A New Thing
by Marcia Bailey, Pastor, First Baptist Church of Pottstown, Pottstown, PA

“Behold, I am doing a new thing; now it springs forth, do you not perceive it? I will make a way in the wilderness and rivers in the desert.”
—Isaiah 43:19

God has been “doing a new thing” over the last few years at First Baptist Church, Pottstown, PA, a Philadelphia Baptist Church that is a part of the Association of Welcoming Affirming Baptists. It began pre-pandemic when we decided that we would enter an extended season of congregational discernment about our future. As with many, our members were fewer and growing older, and our building was demanding more money and attention that we wanted to give.

We intentionally began listening to God individually and together, and the first thing that resulted was the transformative thought that our building was more than a liability; it was indeed an asset. How could we use that asset to serve God and our community?

We began by renting our space to nonprofit groups we believed would add value to our community. But that made us landlords, still tied to the physical structure. The pandemic made it clearer than ever to us that

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a church was not a building but a people, and fast forward a couple of years, we sold our entire building to our local YWCA.

When community members heard they were astonished! How could we sell a building where a church has been located for more than 160 years? It was discernment that led us to this place; listening to and following God's lead gave us the wisdom and courage we needed to do God's “new thing.”

But that was only the beginning; next we had to find somewhere to “live” because we were not “finished” with God's work in our community and the world. The congregation committed themselves to using our resources for serving people, not buildings. In doing so, they not only envisioned new ministries and made their part time pastor full time as a concrete expression of the commitment. Amazing!

It took over a year to find our new home, after looking at restaurants, storefronts, other nonprofits and even shipping containers! But God's “new thing” led us to two congregations who were already sharing space.

Bethel Community Church, an independent predominantly Black congregation, was sharing their space with Congregation Hesed Shel Emet, an independent Jewish community. Both worship and minister side by side in the building that originally belonged to the synagogue. They invited us to join them and on July 1 we began to move in and by July 23, 2023 we held our first worship service, with folks from the other two communities in attendance.

First Baptist Church, also known as “Family By Choice”, gathers each Sunday at 4:30 pm to worship. We offer the only alternative time to Sunday morning out of 65 other worshiping congregations in our town.

Yet one more thing: earlier in our transformative journey, we invited the LGBT Center of Greater Reading to share our space, rent free. We wanted to bring their myriad services to the Pottstown community. When searching for a new home, we included them as partners in the process, and when we made the decision to accept the invitation to join Congregation Hesed Shel Emet and Bethel Community church, they too found a new home.

As we settle in together, new things are on the horizon for us all: books groups, Little Free libraries, learning each other’s traditions, sharing community ministry. Indeed God “is doing a new thing” and we give thanks that we “perceive it” in our midst!
A Congregational Learning Curve
by Rev. Dr. Amy Mears, Co-Pastor, Glendale Baptist Church, Nashville, TN

Glendale Baptist Church: a caring community of equality and grace, continues to develop skill and wisdom as we expand our abilities to connect, to amplify, to listen, and to speak. Part of the little blue dot that is Nashville/Davidson County, in the big red state of Tennessee, Glendalers are working hard to be a congregation of politically aware and active people. The locale can be distressing, infuriating, gobsmacking, and dispiriting, but the community of faith is convincing itself that action incites hope, that knowledge is power, and that we have what we need to make a difference.

The Tennessee state legislature is consistent in its mockery of justice with virulently anti-trans legislation; it also continues to be racist and homophobic. As a community of faith that centers inclusion, Glendale is accelerating our ability and our comfort level with our involvement in the city and political activity. This work is taking several forms.

First, we strive to educate ourselves. That’s relatively easy for us; we’re curious and we’re readers and we’re broadcasters of new ideas and we’re generally humble enough to say, “I didn’t know that!” We like to learn—and that’s a wonderful gift for a faith community to have. So we’re learning to listen and to center voices other than those of our own privilege. We’re locating the ways of our own racism and learning to be anti-racist. We’re realizing the importance of creating space for people—both informally and ritually. After a recent school shooting in our neighborhood, Glendalers gathered in the sanctuary for an evening hour of lament and silence, of weeping and embrace. We are learning the importance of showing up.

A second way that we work for justice is in connecting with and following those who are leading in the work. Glendale’s participation in community organizing in the city is an unabashedly justice-forward attempt to affect policy. We bear the challenge of being a voice for justice in a state that has a super-conservative super-majority. In that work, we participate in amplifying voices and elevating issues that the legislature, at best, ignores but that the community demands be heard and addressed.

This Spring, Glendalers gathered downtown for a march to Legislative Plaza to stand in solidarity with a city that is disgusted by and worn out from the effects of gun violence. Two state legislators had been expelled from the people’s house because of their vocal, insistent stance that the voices of
their constituents—calling for common-sense gun reform—be heard. The legislature shifted attention from the issue of violence by trying to diminish and demonize these legislators who demanded that their districts not be disregarded and silenced. Our presence was intended to strengthen their voices by adding our own. We gathered, we sang, we marched, we chanted, we made new friends, we met up with others we knew, we heard from young people in our city who demand change.

Attending Nashville Metro Council meetings is becoming a more frequent practice for congregants as well. If budgets are, in fact, moral documents, then it’s important for our values to be reflected in the city’s financial decisions. We are learning that our presence, our standing-with position, is important.

A final awareness that we’re gaining is a congregational effort to help increase our own comfort in participating in political actions. Providing Glendalers with a way in, an entry point for developing knowledge and connection in exercising a political voice (in ways in addition to voting) is essential if we are to increase our activity and our presence. The congregation offers companions, carpool, directions for parking, sign-making materials, collaborative voices for song and chant. Each of these gifts makes a difference.

We also employ a variety of avenues in this work for justice. A new “Justice This Week” kiosk in the foyer of the church house will alert worship attenders of letter-writing efforts and directions, phone numbers and scripts, ways to address policy and issues, opportunities to attend vigils and marches, news about our city and state. Thus, individuals linked by Spirit and by our values can work individually but collaboratively to enact justice in our location.

The experience of church folk at the Legislative Plaza action opposing gun violence and the state legislature’s refusal to act in response to the voices of the people is a big, public moment. It’s vital for people of faith, for voices of wisdom and peace, to participate actively in such moments of national press coverage and local passion. For many of us, this is not action that comes naturally; it’s not the first language of our faith communities. There is grand news, though. We can learn this language; we can develop these skills; we can become better listeners and amplifiers of voices for justice in our neighborhoods and our cities and our world. In fact, we must. This is work that is ours to do.
Rainbow Circle reaches 100 members. Will you help us now reach 200?

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

Thank you for your partnership!
FROM THE BOARD CHAIR, BOB SITTIG

On the Road with AWAB

I’m happy to report that, even after a few weeks, the glow of AWAB’s participation in the ABC Biennial and the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship Annual Meeting has not worn off. Our 7:00am Saturday morning breakfast at the Biennial in San Juan, Puerto Rico was attended by a capacity crowd who came to learn what AWAB is up to and listen to Rev. Susan Sparks give the keynote address. The program included reports and greetings from our Executive Director, Rev. Brian Henderson, Development Director, Natalie Aho and the presentation of the Barbra MacNair Award for Christian Witness to former AWAB Board Secretary, Shella Chace. Proceedings were glorified by the music provided by D.J. Boyd. This was the first time in the 50 year history of American Baptists Concerned and AWAB that we were officially on the program, with a designated meal, in the convention hall. Our breakfast was sold out! Our AWAB booth in the exhibit hall was abuzz with a constant stream of attendees inquiring about AWAB and remarking that they had heard so many positive responses to our breakfast. We left Puerto Rico on a high note.

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Moving onward to Atlanta the day after the Biennial ended, we set up our AWAB booth in the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship Annual Meeting Exhibit Hall. Our plan was to present the Randle R. Mixon Award for Christian Service to Rev. George Mason, Pastor Emeritus of Wilshire Baptist Church in Dallas, Texas, at a reception in the convention hotel. We requested guests to register to attend this event. It soon became clear that the room we planned for the reception was not going to be large enough for the number of folks who signed up and we moved to a larger ballroom. That room was barely big enough as the crowd filled every corner of the space as it enjoyed the presentations and the Atlanta Gay Men's Chorus musical numbers. Once again, we spent the following three days chatting with visitors to our AWAB booth and hearing remarks such as “We are so glad you’re here. It’s about time!” We felt quite welcomed and affirmed by our CBF colleagues.

The positive response to AWAB’s presence at both of these events was further realized in the significant number of friends who joined the Rainbow Circle and will be making monthly contributions to support our efforts. You may want to look into becoming a member of this important group.

So why all this success now? We’ve been in this business for fifty years. Certainly, the efforts of our board members, Executive Director and staff account for most of our progress. Developing a strategic plan and hiring a full-time Development Director has also moved us forward. Today I want to recognize some true friends of AWAB who I believe have also contributed greatly to our progress, the Baptist Liberties. The issue of LGBTQ+ full participation in Baptist life has been debated for more than the fifty years at all levels. Denominations try to come up with statements on this issue that try to pacify the most number of members without really taking a hard stand. Churches that have a difficult time discerning their welcoming stance often kick the can down the road for others to figure out. Long time members and large contributors’ voices often overpower newcomers’ progressive voices.

I think it may be the Baptist Liberties that have contributed significantly to a change in attitude regarding the inclusion of all persons in Baptist life. You are probably familiar with these three liberties:

**Soul Liberty: Shaping one’s own relationship with God.**

“Soul Liberty is the deep conviction that every person can enter into direct relationship to God without outside mediation. Baptists resist anything that appears to oppress freedom of the soul.
Our practice of believer’s baptism arises out of our insistence upon soul liberty. No one can decide for another, not even the parent for a child, a person’s relationship with God. Thus, we baptize only after an individual has made a personal decision of faith.”

**Scriptural Liberty: Interpreting the Bible in one’s own way.**

“It seems to me a great thing that Baptists are not chained by creeds, but have taken the Bible as their authority; the full significance of that principle has never yet appeared among us. We have paralyzed the Bible by turning it into a law-book and a collection of proof-texts. We have often refused to take it in its own plain meaning and to comprehend the largest sweep of history in it. We have fussed about trifles and have missed the greatest things.”

—Walter Rauschenbusch

**Church Liberty: Allowing no hierarchy over the local congregation.**

“For Baptists, church freedom means that a local Baptist church has the right and responsibility to run its own affairs under the Lordship of Jesus Christ. No bishop or pastor, no civil leader or magistrate, no religious body or convention of churches can dictate to the local church. To permit such dictation is to abdicate freedom and obligation.”

—Walter Shurden

These liberties may have been written in different terms and language since 1612 when Thomas Helwys said “For men’s religion to God is between God and themselves” but their core meaning has not changed in these 400 years. I believe that more and more Baptists are taking these liberties to heart these days and not allowing outside pressure to dissuade them from knowing that all of us are made in the image of God. God’s love for all of us can never be diminished by some other person’s interpretation of scripture. These liberties cannot be modified for convenience. If you value these liberties, then no outside organization or person can suggest to you, or your church, how to relate to the LGBTQ+ community. That’s between you and God.

Thank you Baptist Liberties for being on the road with AWAB this past month.

*Gratefully,*

**Bob Sittig**
Coming later this year: our history of Welcoming and Affirming Ministry

Help us raise the final costs to bring this important book to press.

“For 50 years, through American Baptists Concerned and the Association of Welcoming and Affirming Baptists, committed folk have worked for the full inclusion of LGBTQIA+ people in our congregations and denominations. While some of us intimately involved in this work are still around to tell the tales, historian Delane Tew has undertaken the important task of researching and recording the story for posterity. This is a project well worthy of our support and I am grateful to AWAB and Delane for making it happen.”

— The Rev. Dr. Randle (Rick) Mixon

Every contribution helps us share our history of Welcoming and Affirming Ministry. Receive exclusive rewards with your generous donation of $25 or more, including a copy of the book!

To make a donation, visit awab.org/50th-anniversary-book today.
**ABC BIENNIAL RESPONSE**

by DJ Boyd

Hello AWAB Family:

I pray that all has been well since we last saw each other. First off, I’m thankful that you allowed me the opportunity to share in the breakfast experience. I think it was well planned and flowed really well. It was great energy and even though it was early everyone seemed present and there was a sense of unity. Although we’re from various places, and some meeting for the first time, we connected as one during that historic moment. I thoroughly enjoyed our speaker, Rev. Susan Sparks. Her message was powerful and tied the entire breakfast experience together. Now the food wasn’t much to write home about (LOL) but other than that, I think it was a perfect experience.

DJ Boyd, Minister of Music at AWAB member, St. Luke Missionary Baptist Church, Charlotte, NC, coordinated music for AWAB’s Biennial breakfast in San Juan, PR.

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**BOARD MEMBERS SPOTLIGHT**

Congratulations to the Rev. Dr. Jason Mack and the Rev. Dr. Lauren Ng upon their recent Doctor of Ministry degree graduation from Central Seminary, Shawnee, KS.

Jason’s dissertation was titled: “Designing a Future Beyond the Building: Exploring the Strengths and Weaknesses of the Design Thinking Process for Churches Rethinking their Building and Property”

Lauren’s dissertation was titled: “Voice, Visibility, and Volition: Asian American Pacific Islander Women in Ministry and the Interrogation of Denominational Systems for Placement and Advancement”
If you choose to give to AWAB, what are you supporting?

by Natalie Aho, Director of Development

“ Asking people for money is allowing them to put their resources at the disposal of the kingdom... to offer people the chance to invest what they have in the work of God. Whether you have much or little is not as important as the possibility of making your money available to God.” —Henry Nouwen, The Spirituality of Fundraising

I came across a profound statement in the new AWAB business plan. “The number of adults who came out as LGBTQ+ has doubled in the past decade, with 20% of Gen Z identifying as queer. As younger generations are embracing their queerness and coming out in larger numbers than ever before, the ripple effects will be felt in all aspects of our lives, including in our churches. Congregants, families of LGBTQ+ folks, clergy, and laity will all grapple with reconciling queer and Baptist identities.”

AWAB relies on our experiences from fifty years of supporting queer individuals and Welcoming and Affirming congregations to advance God’s radical welcome and love in Jesus Christ through being the ministry of reconciliation and building up the beloved community where all will be one. As we look to the next fifty years, we want to end discrimination in the church and the world. We at AWAB believe a fully welcoming and affirming world is necessary – and possible – and our strategic plan marks our next chapter on the journey to make it our shared reality.

AWAB’s goals to respond to this critical time for inclusion include the following:

1. We will reinforce values, theological convictions, and the Church’s mission related to inclusion;
2. We will strengthen the community among LGBTQ+ church members by guiding the church through reconciliation, healing, wellness, and addressing trauma;
3. We will help the church to be more culturally competent on LGBTQ+ issues and how congregational leadership responds, particularly if the church had not been actively engaging in or seeking support in welcoming the queer community into their congregations;

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4. We will advocate for a faithful Baptist voice supporting fundamental LGBTQ+ human and civil rights within the Baptist community; and

5. We will celebrate the sacredness among us!

We need your financial support to make these goals a reality!

Give a one-time gift at awab.org/support. Make a recurring donation by joining the Rainbow Circle at awab.org/rainbow-circle. Or send us a check to AWAB, PO Box 7834, Louisville, KY 40257. If you choose to give to AWAB, you are supporting our mission to ensure safe and inclusive places of worship and a sacred community for LGBTQ+ persons and allies.

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**Christian Citizen Features Six Articles From AWAB Staff, Board Members, and Friends**

In case you missed it, The Christian Citizen, a publication of the American Baptist Home Mission Societies, featured six articles through June and July from AWAB board members, staff, and friends. Each of these articles have been added to our resource library, so that they may be referenced and used well into the future. Each of these articles are linked below. AWAB is grateful to the staff and editors of The Christian Citizen for featuring these articles in their publication in such a critical time.

**AWAB: A Story of Commitment by Bob Sittig**
christiancitizen.us/awab-a-story-of-commitment

**Transgender People Need You Now by Madison McClendon**
christiancitizen.us/transgender-people-need-you-now

**I Am Left-Handed by Kurt Kaufman**
christiancitizen.us/i-am-left-handed

**AWAB And The Black Baptist Church by Clifford Matthews, Jr.**
christiancitizen.us/awab-and-the-black-baptist-church

**Being Trans and Terrified by Donnie Anderson**
christiancitizen.us/being-trans-and-terrified

**Baptism and Coming Out: How Can These Things Be? by Jordan Conley**
christiancitizen.us/baptism-and-coming-out-how-can-these-things-be
AWAB WELCOMES MORE CONGREGATIONS

Welcome to our two newest congregations:

The Baptist Church of West Chester, Wester Chester, PA
First Baptist Church of Savannah, Savannah, GA

MINISTRY MONDAYS WITH MEG

AWAB staff and Board Members were recently featured on the American Baptist Home Mission Societies podcast, Ministry Mondays with Meg. The episodes are available on all podcast platforms, as well as youtube.com/@ministrymondayswithmeg. Check it out! You’ll be glad you did.
AWAB Hosts
Second Installment
of Transgender Webinar Series

“Gender-Affirming Care” is a phrase that’s been demonized in recent times, warped in a systematic way to trigger an image not of someone being affirmed for who they are, but rather an image of a five-year-old who is being forced against their will to physically change their gender. Unfortunately, this misinformation about gender-affirming care is being spread by those with significant wealth, power, and political bias, and has been spread without the broader society noticing.

On Tuesday, August 8th, Rev. Dr. Donnie Anderson and Rev. Erica Saunders led a webinar that explained the myths behind gender-affirming care, and how legislation that restricts gender-affirming care dangerously harms our transgender youth. Rev. Saunders shared that “it’s not just trans folks’ mental and physical well-being that’s on the line—it’s our very safety, because these bills legitimize discrimination, bigotry, and violence against not just trans folks, but queer people of all kinds.”

Rev. Dr. Anderson closed the webinar and shared from the hymn “Just As I Am”:

\[\text{Just as I am, though tossed about} \\
\text{With many a conflict, many a doubt;} \\
\text{Fighting in fears, within, without,} \\
\text{O Lamb of God, I come;} \\
\text{Just as I am, I come.}\]

It is our prayer that our transgender kindred all may feel affirmed and welcomed, just as they are, no matter their age.

AWAB is committed to the work of educating our communities around the realities of our transgender kindred, and will continue to provide opportunities such as this in the future. If you missed this webinar, a recording is available at awab.org/gender-affirming-care-webinar.
**CHURCH AT CACTUS**

On Sunday, July 16, AWAB Executive Director, Brian Henderson, visited Church at Cactus, in Phoenix, AZ. It was a wonderful morning of worship and fellowship. *Pictured: (l to r) Pastor Kathy Hickel; Reina; Retired Pastor David Gunn; Minister of Music Nancy Gunn; and Brian Henderson*

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**OUR BOARD UNITED!**

AWAB’s Board and staff represents all four times zones of the United States. Here is the full Board at work during its 2023 May meeting.