



WELCOMING SPIRIT NEWSLETTER • FALL 2022



*Bob Sittig*

## IF NOT NOW—WHEN?

FROM THE BOARD CHAIR, BOB SITTIG

In our spring and summer newsletters I spoke of the increasing necessity for all of us to become activists. As we approach fall and the mid-term elections, that call for action is even louder now. There has been legislation passed in many states since I wrote those articles, which directly challenges the rights of the LGBTQ+ community to enjoy medical care, education, and free expression. “Don’t say gay!” does not take gay away; it only increases the stress and mental well-being of those dealing with sexual orientation and gender identity/expression issues. I’ve always believed that you can’t legislate morality. Now, I have to expand my thought to believe that you can’t legislate immorality either. I pray the latter is true.

For the next two months we must become political activists. Recent results from primaries have shown that election-denying candidates from the extreme right are being recognized as viable possibilities for important positions that will have influence over future elections and rights-denying legislation. We are the ones who can help ensure that that catastrophic result does not come to pass. I am heartened by the actions of our own Board Member, Donnie Anderson, who has entered the race for the position of State Senator in the First Senatorial District in Rhode Island. Donnie, a member



Donnie Anderson

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of the transgender community, has been actively doorbelling and attending community gatherings in her quest for change in the Rhode Island legislature. Whether she prevails or not, Donnie is already a winner in my eyes. Her candidacy has put the community on notice that LGBTQ+ persons are valuable, productive members of society whose voices will be heard on important civic matters. She is running as a citizen who is in touch with the needs of the people in her district, rather than the LGBTQ+ candidate. I am proud to be an associate of Donnie Anderson.

Activism means action! It is not enough to advocate to those with whom you already agree, although it's the most comfortable. We must get out of our comfort zones and talk with those with opposite views or those who aren't quite sure of their preferences. It takes effort and courage, but the consequences of apathy are too costly right now. Get out there and make some noise! We'll bail you out. Our actions are needed right now to adjust the moral compass of our nation.

### **If not us—Who?**

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### **Welcome to New Board Member: Rev. Jason Mack**

The AWAB Board of Directors welcomes the Rev. Jason Mack to the Board. Jason began his term on September 1. Jason serves as Lead Pastor of AWAB member congregation, Underwood Memorial Baptist Church, Wauwatosa, WI. Prior to this, Jason served another AWAB member congregation, First Baptist Church of Madison, WI, as Minister of Community. We are delighted to have Jason's commitment and passion for our LGBTQ+ Baptist siblings on the Board during this time of growth and expansion.

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### **AWAB @ Space for Grace**

Plan to look for AWAB in the exhibit area during the American Baptist Home Mission Societies' Space for Grace Conference in Kansas City, MO, September 21-23. AWAB is honored to be a conference sponsor.

# THE POWER OF “AND”

Many (if not most) churches claim to be “welcoming.”

Our family previously attended a church whose mission statement asserts “Everyone is welcome here, whatever your story, questions, doubts, or struggles. We trust that God’s grace is sufficient.” Good words, but follow-up conversations with the pastor and lay leaders clarified that they put serious limits on that “welcome” and on God’s grace when it comes to queer and queer-affirming folks serving in leadership, getting married, and fully participating in the life of that congregation.

The beauty of AWAB congregations is that they embrace the “and”—they are welcoming and affirming. And that affirmation makes all the difference.

At AWAB-member Grant Park Church in Portland, Oregon, we recite a litany of belonging every Sunday that includes “Whoever you love, however you identify, you belong.” We are welcoming and affirming. And every person in our worship service hears it every week.

AWAB is committed to continue growing staff, educational resources, events, etc. to more fully:

- Provide support, education, and theological expression to Baptist congregations and organizations as they become more welcoming and affirming while honoring Scripture and Baptist heritage.
- Strengthen connections among congregations, which empower them to stand in support of LGBTQ+ people.
- Offer support to individuals and families experiencing difficulties reconciling sexual orientation and gender identity with serving in every aspect of Baptist life.
- Advocate for a faithful Baptist voice in support of LGBTQ+ full human and civil rights.

## How can you become more engaged in AWAB? Here are a few ways you might consider:

1. Join our new [Rainbow Circle](#). By signing up for a regular monthly donation from your credit card or bank/credit union (for as little as \$8 per month), you can help ensure AWAB is better able to help churches welcome and affirm.
2. Co-sponsor and attend the new [AWAB Lectureship](#) on September 26. Each year, this in person and online lecture will feature a scholar,

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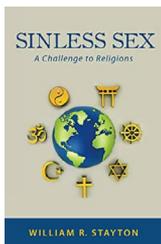
theologian, or historian who will offer us perspective and thought, rooted and informed by the academy, but still practical in application, on LGBTQ+ issues.

3. Forward this AWAB newsletter to two friends and encourage them to join our list.
4. [Encourage a non-member church to join AWAB.](#) We have 138 member ministries today, but who else should join AWAB to make clear that they are welcoming and affirming?

Do it for the child who is struggling with their sexual orientation. Do it for the young adult who wants to understand their gender identity. Do it for the seminarian who needs help with ministry placement. Do it for the adult who wants to better affirm their child or grandchild. Do it for the congregation that wants to better understand and serve their community. Do it because you are welcoming and affirming.

Thank you for your partnership in ministry and mission.

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### **Sinless Sex: A Challenge to Religions**

**Thank you** to Bill & Kathy Stayton for facilitating for a second time this course based on the book by the same titled, written by Bill Stayton. Participant, the Rev. Wendell Griffen has commented on this class: “The *Sinless Sex* Zoom course led by Bill and Kathy Stayton is reverent, thoughtful, safe, and prophetic. This course is ‘right on time!’”

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FBC Madison



FBC Moorestown

### **AWAB CELEBRATES WITH...**

The First Baptist Church of Madison (Madison, WI) and its 175 years of ministry.

&

The First Baptist Church of Moorestown (Moorestown, NJ) and its 185 years of ministry.

# Help us make our vision a reality.



Join AWAB's Rainbow Circle today! By signing up for a regular monthly donation from your credit card or bank/credit union (for as little as \$8 per month), you can help ensure AWAB is better able to **make the welcoming and affirming vision a reality.**

As part of the Rainbow Circle, you will receive:

- **Quarterly communications specifically for Rainbow Circle Members**
- **Free or deeply discounted access to all AWAB events**
- **Special recognition in AWAB's newsletter and website (unless you prefer to remain anonymous).**

Most importantly, you will receive the blessed assurance that you are turning some of your "green" into a colorful rainbow that welcomes and affirms all of God's children.

Please join the Rainbow Circle:

[www.awab.org/rainbow-circle](http://www.awab.org/rainbow-circle)

Thank you for your partnership!

## FROM THE COMMUNICATIONS COORDINATOR, KURT KAUFMAN

In the Summer issue of *Welcoming Spirit*, we shared that AWAB would be running a social media campaign in order to drive traffic to our membership directory on our website and subsequently into our member churches. This campaign was run right at the beginning of Pride month, and I had anticipated that the results would be interesting, especially given that we were simply trying to reach as many people as possible.

Indeed, the results were quite interesting. When one came across our ad on social media, they would have been greeted by quite the discussion—though mostly one-sided. 193 comments flooded the advertisement with comments that AWAB and our member churches are no stranger to. These same comments were comments that we've heard at biennials, comments that we've heard from other Baptist colleagues, and comments that we've heard from those we've considered friends and neighbors.

I recently spoke with Judson Day, who is a longtime supporter and advocate for AWAB since before we were known as AWAB. Judson was involved in some of the earliest days and knows what it's like to publicly embody and preach a radically inclusive message.

“People are definitely aware of us—we made sure of that. Even at biennials, when we were often in a separate place, we were still very much there, demonstrating, etc. Some [people] are aware of us and hate us, some are aware and wish we would go away, and some are aware and happy we're around.

Ten years from now, I still suspect we'll be ‘those people.’”

Our social media campaign certainly reminded me that we are, indeed, still “those people.” However, I also was able to see the other side of the campaign, which was our impact. Even in the midst of a tremendously loud comment section, over 19,000 people saw it and over 600 people saw our directory of churches that are, indeed, okay saying “gay.”

We may always be seen as “those people”—but we're no strangers to that designation. Judson was one of “those people” but still chose to make himself and the message of our organization known to those who very clearly need to hear it most. In the days when it seems like our work is for nothing, may we remember that God works in the background through us and through their creation, and it is only through that bold, courageous work that 600 people may have found a church that they're accepted into and 18,000 more have, perhaps for the first time, heard a message of radical inclusion and love. May we continue to be “those people”—those radical, welcoming, loving, accepting, affirming, people.



AWAB at the CBF General Assembly

## FROM THE NATIONAL COORDINATOR, BRIAN HENDERSON

After a little more than two years of not being able to travel and be connected in-person with so much of our AWAB family, 2022 has allowed us once more to experience a sense of “togetherness” that is so life-giving. Don’t get me wrong, Zoom has helped hold us together and I imagine it will continue to do so indefinitely, and for this we can be grateful, but there’s something about being with each other face-to-face that is so powerful. It was wonderful earlier this summer to be with our Cooperative Baptist Fellowship family in Dallas, Texas, at the annual General Assembly. Many thanks to Minister of Music Harry Wooten and the Royal Lane Baptist Church for hosting our AWAB worship service and reception. [Click here to experience the AWAB worship service.](#)

Not long from now, AWAB will gather with our American Baptist family in Kansas City, Missouri, for the ABHMS Space for Grace Conference. As it was with CBF, I know it will be so good to be in-person with our ABC colleagues and congregations.

Personally, I’m so grateful for AWAB’s Board, Staff, members, friends, and supporters. Together, we are doing far more than any of us can do on our own. I trust that as you read this issue of Welcoming Spirit, you will sense with me how our collective welcoming and affirming ministry is growing, by leaps and bounds.



## AWAB Inaugural Lectureship

On Monday evening, September 26, at St. Luke's Missionary Baptist Church, in Charlotte, NC, AWAB is pleased to launch an Inaugural Lectureship. Our inaugural lecturer will be the Rev. Dr. Cody Sanders, who will speak on: "Strengthen What Remains: Queer Apocalyptic Hope."

*Lecture synopsis: The age in which we are living and dying is one of myriad endings and edges. The planetary climate, the political climate, the composition of our everyday lives and communities are all filled with possibility and peril. Christian faith traditions hold a resource of visionary potential for living at the edges of life and the endings of the world as we know it: apocalyptic imagination. This lecture will explore the potential of holding together three concepts—queer, apocalyptic, hope—known to cause trouble and provoke revolutionary imagination, asking: What potential does queer apocalyptic hope offer to faith communities to awaken us from our captivity to the status quo, sustain us in cultivating communities of compassion and justice, and nurture our capacity to “strengthen what remains and is on the point of death” (Rev. 3:2).*

**For more information and to register for this event or to become a Lectureship Sponsor, visit:**

**[awab.org/event/strengthen-what-remains-lecture](http://awab.org/event/strengthen-what-remains-lecture)**

**Thank you to our sponsors this year:**

The Hunt Family  
The Alliance of Baptists

# WHY WE NEED TO TALK ABOUT SEXUALITY & LOVE, ALWAYS

BY MARK WINGFIELD

Last Sunday, I taught my adult Bible study class at Wilshire Baptist Church from 1 Corinthians 13. We're in a series I've titled "Bible Verses We Love," each week taking a beloved passage of Scripture and digging deeper into it.

Turns out that many of our most beloved Scripture passages also are problematic—or at least often misused. 1 Corinthians 13 is no exception. I confessed to our class that my wife, Alison, and I made the best man at our wedding memorize the entire chapter to speak at our ceremony. Not only was that unfair to him, I now know it was a misapplication of a beloved Scripture.

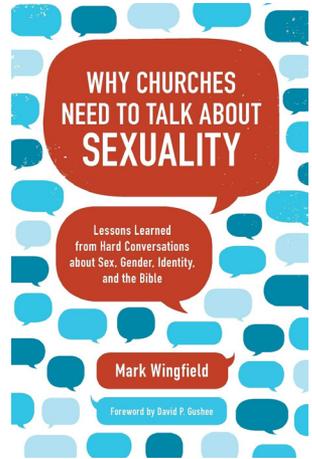
1 Corinthians 13 is not about romantic love—as much as we might want it to be. It is a message written to a deeply conflicted early church. It is an appeal for unity amid division, for setting aside the “lesser” things for the things that really matter. It is a demand that love trump theology or ideology.

Paul teaches that if your theology appears entirely sound but doesn't show love, it is rotten. Good theology always will pass the test of love.

This is one of the problems I have with Christians who use five or six Scripture passages as bludgeons to maintain their hardened positions on sexuality and gender. Their theology does not produce love, does not exhibit love, is not based in love. It is, in fact, the opposite of love.

One of the barriers is they refuse to see love where it occurs. Which is why I then told my class this story about my friend Lupe and his husband, Bill. To borrow a phrase from the apostle, “Now I will show you a more excellent way.”

Lupe and Bill met 32 years ago on an airplane. Lupe was a young flight attendant, and Bill was a businessman. Bill was so handsome that all the female flight attendants noticed him and wanted to get to know him on the long flight. But they didn't stand a chance, because Lupe also noticed him and took action. He got Bill moved to his section in first class. And the rest is beautiful history.



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Bill and Lupe were together for the next 32 years—until Bill’s death three weeks ago yesterday. They were as devoted a couple as I’ve ever known. When it became legal to do so, they got married in their Episcopal church. The same church where they faithfully attended and served, where Bill rallied other members to teach English as a second language, to help the least of these among us. (This was after a derisive priest at another Episcopal church in town caused them to leave the church entirely for two years, but that’s another story.)

Earlier in life, Bill had lost everything when he came out. He lost his family. He lost his friends. He even lost his job. Yes, back in the early 1990s Bill was fired from his public service job in Louisiana simply because he was gay. It was such a scandal that it made the local newspapers. I’ve seen the clippings. He was dragged through the mud simply because he loved another man.

But Bill and Lupe picked up and moved on, and they did so together with great devotion. They built a beautiful life together. Twenty-two years ago, they bought a house in our very normal North Dallas neighborhood. They got to know their neighborhoods—Lupe knows every person on his block and can tell you their life stories. They opened their home for fellowship events for their church. They loved to travel, and when they did, Lupe still had to let the female flight attendants know that Bill was taken.

In time, Bill began to get ill. Heart problems, kidney problems. He was quite a few years older than Lupe. For the last two years, Bill was essentially homebound; it was a chore to get out. But Lupe was by his side the entire way. Whatever Bill needed, Lupe provided. As faithfully as any heterosexual couple I’ve ever known.

And then a few weeks ago during a visit to the hospital ICU, Bill made the decision to go home on hospice care. Lupe loaded him in the car, took him home and devoted himself to caregiving. And I mean devoted himself. When the hospice workers hauled in all sorts of equipment, Lupe stood at the door and said, “Oh, no, we’re not doing that. I promised Bill he would die in our bed, in peace, and that’s what’s going to happen.” The oxygen machine was put in another room down the hall and connected to Bill with the longest oxygen tube I’ve ever seen.

The night before Bill lost consciousness, he and Lupe laid together in that bed and talked from 10:30 at night until 5:30 in the morning. They reviewed their life together, they said their goodbyes, and then Bill slid into a coma, never to speak again. A couple of mornings later, Bill quietly passed from this life to the next.

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Before the funeral home arrived to remove the body, Lupe asked the hospice workers to help him in one last act of love and devotion. They dressed Bill in his tuxedo, with his best white shirt, freshly shined shoes and a pocket square. “He was such a classy man,” Lupe said. “I wanted him to leave looking his very best. That’s what he would have wanted. He never left the house without a jacket and a pocket square.”

Bill and Lupe began every morning with prayer. They had found a favorite prayer from the Book of Common Prayer, and that became their morning ritual. It’s the same prayer Lupe led the congregation in saying when he gave the eulogy at Bill’s memorial service last Friday.

*This is another day, O Lord. I know not what it will bring forth, but make me ready, Lord, for whatever it may be. If I am to stand up, help me to stand bravely. If I am to sit still, help me to sit quietly. If I am to lie low, help me to do it patiently. And if I am to do nothing, let me do it gallantly. Make these words more than words, and give me the Spirit of Jesus. Amen.*

As the bells tolled, we all walked in solemn procession from the sanctuary to the columbarium, where Lupe knelt down on the ground and lovingly placed Bill’s remains in a niche, weeping copiously as he did so. I’ve stood with hundreds of families at gravesides, and seldom have I been as moved as I was that afternoon.

A few days after Bill’s death, as I was listening to Lupe talk about their life together and as I tried to console him in his grief, I mentioned that I often am asked to speak to people who are trying to reconcile their Christian faith with their own sexuality or the sexuality of their children.

“Please tell them our story,” he said. “They need to know this is not about sex. This is about love.”

And so I have. He wants you to know—and I want you to know—how lovingly these two men cared for each other for three decades. And how beautiful and how normal it all was.

Bill and Lupe’s life is not what the conservative Christian gossip machine says it means to be gay. But this is a real story, and it represents the same kind of stories I’ve learned over and over again.

When we advocate for full inclusion in the life of the church, we are not primarily making a statement about sex. We are making a statement about love.

Theology without love is nothing but a noisy gong on a clanging cymbal.

**Mark Wingfield serves as executive director and publisher of Baptist News Global. He is the author of *Why Churches Need to Talk About Sexuality* (Fortress, 2020).**

# I AM BAPTIST

BY REV. JUNIA JOPLIN

He's famous for making everyone's favorite animated ogre sound Scottish, but Mike Myers grew up in Canada. Myers remembers his Toronto area upbringing fondly, and often describes his childhood home as "a shrine to all things English."

What was with all that British bric-à-brac? Well, the *Shrek* star's parents left England for Canada in the late 1950's, but they didn't leave behind their patriotism. Myers is fond of pointing out that "there's nobody as English as an Englishman who no longer lives in England."



*I get it, Mr. and Mrs. Myers. I really do.*

No, my home is not a shrine to all things American. And I don't exactly wear my U.S. roots on my sleeve—unless, of course, the Olympic women's hockey tournament is happening.

But I'm not just an immigrant in the national sense; I'm also a denominational immigrant. After spending my entire life in one branch or another of the Baptist family, I joined the staff of the Metropolitan Community Church of Toronto last year. Fifteen years after being ordained in a Cooperative Baptist Fellowship church, I'm in the process of getting my ordination recognized and credentialed by the Universal Fellowship of Metropolitan Community Churches—MCC for short.

I love my new congregation. I love being a part of the life-changing, life-saving ministry MCC is doing. And getting to work in the sanctuary where the world's first legally recognized same-sex weddings were held? Well, that's just incredibly cool.

*But I miss being part of Baptist life.*

There. I said it.

Now, I don't love Baptist-ness the way an Englishman loves England when he no longer lives there. I certainly don't want to turn my home into a shrine to all things Baptist. (I do have a portrait of Walter Rauschenbusch around here somewhere, though, and that's a pretty good start.)

What I do love is introducing people to the parts of the Baptist story where Baptists have been inclusive, progressive, or surprising in other ways.

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Did the great folk singer Woody Guthrie belong to a Baptist church in his young adulthood? You bet he did!

Did theologian Dietrich Bonhoeffer attend a Baptist church during the time he spent in New York? He sure did!

Did politician Tommy Douglas, the father of Canada's socialized healthcare system, grow his passion for social justice while serving as a Baptist pastor? Absolutely.

Did Rev. Troy Perry, the founder of the MCC and an organizer of the very first Pride Parade, come from Baptist roots? Well, sort of. Before he helped create my present denominational home, Rev. Perry served as a Pentecostal pastor. But before that, he was a Baptist.

I love to tell people about Nancy Ledins, the Catholic priest who became a media sensation when she came out as a trans woman in 1979. Nancy never worked as a priest again, but in the later years of her life, she found a place to minister in Wedgewood Church, an Alliance of Baptists congregation in Charlotte, NC. I never met Nancy, but her friends tell me she could really preach—especially on Easter Sunday. That's not surprising. Baptists are excellent preachers, and trans people understand resurrection like nobody else.

When most people think about Baptists, they're probably not thinking about social justice or pride parades or transgender ministers. That's why I like to let folks know about the work and witness of Baptist congregations like Pullen Memorial in Raleigh, Harlem's First Corinthian Baptist Church, and Calvary in Washington D.C.

It's why I like to point out that the first congregation to welcome me into the pulpit as my authentic self—back in 2019—was Wake Forest Baptist Church in Winston-Salem, NC. I wasn't fully out in those days, but I knew I would find safety and welcome at Wake Forest.

And I love to tell people that an organization called the Association of Welcoming and Affirming Baptists exists. To paraphrase a well-known Lavern Cox quotation, it's revolutionary for an organization like AWAB to be visible in a world that says welcoming and affirming Baptists should not exist.

(Also—I asked google, and apparently Lavern grew up in the A.M.E. Zion Church. I guess we can't all have Baptist roots. *Anyway...*)

At the end of the book of Acts, Paul stands trial in front of a council of Jewish leaders in Jerusalem. By this point in the story, the apostle had been preaching in the name of Jesus for years. But when Paul recognizes that some council members are Pharisees, he calls out to them, saying

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“Brothers! I am a Pharisee.”

For some readers of scripture, the Pharisees are basically villains (some people think the same thing about Baptists, come to think of it). But Paul doesn't distance himself from the group. He doesn't say “I *used to be* a Pharisee.”

“I am a Pharisee,” he says, speaking to his brothers.

*I get it, Paul. I really do.*

Sometimes I wonder if I'll ever work in Baptist life again. Sometimes I wonder if I'll ever belong to another Baptist congregation. Maybe I will, maybe I won't.

One way or the other, siblings, I am Baptist.

**Rev. Junia Joplin serves as the Associate Pastor of Programs and Congregational Care for the Metropolitan Community Church of Toronto.**

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Lake Shore Baptist Church, Waco, TX



Providence Church, Charleston, SC

## **AWAB WELCOMES MORE CONGREGATIONS!**

Our AWAB family keeps growing. At its August meeting, the Board officially accepted the following two congregations into membership: Lake Shore Baptist Church, Waco, TX, and Providence Church, Charleston, SC. AWAB currently has 138 member congregations and ministries.

## A PASTORAL PRAYER

REV. MOLLY WILLIAMS, PASTORAL INTERN, GLENDALE BAPTIST CHURCH

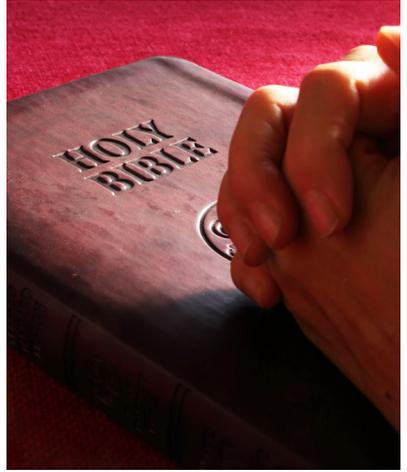
Living God, may we feel your presence surrounding us and holding us as we prepare our hearts and settle our bodies for worship. God, you know the deepest joys and pains of our lives, and we give thanks for a community of faith that welcomes all we are carrying in worship this morning. Bring our awareness to this place—to the ground holding us up, to the presence of our neighbors beside us, to the birds singing outside the window, to the breath filling our lungs.

Living God, as Easter people who seek to create life alongside your living and moving Spirit, remind us that part of practicing resurrection is rolling open the tomb. God, we ask for your guidance as we find our way out of every tomb that keeps us from practicing resurrection life and living into the kingdom of God on earth.

We grieve with those who are grieving and we ask for comfort and safety for our Black siblings who are hurting especially from the trauma and violence of white supremacy. God, for those who are afraid or feeling deep despair, be near and hold them tenderly in your care.

Holy One, even when we feel numb or hopeless or overwhelmed, give us the tenacity and persistence to keep rolling open the tombs and learning new ways to live together. We know the ways of white supremacy have no place in resurrection life, and we ask for your help as we confront its presence in our lives and in our community. Spirit of truth, we trust that guilt and shame cannot be our guides as we find our way, and we ask instead for the wisdom to remember that no one of us can be free until all of us are free and the courage to act in a Spirit of solidarity. Holy God, grant us righteous indignation, bolder courage, and outrageous hope - that we might, everyday, turn away from all that is life-denying and choose the ways of resurrection and new life.

May your Spirit move among us, awakening us to new possibilities where all can flourish. We give thanks that we do not try to practice resurrection on our own but always in and through your never-ending love and in the care of this community. May your spirit of hope sustain our work for the transformation of the world. Living God, hear our prayers and move in our hearts. Amen.





# Got Swag?

If your congregation or ministry is preparing to celebrate Pride or if you simply would like to have some AWAB swag, know that AWAB will send you what you want **free of charge!** Check out some of our newest items above, and then simply contact [Administrative Coordinator Janet Cole](#) and your swag will be on its way!