inclusiveness can be explained only by looking at the situation from the perspective of the lesbian or gay person. Suppose that Sally Jones and Jane Smith have been members of First Baptist for years. Since they come and go together and have the same address, they are obviously a couple. People may even treat them as a couple, inquiring after the health of the other when one shows up alone. The church is obviously welcoming, at least for the time being. But in the back of Sally's and Jane's mind, the question must inevitably lurk: Just how deep does this acceptance go? The descendants of Jacob were welcome in the

land of Egypt – until a new king arose who did not remember Joseph. The acceptance depended upon a purely personal relationship. When that relationship changed, the Israelites were turned into slaves.

Gay and lesbian people, like other minorities through the ages, have learned to be suspicious of apparent acceptance because it can vanish overnight. A new minister arrives who turns out to have a blind spot in this area. A zealous new Sunday School superintendent decides that no longer are junior highs to be taught by one of "those people" lest they be influenced by their "immoral lifestyle." Historically, what sexual minority people have done when faced with this kind of new situation is just quietly leave, even though they may have faithfully served that church for decades.

But when a church joins the W&A association, it goes on record to say that its official policy is to accept its sexual minorities as fully participating members. They become members who are protected, in effect, by "law" and not by mere sufferance or toleration. They can ask questions of a ministerial candidate to make sure she or he endorses the church's policy and will be willing to uphold it. They can press for sexuality to be a continuing concern in Christian education, because the church is on record as recognizing its importance. They will know they can bring their lives into the time for prayer concerns since those who might be offended have been given fair warning. If a gay or lesbian person is looking for a church home and has a choice between one that accepts him or her as an openly gay person, and one that accepts him or her as an openly gay person and has put it into writing, he or she would not hesitate two seconds before choosing the latter. As one gay man put it who hopes to go on to seminary, "There are 16,000,000 Southern Baptists on record against us. Is it too much to ask a few churches to go on record for us?"

Finally, if a church is open toward gay and lesbian people, why would it not want to say so publicly? If a church faces that question squarely, it will begin to get a sense of what it means to be gay or lesbian in our society, for this is the issue of "coming out of the closet."

Although the process of coming to terms with one's different orientation can follow patterns as varied as human beings themselves, a typical case runs like this: First is the sense that I am somehow different. I may already recognize that it has something to do with my feelings of attraction to people of my own sex or it may be something more indefinable. Eventually, however, it becomes clear wherein my sense of difference lies; and I learn that those words – fairy, queer, dyke – apply to me. This moment of truth can be devastating, and suicide is not an uncommon response. The fortunate ones, however slowly or quickly, learn to accept their difference; they, in effect, "come out" to themselves. The final step, which continues for the rest of one's life, is to come out to the world in ever-widening circles – friends, family, co-workers, church members, etc.

Every church realizes at some level of consciousness that there are young people who have grown up in the church family who are "different" and that this is a difference having to do with sexuality. Most churches stop at this stage; they extrude such people, gently perhaps but firmly, or judgmentally with psychic violence. Other churches are at the next stage; they accept their differently oriented, but they don't want to talk about "it." Next are churches that become known as congenial to lesbians and gays, as places where they may be "out" and be themselves, where there may even be a support group. Finally, there are those few that proclaim to their denomination and the public at large: "We are not afraid to say publicly that we are a welcoming congregation. We not only accept our sexual minorities, we are glad they are members. And we would welcome more."

These stages that a church goes through constitute a process of "coming out" as surely as that experienced by an individual. The fears are similar: What will people think? Will we lose members and financial support? Do we risk being disfellowshipped, expelled from our church family? And indeed coming out does not guarantee a happy ending, as many lesbians and gay men know all too well. But the Gospel calls us to risk-taking, to being vulnerable, and to commitment to the truth which, we are promised, will make us free. Once a church develops an internal atmosphere of acceptance toward sexual minorities, only fear can prevent it from taking the final, public step. And fear is not fertile ground for spiritual growth.

Jesus said, "No one after lighting a lamp puts it under the bushel basket, but on the lampstand, and it gives light to all in the house" (Matt. 5:15, NRSV). If a church has been able to push aside the prejudice of centuries to see in gay and lesbian persons simply other humans beings created in God's image, then it can also push aside its fear of letting the world know about it, and come out. As one lamp after another is lighted and courageously lifted for the world to see, the shadows of fear will be pushed back for good.

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