BATHROOMS, BAD PEOPLE, & BRAVERY

By Rev. Sarah Strosahl-Kagi, Pastor of Royersford Baptist Church, Royersford, PA

Parents and students shuffled into the rows of chairs setup in the high school library for the school policy committee. I was wearing my clergy collar and “Protect Trans Kids” t-shirt. A couple sat down behind me; they looked around at me and the folx with whom I was sitting, and the wife said to her husband, “I think we’re sitting on the wrong side. These are the bad people.”

I had to laugh; our motley crew of kids and parents clad in rainbows and trans pride flags were hardly the image most think of when they imagine “bad people” but to those on the “other side” we were.

The Perkiomen Valley (Pennsylvania) School District is just the latest of many school districts contemplating bathroom policies that would exclude transgender students from using the bathroom aligned with their gender identity. After the proposed exclusion was voted down in a contentious school board meeting, it was sent to the policy committee. As the pastor of families in that school district, I went to the policy meeting to show my support for transgender kids and their families.
Many of those promoting the bathroom policy are actively involved in the local Moms for Liberty chapter. Their anti-trans rhetoric comes out of the same playbook being used across the nation as transgender students continue to fall under attack. There were moments I had to laugh (or else cry)—like when a school board member noted the 200,000 year history of separate men’s and women’s rooms (no citation was provided). There were other moments when my smartwatch alerted me to a steep rise in heart rate. And then there were moments when I sat in awe of the courage of our trans students, such as when a “Mom for Liberty” was spewing hate and a recent grad (who is non-binary) simply raised their trans flag in the air, arms shaking yet unrelenting.

I felt the pain of the parents of trans and non-binary students as they described their children being doxxed and made into hateful memes by the Moms for Liberty. It was uncomfortable to sit and listen to the insults and misinformation being hurled. As a non-resident of that community, I was unable to speak but provided witness with my presence. Ok, and maybe that was me who audibly said, “Nope!” when a pro-exclusion student tried to claim “religious exemption” from sharing bathrooms with trans students.

The meeting was abruptly adjourned when the insults and voices were losing control. As those on the opposing side passed by me to exit, I looked into their eyes; as the hate boiled up inside of me at these parents and community members who had just hoisted such cruelty at our children, I remembered that these faces I looked at were the faces of people made in God’s image. As the angel and devil on my shoulders were duking it out over what I was called to do in that moment, my attention was redirected to a mother near me whose rage and hurt were palpable. Behind her, her child collapsed to the floor in tears. They couldn’t take it anymore. While someone tended to mom, I quietly walked up to the student and gently led him away from the scene.

We exited the school building, defeated yet still standing. It was then that I turned to my parishioner and asked, “Where are you parked?” My car was across the street, and it was now well past dark. I’ve walked through some pretty sketchy places alone, but in this space I felt actual fear. If these parents had no problem threatening kids who just want to pee in peace, what might they be willing to do to a lady pastor who loves transgender folx?

The real courageous ones are our transgender siblings who show up to life everyday, who show up and speak out despite the very real danger. They are the ones whom Jesus calls blessed.
And yet, the fear I felt in that moment dissipated once I was in my car with the doors locked. But for my transgender siblings, that fear is never ending. Simply existing in the body God gave them is a threat to the status quo. A quick lock of the car door will not afford them the privilege of escape.

People thanked me for being at the meeting that night, but I shouldn’t get accolades for showing up for the least of these. That’s my basic Christian duty. The real courageous ones are our transgender siblings who show up to life everyday, who show up and speak out despite the very real danger. They are the ones whom Jesus calls blessed. May we all be so faithful and brave in living out the Gospel to all of God’s children.

FROM THE BOARD CHAIR, BOB SITTIG

Baptists Are a Queer People!

It grabbed my attention when Rev. Dr. Susan Shaw proclaimed “Baptists are a queer people!” during her presentation of “Truth and Lies at the Foot of the Cross.” During our recent AWAB Annual Lectureship presentation, Dr. Shaw enumerated ten lies frequently heard in Baptist circles regarding the LGBTQ+ community. Being gay is a choice and what the Bible actually says about homosexuality were among the misconceptions discussed on the lie list. The complete lecture is available on YouTube as the video “AWAB 2023 Lectureship.” I encourage those of you who have not watched this in-depth consideration of LGBTQ+ issues to take the time to hear her words.

In addition to the lies addressed, Dr. Shaw revealed three truths applicable to the relationship between Baptists and the LGBTQ+ community. You may watch the video to learn about Truths #1 & #2, but in presenting Truth #3, Dr. Shaw exclaims “Baptists are a queer people.” If you use her definition of “queer” as “at odds with the norm,” it would be hard to say that we are not. Most other Christian religions are hierarchical, authoritarian, and prescriptive in their structure. The Baptist Liberties, which most Baptist denominations claim, would suggest that we follow none of those methods of governance. Our distinctives, such as The Priesthood of all Believers and the Autonomy of the Local Church, are unique only to Baptists. In the world of Christendom we are at odds with the norm, or queer. I suspect many

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Baptists don’t think of themselves as queer or different, perhaps that’s because many don’t follow the Baptist Liberties in the spirit in which they were created.

The designation of “queer” in society today has widely been applied to sexual orientation or identity. However, considering the root definitions of “at odds with the norm” or just “different,” might cause us to look at that word differently. I suggest that we are all queer in some way, not just as Baptists, but as individuals. Think of the ways you are different from most other people. You play the sitar! You collect Pez dispensers! You enjoy sky-diving! Would your church turn you away for these unusual habits? You might be asked to play in a service, or show and tell in Sunday school. Or your difference might be a challenging physical affliction or disability, something you can’t change. How does your church react to you? Perhaps they remove a pew to accommodate wheelchairs or install an elevator. Most of our queerness is greeted with welcome and compassion.

Whether we find ourselves as members of the LGBTQ+ community or not, we are all queer. If we’re Baptists we are especially queer! The song “Quirky, Queer and Wonderful” applies to you. When you see a group chanting “We’re here, we’re queer, and we’re proud!” you can join right in, because all of us have been made in God’s image, in our own unique fashion. We strive for the day when we see each other just as God’s children only. May it be so.

Coming out is a process and journey that involves not just the person who “comes out,” but it involves everyone who knows that person too. And coming out isn’t a one-time experience, but it is an experience that repeats itself over the course of time. Whoever you are, as you “Come Out,” know that you’re not alone and that AWAB members and friends stand with you on your journey. If you should ever need to talk or process your coming out experiences, know that you can call someone at AWAB any time, by dialing: 1.888.906.AWAB. AWAB celebrates every one of our “Coming Out” journeys.
FROM THE EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR, REV. BRIAN HENDERSON

We Must Remain Focused

I trust as you’re reading this issue of the Welcoming Spirit that you’re sensing the energy and momentum that continues to build for our larger AWAB community at this point in its history. Speaking of history, while there is always much to celebrate, I am also aware that there are many realities and forces at work that are overwhelming and alarming for our LGBTQ+ community throughout the world, and no less even throughout the United States. Over 400 anti-LGBTQ+ bills have been proposed during this past year in state legislatures. As the opening article of this Welcoming Spirit reminds us, the trans-community is being targeted in horrific ways. According to https://translegislation.com, during 2023, anti-trans legislation has been proposed in 49 states.

As AWAB celebrates still the progress made in its 50 years of Welcoming and Affirming ministry throughout Baptist life, we must remain focused on the work that is still ahead. This work will require us to be creative, daring, innovative, and ever willing to cross boundaries that many people of faith find challenging to step across.

Thank you for your commitment to the work we are doing together. For in truth, there is far more we can do together than any of us can do on our own. Keep reading this issue of the Welcoming Spirit to discover how you can be part of this collective work people have been about for half a century. What will we yet accomplish together?

WELCOME TO OUR NEW CONGREGATIONS

Dayspring Church, St. Louis, MO
First Baptist Church in Essex, Essex, CT
Ginter Park Baptist Church, Richmond, VA
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!
SECOND ANNUAL LECTURE RECAP

Kurt Kaufman, Communications Coordinator

On Monday, September 11, 2023, Rev. Dr. Susan Shaw joined guests and sponsors at Wilshire Baptist Church for AWAB's 2023 Annual Lecture. Rev. Dr. Shaw's lecture was titled “Truth and Lies at the Foot of the Cross: The Church and God's LGBTQ+ Children.” During her welcome, Rev. Dr. Shaw noted that “if we don’t speak, we are complicit; and the irony of giving this talk in Texas has not escaped me.” AWAB is grateful for the staff and volunteers of Wilshire Baptist Church and to our generous sponsors who helped make this installation of our annual lecture a reality. Welcomed by colorful balloons, delicious cake, and friendly faces, the Welcoming and Affirming movement took another large step in a region of the country that still demands to hear the message that Rev. Dr. Shaw had to share.

During her lecture, Rev. Dr. Shaw spoke on the standard lies that we are told when we come, traditionally, to the foot of the cross. Speaking on lies such as “The Bible Says [that Homosexuality is a Sin]” and “Love the Sinner, Hate the Sin,” Rev. Dr. Shaw succinctly and academically tore each of them down in a way that only an “old lesbian feminist with tenure who's got nothing to lose” could do, as Dr. Shaw herself described. As Rev. Dr. Shaw stood at the front of Wilshire’s sanctuary and at the foot of the cross, she modeled the way that each of us should boldly stand up when blatant lies are being told in that very same place, in order to convey the truth that really is and the truth that God has created for us.

These truths are just as Dr. Shaw outlined: we are queer, and we are made in God's image; in the resurrection, God affirmed Jesus’ coming out; and...
there is a distinctly and uniquely Baptist case to be made for LGBTQ+ inclusion. These truths are truths that those of us in the Welcoming and Affirming movement have come to know and accept with ease, but truths that remain elusive to some of our Christian brothers and sisters.

On this 50th year of Welcoming and Affirming ministry, we celebrate that we have come to a place where we can proclaim these truths from a Baptist pulpit in Texas, but our work is not finished. AWAB is committed to hosting these lectures on an annual basis in order to speak rather than being complicit. Be on the lookout for information regarding 2024’s annual lecture, in a location to be determined. We thank Rev. Dr. Shaw for her excellence in understanding and speaking truth to us at this year’s lecture, and to all who were able to join us for this historic event.

To view this year’s lecture visit: https://awab.org/2023-lecture-recording-now-available.

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**BOARD RETREAT REFLECTION**

**Victor Crentsil, Board Member**

Our in person board retreat for 2023 was the first in person meeting I had as a new board member. It was comforting to embrace and greet many folks I had only seen in Zoom meetings. There was a palpable eagerness to engage the moment I met Rev. Dr. Donnie Anderson, who graciously played airport and hotel chauffeur shuttling us to our host church, Wilshire Baptist Church and elsewhere in Dallas. Rev. Brian Henderson immediately lit up to guide me to his pew when I stumbled into the large pastel painted sanctuary in my travel clothes - sweat pants and windbreaker. I felt a bit out of place but that feeling of self-consciousness began to wilt as Rev. Dr. Susan Shaw took us on a journey in her compelling but gently subversive talk suggesting the inherent queerness in Baptist theology. I, a queer Black Christian, have had to and continue to negotiate seemingly conflicting identities my whole life. This was familiar territory.

That said, I didn’t anticipate the spiritual rollercoaster I experienced the rest of the 48 hours I spent with fellow board members, one of our facilitators - Rev. Dr. Marie Onwubuariri, and representatives of our host church. I quickly began to realize that our board and its work is at an inflection point. We have doubled in size, diversified in age, race/ethnicity,
and experience, and added new staff in less than a year. (Welcome, Natalie Aho! You are a force. We are so blessed to have you with us.) With all of these changes, we took some time to address how we work with each other with these diverse experiences. Rev. Dr. Onwubuariri guided us through challenging exercises that forced us to begin to acknowledge some of the unconscious ways even our organization dedicated to welcoming the marginalized might still center dominant voices and ways of being. I ask you, dear reader, to keep our board in prayer as we continue along this journey. We have just scratched the surface.

We were also blessed to hear Mark Wingfield of Wilshire Baptist share the church's story of how they became Welcoming and Affirming. Their story is relatively recent but still powerful. This work within the Baptist tradition has been going on for 50 years! There are so many stories to share. I hope that many churches are able to share their journeys on becoming Welcoming and Affirming more broadly, so that others can be inspired to take that next step in making their churches more inclusive. With this inspiration and a little bit of cultural competency training, our board began the work of planning what actions we want to take in the near future using our business plan as a guide. Based on what came out of our debrief from the various small committees within our board, I was impressed by the creativity and commitment from all to usher us forward.

We finally were reminded by Rev. John Kelly, a pastoral fellow at Wilshire Baptist, of the impact of our work. His testimony of his journey to live more authentically brought many in the room to tears. It was indeed a holy moment to remind us that individuals in our communities are struggling to find peace within themselves. And we have a duty as Christians to embrace them with our love. This work is challenging and not always popular but it is worthwhile. I finally ask you, dear reader, to continue to keep our board in prayer as we strive to make churches more loving places for our marginalized LGBTQ+ family.
WHY DID YOUR CHURCH JOIN AWAB?

Natalie Aho, Director of Development

Do you know why your congregation became a member of AWAB (or any church, for that matter)? Here are a few reasons we’ve heard lately:

• Joining AWAB allows us to make a public statement of what kind of Baptist we are.
• It is not a denominational alignment; rather, it is demonstrating what we believe.
• Of course, we can be Welcoming and Affirming without AWAB. But joining allows us to have a group to be a part of and a kind of label of who we are.
• We concluded that joining this organization might be the best way to invite the LGBT community to worship with us.
• It helped us develop our nondiscrimination statement to align with our church policy.
• Of the handful of new people in our congregation, half of them came through our door because we are listed as Baptist AND Welcoming and Affirming.

As you should know, this is the 50th anniversary of AWAB. In 1973, a small group from the American Baptist Churches-USA had the audacity to speak for God’s radical love and welcome for all. This group, named American Baptists Concerned, advocated for their own inclusion as well as the congregations who were on the path to being disfellowshiped for their affirmation of the LGBTQ+ community.

Twenty years later, AWAB was formed in 1993 to create and support a community of churches, organizations, and individuals committed to the inclusion of lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender persons into the full life and mission of Baptist churches.

Whether your church just joined last month, is still contemplating joining, has been a member since 1993, or was a part of American Baptists Concerned, we hope that being a part of AWAB is important to who you are.

If you’d like to demonstrate the value of AWAB membership, we ask that you first engage in the conversation to answer why your church is (or should be) a member of AWAB. Talk to your church staff and leaders about why they thought membership with AWAB was important. And if your congregation isn’t a member yet, ask them why they haven’t joined.
We’d love to hear why being a member of AWAB matters to you!

And then take up a special offering by the end of 2023 to celebrate AWAB’s 50th Anniversary. Send us photos, your church bulletin, or any notes that accompany this recognition. Mail to AWAB, PO Box 7834, Louisville, KY, 40257, visit awab.org/support, or email Natalie Aho (natalie@awab.org). Be sure to name your donation in honor of our anniversary.

W&A MOVEMENT BEGINS WITH BAPTISTS IN PUERTO RICO:

La Mesa Abierta (The Open Table)

By Rev. Víctor Vázquez, Retired Baptist Minister of the Baptist Churches of Puerto Rico

Thursday, August 24, 2023, was an historic day for Baptists in Puerto Rico. Eleven men and women met for the first time to consider the possibility of coming together to organize the kind of church that we believe Jesus intended, one that would be diverse, completely inclusive, and affirming of every person’s dignity and identity. We all came with a sense of dissatisfaction, frustration and hurt, disillusioned by the sad state of the institutionalized, traditional churches which have ceased to be beacons of our most basic fundamental Baptist principles of religious liberty, soul liberty, the autonomy of the local church and the priesthood of all believers. Yet, we also came with great expectation, excitement and hope.

Two months earlier, at the Biennial meeting of the American Baptist Churches, USA, held in San Juan, I had the pleasure of meeting the Rev. Douglas Avilesbernal, Executive Minister of the Evergreen Association of American Baptist Churches, USA, which is made up of an array of more conservative churches along with Welcoming and Affirming congregations from different parts of the country and Venezuela. After sharing my story with Doug, I expressed my understanding that there is a dire need to establish a ministry geared to reaching out to the many marginalized and excluded LGBTQ+ folk on the Island. Fast-forward, that was the beginning of what has become a fast-moving process.

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The August meeting was presided over by Doug and included several retired ministers and a retired seminary professor, a seminarian, and persons of the LGBTQ+ community on the Island, several of whom came with similar stories of rejection and isolation from other denominations. Without a clear plan or direction, but with a strong conviction of God’s leading, we unanimously decided to forge ahead to become a Welcoming and Affirming ministry, with roots firmly based on the principles of our Baptist heritage. This would be the first ministry of its kind in Puerto Rico. The significantly symbolic name of La Mesa Abierta (The Open Table) was born, and plans were immediately made to come together for our first worship service on Sunday, September 10, in the central town of Gurabo.

For that gathering, our number had already doubled. It was a time of celebrating, sharing our stories, bonding, and envisioning, with the final moments dedicated to commemorating the reality that brings us all together in the first place: that we are one because of what Jesus did for all humanity at Calvary. The Lord’s Supper took on a new meaning for all of us as tears of joy, solidarity and love flowed from many eyes. Some of those present had not attended church in many years, much less partaken of a communion service.

As we dialogued around the table, several questions and issues were addressed: 1) Who are we and what are we seeking as a group? 2) The need to understand the “diversities” before us, presently and in the future, in terms of theologies, gender realities, physical and emotional incapacities, political diversity, and others; 3) Reflect on what it means to be “welcoming and affirming” in the context of the cultural and congregational realities in Puerto Rico; 4) What resources will we have at our disposal on the difficult road of confronting resistance and intolerance which we will soon have to face? 5) The strategic roles that both the Evergreen Association and AWAB may have in our process of “becoming.”

Last August, I had the unique opportunity to visit First Baptist Church of Denver to get a first-hand understanding of what a Welcoming and Affirming congregation actually looks like. Rev. Brian Henderson was gracious in sharing with me his personal story and that of his church. I was impressed to witness the dynamic diversity and inclusiveness of this
vibrant body of Christ and to learn of its intense multifaceted ministry of serving within the context of an inner city that is encountering a plethora of social issues and challenges. It was my privilege to witness a living example of what the church of Christ can embody amid constant change and conflict - a community where love abounds, justice is sought, hurts are healed, hope is held high, and Christ is Lord.

This is what *La Mesa Abierta* envisions as its mission. With a sense of obedience and commitment in fulfilling the Great Commission entrusted to us by our Lord, we are willing to face whatever lies ahead, just as many have done before us, knowing that one day we will all sit and celebrate at *La Mesa Abierta* in eternity.

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**AWAB BOOK UPDATE**

**by Delane Tew, PhD**

Where did it all begin, the Association of Welcoming and Affirming Baptists? The scene was set June 29-July 3, 1992, at the fourth national retreat for American Baptists Concerned (ABConcerned). The group had been working for the inclusion of LGBTQ+ individuals in American Baptist Churches (ABCUSA) since 1973. ABConcerned was made up of individuals who cared for this community of believers who were often shunned and ridiculed in their local churches. The membership included LGBTQ+ individuals and straight allies, clergy and laity, even denominational staff, those who loved and cared for these outcasts. The retreat was a time of fellowship, games, worship, and prayer. Louise Rose, singer, composer, musician, and first president of ABConcerned, led the retreat, using her talents to bless all in attendance. Notable ministers led the worship services; Nadean Bishop, the first out lesbian called by an ABCUSA church; John Blevins, an openly gay graduate of Duke Divinity School, ordained by Olin T. Binkley Memorial Baptist Church; and Irv Cummings, the first openly gay man called by an ABCUSA church.

Being a true Baptist gathering, the group conducted two business meetings. One issue before the group was creating an organization for churches that were “Welcoming and Affirming” to the LGBTQ+ community. This idea had been discussed since the late 1980s. At the ABCUSA biennials during this time, various anti-gay statements of concern were up for consideration. In both 1987 and 1989 attendees rejected these statements. The situation changed in 1991 at the West

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Virginia biennial when members of conservative churches in the Charleston area were a large part of those attending. Here the anti-gay statement of concern was approved. In this atmosphere, churches which were open to the LGBTQ+ community felt the need to join together for support and encouragement. At the 1992 retreat, ABConcerned members laid the groundwork for the new organization, stressing the necessity for churches seeking membership to be seriously committed to openness. Church applications had to include a statement of inclusion. Some of the first churches to join were Lakeshore Avenue Baptist Church, Oakland CA; Central Baptist Church, Wayne, PA; Judson Memorial Baptist Church, Minneapolis, MN; Pullen Memorial Baptist Church, Raleigh, NC. The first meeting of AWAB was during the 1993 Biennial in San Jose. What happened to these early pioneers? How did ABCUSA react to AWAB? How did AWAB move beyond its first denominational roots? More to follow.

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

Visit [https://awab.org/50th-anniversary-book](https://awab.org/50th-anniversary-book) to learn how you can help underwrite the publishing of this significant history.

**Queer Conversations**

You’re invited to the online gathering of Queer Conversations—a Queer community of faith affiliated with the Association of Welcoming & Affirming Baptists.

Queer people have been and continue to be marginalized within faith communities across the United States.

Queer Conversations is an interreligious space for Queer people and their allies to gather with one another to build lifelong relationships and to celebrate one another in our unique identities as Queer people of faith.

Join us beginning on Thursday, November 2, 7:00PM ET for our “First Thursday Gathering” on ZOOM.

You can learn more about Queer Conversations and get the Zoom link for November 2 at this link: [queerconversationsatcbc.square.site](https://queerconversationsatcbc.square.site) and find us on Facebook at [FB.com/QueerConversationsCommunity](https://www.facebook.com/QueerConversationsCommunity).
Opportunities to connect with others about queer matters and realities...

A Place to Talk: LGBTQ+ 101 for People of Faith

First Baptist Church of Pottstown invites AWAB members and friends to a Zoom forum.

“A Place to Talk: LGBTQ+ 101 for People of Faith,” will offer information about LGBTQ+ community members and the issues that affect their lives. On Oct 15, Oct 22, Oct 29, and Nov 5 at 7pm EDT, FBC staff will facilitate conversation with experts on topics such as LGBTQ+ education and advocacy as well as the intersections of theology and gender expression.

Visit www.FBCPottstown.org/LGBTQ-101-Forum for more info and register at tinyurl.com/4wbt65am.