



WELCOMING SPIRIT NEWSLETTER • MAY 2023

And Yet

by Rev. Adam Gray, Pastor,
Riverside Church at Park and King



Riverside Church
at Park and King

It's become fashionable, of late, to predict the death of the church—that the future is outside, beyond, after, or transcending of these tired old historic communities, these brick and mortar monuments to an age that has passed us by. So many of us have been hurt, so many of us disappointed by the way that the church has broken its promises of inclusion, stepped back from its commitments to the common good, looked the other way as people walk away forever in droves. There's every reason to think that the project might not be recoverable in its current form, that we need abolition rather than reform. And AWAB family, I've felt all those feelings. I've looked in the mirror and wondered if it was time to hang up the robe and stole forever. I've looked at job postings for project managers or non-profit directors, knowing that I could make a lot more money doing a lot less work with a lot (lot) less hassle.

And yet.

Sometimes the Holy Spirit surprises us anyway. You see, last year I was called as the Pastor at Riverside Church at Park and King in Jacksonville, Florida. *Jacksonville. Florida.* Riverside shouldn't exist—a church with an impossibly beautiful historic Sanctuary, an intersectionally diverse

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lay leadership—with young and old, black and white, gay and straight, male and female, cis and trans all coming together with a vision for a church where everyone is welcome and all means all. While Riverside has been tentatively affirming for decades (we made the papers when the local Southern Baptist Association threw us out over our first gay deacon), we found the resolve during COVID to step fully and finally into our welcoming identity. We hung a sign outside our church that says things like: “Love is Love,” “Black Lives Matter,” and “Science is Real.” We reached out to those who were already doing good work in our city and re-engaged long dormant connections. We welcomed 25 new members last year, and have 25 more

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who are in our membership process in 2023. We licensed two seminarians to help pastor the congregation as they train for the ministry. After almost four decades of slow decline, Riverside Church is alive again.

Florida is still a hard place to be a welcoming and affirming church. We’re having conversations about how to keep our trans folks—especially the kids—safe and cared for while our government portends genocide. Our Sheriff still treats the unhoused like they’re trash to be swept up instead of people to be cared for. Our city still ignores decades of broken promises to our communities of color. There’s still every reason to be angry, and every reason to grieve. We’re a church that should’ve died a long time ago, and yet God has raised us to a new era of welcoming and affirming ministry. We’re a church that by the reckoning of many, shouldn’t be able to exist where and how we are—and yet here we are, shining again as a witness of God’s liberating love.

It’s a little miracle that this good Southern Baptist boy should grow up to be writing this for you today, and a greater miracle still that there are so many of you to write to. It would’ve been so easy to give up along the way, and yet you didn’t, you haven’t, you won’t. Thank you. And now there are those coming behind you who will build on the faithful work that you’ve done—so that one day we will sit at God’s feast of abundance together, a table prepared for those from every corner of humanity to taste and see that there’s always enough with God. There’s no one who needs be shut out, no one who needs be rejected, no one who needs be erased. We welcome because we’ve been welcomed. We affirm because we’ve been affirmed. We love because we’ve been loved. We may still sojourn in the nighttime, and yet the dawn still comes.

Ready, Set, Go!

Well, it finally stopped raining in Seattle and the spring flowers are everywhere. Spring always feels like a time of renewal with fresh blossoms, fresh greens and fresh air to greet us as we venture out into warm welcome of the outdoors. This newness seems to bring on fresh energy as well, energy to get things done. I'm pleased to report that this freshness and newfound energy applies to AWAB as well. Many things are new and fresh in our world this season.



Bob Sittig

First, our Board of Directors has expanded in number to an energetic group of fourteen. If you check out our website you will see the faces of smart, talented, motivated people, while varied in interests and experience, they share a passion for the mission of AWAB.

The mission of the Association of Welcoming & Affirming Baptists is to create and support a community of churches, organizations and individuals committed to the inclusion of lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender persons in the full life and mission of Baptist churches.

At our annual in-person board meeting in the fall of 2022, through a lengthy facilitated process, we created a vision for AWAB in the upcoming five years. Granted, there were some aspirational “pie in the sky” wishes for our future, but the final result seemed more realistic. The only thing more important than a wish list is a sound plan necessary to achieve it. We were fortunate to be able to engage the services of the consulting firm Third Plateau to help us formulate a “how to get there” business plan for the next three years. The thrust of both the vision and business plan is how to make a relationship with AWAB more meaningful to both member and non-member churches, as well as all of our individual friends and members. We want to make sure the programs and services we offer will make AWAB more than a plaque on the wall for our constituents.

Two of the most important tasks outlined in our business plan for 2023 are to expand the Board of Directors and hire a Development Director. We're off to a good start! As mentioned earlier, we have added seven new members to the board in 2023, who will add their skills and energy to the seven devoted members we had coming into this year. I'm very pleased to tell you that we were also successful in completing the second task as well by the recent hiring of Natalie Aho to be our Director of Development on staff. You will find more information about Natalie in an accompanying article in this newsletter. As our business plan unfolds, adding staff

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members is the key to providing the resources necessary to fulfill our mission stated above. Development success will allow us to accomplish that goal.

Adding to the momentum created by the progress outlined above, we have been blessed with the opportunity to contribute several articles to *The Christian Citizen* publication during Pride Month. You will find topics such as the history of AWAB, transgender issues, and pastoral experiences in our offerings. Please look for these on-line during June.

So, you can see we are ready, set and coming off the blocks for go. It's a long race, but AWAB is ready to run. God's work is often long and difficult but there's no turning back. With your love and support we continue the fight.



BOARD REFLECTIONS

by Aubin Petersen

Until 2004, I was not fully aware of the degree of discrimination and prejudice faced by persons of the LGBTQ+ community. Upon hearing my New Testament Professor at Baylor University speak of his son's experience growing up gay in 1960's Waco, Texas, involved with a Southern Baptist Church, it was a topic and issue I thought did not affect my life. To be made aware of the pain, fear, and shame so many persons experienced, most often brought on by faith communities, brought me to the place of discerning what my response would be to knowing so many people had suffered and often died in the name of the One whose love can heal and give hope to every human being.

Researching the Position Statements of Baptist groups regarding LGBTQ+ inclusion while in divinity school, I became aware of The Association of Welcoming and Affirming Baptists. There was actually a Baptist entity which affirmed and cherished the diversity with which God had created all people! Every person who has suffered hearing scripture misinterpreted to condemn our diversity needs to know a different story regarding the love of God. Serving on the Board of AWAB allows me to help churches and individuals hear a different story of love, inclusion and affirmation.

I am so grateful to have an organization like AWAB to share my story, to live out my call which is to inform and educate others that our great diversity of human sexuality and gender identity is a gift of God's great creation. Diversity is a gift to be celebrated, honored and affirmed, not feared and condemned. The Association of Welcoming and Affirming Baptists helps spread that good news!



Annual AWAB Lecture: Mark your calendar!

AWAB is pleased to announce that its annual lectureship lecturer will be Dr. Susan Shaw, Professor of Women, Gender, and Sexuality Studies, Oregon State University. This year's lecture will be hosted by Wilshire Baptist Church, Dallas, TX, on Monday, September 11, 6:30pm. The lecture will be livestreamed. More information to come.

JOIN AWAB'S RAINBOW CIRCLE TODAY!



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 **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

Thank you for your partnership!

AWAB Announces 2023 Award Recipients

The Barbra MacNair Award for Christian Witness

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

This year's recipient, after having been nominated by multiple people, is **Shella Chace**. Shella Chace is no stranger to AWAB. At the end of last year, she completed two full terms on the AWAB Board where she served as Board Secretary. Shella also recently retired as the Office Manager for



Barbra MacNair and Shella Chace

AWAB member, the First Baptist Church of Ithaca, Ithaca, New York. Shella spent most of her career as a social worker with the Department of Social Services. In truth, her social work ministry continues. Shella is proud of how she supported faith communities in the greater Ithaca area to work together as they helped those who were often in need of assistance, in any number of ways. In the spirit of the MacNair Award, one nominee commented, "Shella exemplifies what it means to be welcoming and affirming of all...no matter who they are." Shella is a proud mother and grandmother. Congratulations Shella, and thank you for being who you are to so many.

The Randle R. Mixon Award for Christian Service

The Randle R. Mixon Award for Christian Service is given to an individual clergyperson whose work has helped to increase the inclusion of sexual minorities within Baptist bodies and has served to advance the cause of justice by educating congregations and organizations about sexual minority and gender identity issues.

This year's recipient is the **Rev. Dr. George Mason**. George is well known to our larger Baptist families. George is Senior Pastor Emeritus and Director of Pathways to Ministry at Wilshire Baptist Church, Dallas, Texas, Lead Advisor and Adjunct Professor at Baptist House of Studies-Perkins School of Theology at SMU (Southern Methodist University) and Founder and President at Faith Commons.

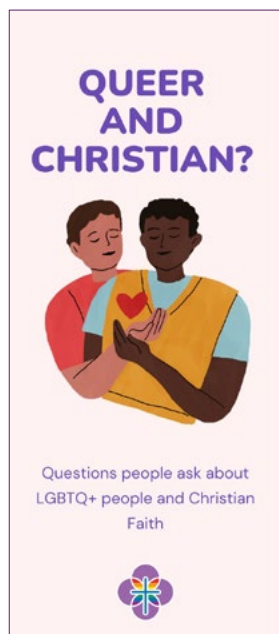
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For over three decades George provided pastoral and prophetic leadership to Wilshire Baptist Church. In the years preceding his retirement, George led the congregation through a very thorough discernment process at the end of which the congregation became overtly welcoming and



Rev. Dr. Rick Mixon and Rev. Dr. George Mason

affirming of all members, granting any member the opportunity to serve fully in any capacity of its ministry. Dr. Rick Mixon says of George, “George is a consummate pastor, theologian, scholar, and follower of Jesus devoted to the living out of our historic Baptist freedoms for all.” AWAB is so glad for the leadership George provides at both the congregational and denominational levels of Baptist life. Congratulations George, AWAB is grateful for your leadership and vision.



W&A BROCHURE AVAILABLE

Just in time for Pride, AWAB is pleased to be able to offer a revised resource for our member congregations: a brochure on being Queer and Christian! This brochure provides an easy way for individuals interacting with your church or ministry to get some quick and easy answers to some of the first questions that they have about being queer and Christian.

Two different versions of this brochure are available. One version includes a space on the back page where you may affix a sticker highlighting your church or ministry, directing individuals who take the brochure to connect with you directly. The other version includes AWAB's information, for individuals to be able to connect with a larger body of welcoming and affirming churches and find one nearest to them.

These brochures will be provided at no cost upon request. To request brochures to be sent to you, please contact Administrative Coordinator Janet Cole at admin@awab.org. Please indicate which version of the brochure you would like to order upon doing so.



Rev. Howard Bess January 30, 1928–April 1, 2023

by Rev. Mindi Welton-Mitchell

Rev. Howard Bess was a beloved leader in the early days of the Association of Welcoming and Affirming Baptists, serving on the original organizing board. He published and printed the InSpiriter, the newsletter of AWAB in the early 1990's, from his home in Palmer, Alaska. He began ministry in California and later moved to Alaska to pastor a church in Anchorage. During his years as a pastor, his experience in the 1970's and 80's ministering to and with members of the LGBTQ+ community opened his heart and mind to understanding and acceptance. In 1985, he was forced to resign from his church in Anchorage, as he had performed same-sex unions in the chapel. He retired early and began pastoring in his retirement Church of the Covenant, a new church plant in the Palmer-Wasilla area, seeking a new pastor. Church of the Covenant became one of the first officially Welcoming and Affirming Baptist congregations, and during his time as pastor he wrote his book, *Pastor, I Am Gay*. Howard was involved in AWAB and in denominational life for many years, until he "retired-retired" from ministry.

Howard was my pastor. I don't recall anyone at Church of the Covenant calling him Pastor Bess, he was always Howard. My family began attending in 1987 and I was baptized in 1991 shortly before I turned fourteen. Howard encouraged and inspired me along my journey of becoming a pastor. Howard never ceded the term evangelical and described himself as an evangelical Christian when others tried to label

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him liberal. He was eager to share the good news of Jesus Christ, and that was his definition. That eagerness extended to all, for every person who wanted to follow Jesus Christ ought to be welcomed, encouraged, and included in his view.

Howard was a trailblazer. He was also stubborn—everyone who knew him understood that. However, he was one of the few older white heterosexual male clergy members who put his life, and his job, on the line, to pursue the call to love one another in the name of Jesus Christ. His faithful life and ministry continue to inspire me. His beloved Darlene went home to the Lord a few weeks before he did, and we continue to hold the Bess family in our prayers.

Congratulations to The Rev. Dr. Clifford (“Cliff”) Matthews, Jr., Senior Pastor of St. Luke Missionary Baptist Church in Charlotte, NC, and AWAB Board Member, on the completion of his Doctor of Ministry degree from Duke Divinity School. Cliff’s dissertation title was: “Walking the Back of the Crocodile: A Manual of Biblical Interpretation for Queer Members of the Black Church.”

Through his research, Cliff posits that the Black Church’s response to the S.C.O.T.U.S. ruling which legalized same sex marriage nationwide, illustrates its weaponization of the Bible against Queer members of the Black Church who are often unequipped to blunt the weaponization of the Bible opting rather for either a rejection of affectional orientation, and/or a passive existence both which reinforce shamed-based pathologies and correlate with unsafe practices which fester in contexts where communal accountability is absent.



His dissertation aims to provide Queer members of the Black Church with a manual for biblical interpretation, one which is rooted in the interpretative strategies of the Church, and particularly that of the Black Church whose interpretative strategies blunted the weaponization of the Bible in support of slavery and Black inferiority. Queer members of the Black Church, Black Church leadership/members, and friends and family networks of Queer members are identified as audiences for this work.

If you’re interested in knowing more about Cliff’s research, you can email him at: cliffmatthewsjr@gmail.com.

AWAB Event Sponsors & Sponsorship Opportunities

AWAB is grateful for our national event sponsors:

- American Baptist Home Mission Societies
- The Baugh Foundation
- FaithLab



faithlab

If your organization would like to be a sponsor, or if you'd like to be a sponsor as an individual, the following levels are available:

\$250

- Name recognition during the event
- 2 complimentary AWAB history books, once published

\$500

- Name recognition prior to and during the event
- 3 complimentary AWAB history books, once published
- Acknowledgement on AWAB's website and in the *Welcoming Spirit* newsletter

\$1,000

- Name recognition prior to and during the event
- 5 complimentary AWAB history books, once published
- Acknowledgement on AWAB's website and in the *Welcoming Spirit* newsletter

*To become a sponsor, please email
Administrative Coordinator, Janet Cole at: janet@awab.org.*



Congratulations to Courtney Jones, Lead Pastor, Circle of Faith, St. Petersburg, FL, on her recent ordination

AWAB hires a Director of Development



AWAB is pleased, on behalf of the Staff and Board, to announce that as of June 5, Natalie Aho will be our full-time Director of Development. Natalie has spent over twenty-four years as a professional in communications, program development, fundraising, and as an educator. She was most recently employed at Wake Forest University School of Divinity as the Program Manager for the Baptist Commons and as program director for three Lilly Endowment grants. Previously, she was the Director of Engagement and Annual Giving at Baptist News Global and spent over a decade as a communications consultant. She has worked with church ministers, staff, and lay leaders from all sizes of membership in rural, city, urban, and suburban settings from all Christian denominational affiliations and various religions.

She obtained her Master of Science in Interactive Media from Quinnipiac University in 2012 and holds a Bachelor of Science in Education from Baylor University (1999). She is married to Rev. Dr. Chris Aho who has been in pastoral work for over 24 years. He is the Director of Thriving Congregations for the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship. They live in Durham, North Carolina, the state they have called home for 20 years. Their oldest son is in high school and their youngest son is in elementary school. As a family, they like to cheer on the Carolina Hurricanes. They also enjoy concerts and traveling. They are proud members of Watts Street Baptist Church in Durham.

Please join AWAB in welcoming Natalie to our work together (natalieaho@awab.org). You can anticipate hearing from her soon! In the meantime, she encourages you to give today: awab.org/support.



Happy Pride!

GET YOUR AWAB SWAG!

If your congregation or ministry is celebrating Pride, we will send you some swag **free of charge!** Simply contact Administrative Coordinator Janet Cole at janet@awab.org and your swag will be on its way!

Baptist Gatherings...

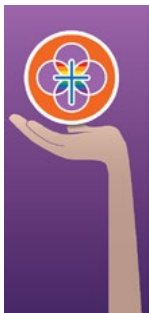
Along with Staff, Board Members, and friends, AWAB is pleased to be hosting a breakfast at the American Baptist Churches, USA, Biennial in San Juan, Puerto Rico, on Saturday, June 24. **Rev. Susan Sparks** (Madison Avenue Baptist Church, New York, NY) will be our keynote speaker and **Minister DJ Boyd** (St. Luke Missionary Baptist Church, Charlotte, NC) will be providing music.



Rev. Susan Sparks and Minister DJ Boyd

Also, please join AWAB Staff, Board Members, and friends at the **Cooperative Baptist Fellowship General Assembly** in Atlanta, GA. AWAB will be hosting a reception on Wednesday, June 28.

AWAB was pleased to be part of the **Alliance of Baptists Annual Gathering** in Atlanta, GA, hosted by AWAB member congregation, Oakhurst Baptist Church, April 20-22. AWAB and BPFNA/Bautistas por la Paz co-hosted a meet-up at a local brewery. Nearly 70 people were in attendance.



We've Updated Our Resource Library!

Kurt Kaufman, Communications Coordinator

We're pleased to announce that we've redesigned and relaunched our resource library on the AWAB website, which can be found at awab.org/resource-library. This new resource library is fully searchable, fully categorized, and contains more information as to what resources would be best for which groups. We've also added a number of new resources, including books, articles, and sermons from some of our AWAB member congregations! We will also soon be adding additional physical resources, such as brochures, table placards, logos, and the like for our member congregations to use in their own contexts.

AWAB is grateful for the work of the Rev. Dr. Cody Sanders, who put together our initial resource library through his work on *Rightly Dividing the Word of Truth*. If you have any additional resources that you feel would be beneficial for our resource library, please send them to Communications Coordinator Kurt Kaufman at kurt@awab.org. We are particularly interested in sermons, articles, and other such resources from our AWAB member congregations to prominently feature their work.

AWAB Welcomes 3 More Congregations



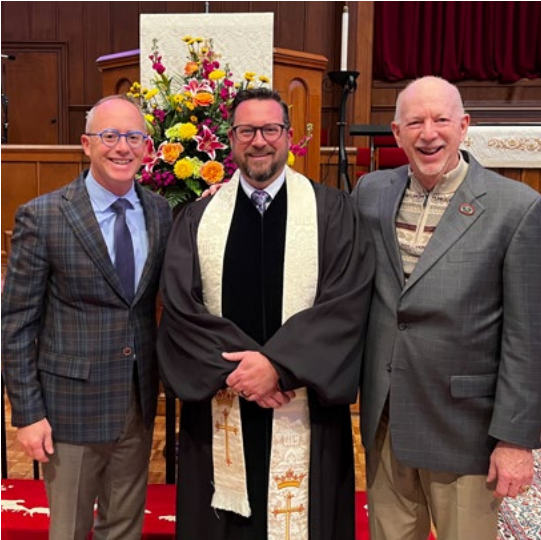
Riverside Church at Park and King,
Jacksonville, FL



The Baptist Church in the Great Valley,
Devon, PA



College Park Baptist Church, Greensboro, NC



On Sunday, April 23, AWAB Executive Director, Brian Henderson, and Board Member Emeritus, Rick Mixon, attended worship at one of AWAB's newer congregations, Northside Drive Baptist Church in Atlanta, GA. Pictured with Brian and Rick is Senior Pastor, Scott Hovey.