Wisconsin Legislative News Impacting the Trans Community

by Jason Mack, AWAB Board Secretary and Pastor, Underwood Memorial Baptist Church, Wauwatosa, WI

The Wisconsin state legislature has become yet another battleground in the far-right’s war against the trans community. On Wednesday, October 4th, three pieces of Anti-Trans legislation were brought to hearings, all of which targeted trans youth. AB377 & AB378 targeted trans athletes, and AB465 targeted trans youth attempting to access appropriate gender-affirming medical care. The bad news is that all of this legislation and their state senate equivalents passed the Wisconsin legislation easily. The good news is that our Governor has promised to veto them, and there aren’t enough votes to overturn his veto. But the damage is done.

Every time these kinds of bills are introduced, things get worse for our trans siblings. 86% of transgender and nonbinary youth say recent debates around anti-trans bills have negatively impacted their mental health; as a result of these policies and debates in the last year, 45% of trans youth experienced cyberbullying, and nearly 1 in 3 reported not feeling safe to go to the doctor or hospital when they were sick or injured. —The Trevor Project.

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But I want you to know, friends, that the Church was there, and we were noticed. There were literally hundreds of people in the Wisconsin Capitol that day. Over 90% of us were there to advocate against the legislation. And many of us represented the Church. I was at the hearing for AB465 and sat there for seven-plus hours before I got to testify. Over seven hours of testimony on the damage this legislation would do. Brave youth came and shared their stories of transition. Counselors, parents, educators, medical experts, and clergy all testified against this hateful legislation. We didn’t win this battle but are winning the war.

The Church showed up and people noticed. I had several organizers from secular organizations tell me that they were stopped by legislative staff and representatives to comment on the large faith-based response. I was told by an organizer that the legislative committees expected the social workers, the medical providers, the teachers, and the advocates to show up. They did not expect the Church.


Here is a copy my testimony from that day:

My name is Rev. Dr. Jason Mack. I am the pastor of Underwood Memorial Baptist Church in Wauwatosa, WI, and a resident of Madison. I am speaking you today to urge you, with all of my heart, to oppose Assembly Bill 465.

I speak to you today because I serve a God that loves. A God that, according to our scriptures, literally is love (1 John 4:8). I speak to you today because I serve a God who I believe sent Their own son – a very piece of themselves – to come to earth to show us how to love. To show us that to live a life of love is to love the outcast, the left behind, and the marginalized. I follow this son, this teacher, this guru, this lord. I follow this example of God's love on earth every day to the best of my ability. And I encourage my Church to do the same.

This teacher of love, this piece of God, was murdered. Not by criminals. Not by a rival religion. Not by the outcasts that he served. This teacher of love was killed by an unholy alliance between the religious and political leaders of his day. This teacher of love was killed because he dared to love the wrong people and told others to do the same.

So, I speak to you today to say, as loud as I possibly can, that the hate and the scapegoating of the trans community that is present in this bill, has nothing, absolutely nothing, to do with Jesus or the God that sent him. And I, for one, will speak out against it as long as I have breath in my lungs. Because I don’t just speak to you this morning as a pastor. I speak to you as a parent. A parent of a trans youth who every
day must watch as their country, the leaders who are supposed to be there to protect them, threaten their very existence. They’re just a kid. Just trying to love their life and love their friends and get into college. They shouldn’t have to worry if their very existence is going to be outlawed.

To the representatives supporting this legislation, I ask, and I pray, that you would look deeply into your own heart and ask yourself, is there something scary to you about my kid? Are you afraid of people simply being who they are? Do you feel you need to silence difference? Are you so insecure that you want to push others back into a closet of your making?

And I ask you to pray. Because I am confident that the God of love will let you know that what you are doing has nothing to do with them. And that God will tell you simply to stop, just, stop.

Thank you for your time.

FROM THE BOARD CHAIR, BOB SITTIG

Good News for AWAB!

This past year has seen many blessings for our organization. We expanded the Board of Directors from seven to fourteen, we added over a dozen churches to our membership role, hired Natalie Aho as our full-time Director of Development, we significantly increased the number of Rainbow Circle donors, and we had highly successful exhibits and presentations at the ABC Biennial in Puerto Rico and the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship General Assembly in Atlanta. But I believe that the most important blessing for AWAB has come at the close of 2023 as I am pleased to inform you that the Reverend Brian Henderson will become the full-time Executive Director for AWAB starting in January of 2024.

Brian has served AWAB since early 2018 in the capacities of Board member, Board Chair, National Coordinator and recently, part-time Executive Director. It’s appropriate to recognize that the accomplishments outlined above have occurred primarily through Brian’s efforts. His recent title of part-time Executive Director does not accurately represent the hours he has donated to this organization over the past several years. While maintaining his full-time job as Pastor of First Baptist Church of Denver, Brian devoted many hours over and above his part-time commitment to AWAB. The progress we have made in the past five years is evidence of that dedication.

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Rev. Henderson's experience in both the straight and LGBTQ+ communities positions him well to listen carefully and offer empathetic counsel to both individuals and to church leaders who struggle with identity issues for themselves or their church communities. With his expanded hours Brian will spend more time in communication with our members and member churches. He will continue to be supported by his staff of Janet Cole - Administrative Coordinator, Natalie Aho – Development Director and Kurt Kaufman – Communications Coordinator.

In 2022 we developed and adopted a business plan for the growth and effectiveness of AWAB in the Baptist life. Thanks to the hard work of our Board and Staff we have been able to meet most of the goals set by that plan. The plan called for the addition of a Program Coordinator in early 2024 and a full time Executive Director at the end of 2024. We switched the order of these additions with the knowledge that our growth and development goals would be more readily achieved with full time executive management.

Brian will be leaving his pastoral role at First Baptist Church Denver, but he won’t be leaving pastoral ministry. The work of AWAB is a perfect example of pastoral ministry in the sense of tending to a flock. Our flock may be spread out a bit more than usual. We can't gather in the pews on Sunday morning, but our needs are very much the same as those of our local congregations. Congregations need a place to be loved for who they are, and they need a place to love others in the same manner. The mission of AWAB is to ensure that those places exist for all God's children.

Please join me in wishing Brian Henderson great success and happiness as he continues to guide AWAB in the fulfillment of our mission, and accept my gratitude for your support as we strive to accomplish God's important work together.

Gratefully,

Bob Stitt
For the Love of God and Neighbor

by Rev. Ashlee Wiest-Laird, Pastor
First Baptist Church, Jamaica Plane, MA

I was born in the United States—Louisville, Kentucky to be exact. I am your average straight, cis, anglo-saxon, protestant woman. Last month I was arrested in a protest at the John F. Kennedy federal building in Boston, calling on Senator Elizabeth Warren to demand a ceasefire in the Gaza Strip.

Now, you might wonder why someone like me would do something like that. And in fact, many years ago a relative of mine asked me something akin to that question: “Why is it that you care about people in these other places? I mean, it’s not your country. They’re not your people.” And my response, then as now, is that as a person of faith, there is no ‘here or there, them or us.’ We are all connected. We are all a part of what Dr. King called the “inescapable network of mutuality.” As many people of Christian faith would undoubtedly agree, we are called to care.

Okay, but why get arrested? Why take that risk in this particular circumstance? Thirty years ago, my husband and I lived for a year in the town of Bethlehem. No, not Pennsylvania. **THE** Bethlehem. The town where it is believed Jesus was born. The town of Bethlehem sits in the occupied territory of the West Bank in the historic land of Palestine. During our year there while my spouse did doctoral research on Muslim-Christian relationships among Palestinians, I volunteered with Sabeel Liberation Theology Center and with the Middle East Council of Churches in Jerusalem facilitating alternative travel opportunities.

Let’s put it simply. It was a life changing experience for me. What was confirmed for me in those days was the old adage that two wrongs don’t make a right. While, of course, Jewish people have a right to be free and safe, so do Palestinians. Trying to fix a Euro-American “Christian” history of antisemitic genocide by creating and abetting (or perhaps just ignoring) the erasure of a non-European people is ignorant at best.

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genocidal worst and unacceptable either way. Palestinians are human beings who have the right to life and dignity.

What is happening now in Gaza and the West Bank is the fast forward continuation of what has been happening to Palestinians for 75 years. It is historical fact that the Zionist movement, assisted greatly by European antisemitic governments, begat the state of Israel with a clear plan to dispossess, transfer or eliminate the Palestinian population that inconveniently lived on the land of Palestine. The destruction of villages, the creation of refugees, the divide and conquer strategy, the military occupation, the demolition of homes, the detention without charge, the confiscation of land, the stealing of resources and culture, the harassment and killing, the siege, starvation and genocide in Gaza, are all part and parcel of the same larger strategy....to take all the land without any of the people.

I know that some will inevitably point the finger at Hamas, as if their violence on October 7th was the cause of all this carnage. There is no way for me to convince you in 800 words that it’s actually the opposite. Like them or not, Hamas is responding to decades of state sponsored terror. At least ask yourself what you think about Native American or South African resistance to settler colonialism before you come to a conclusion. And if you think it's not the same situation, ask yourself why not? Do we really believe that historical trauma justifies ethnic cleansing and war crimes?

Here's what's most important in this moment though. We (especially those of us who call ourselves Christian) must call for a permanent ceasefire. Our voices must be loud and urgent. Tomorrow the “pause” may end, and we will be inundated with more images of broken buildings and bodies. Bombed neighborhoods and dead babies. To say “Stop Killing” should not be controversial to those of us who value life and worship a God of love, and yet there is silence from our governmental leaders and, even more disappointing, a willingness to ‘look the other way’ by the majority of churches in this country. The churches in AWAB consistently step up for love and justice on behalf of our LGBTQIA members. Might we be willing to speak up now for our Palestinian family, both Christian and Muslim? For the children of Gaza, for all the hostages, for my friends Elias, Adnan, Kifah, Yamila, Mitri, Nahida, Mahmoud and so many more in the West Bank? And for the love of God(!), can we lift our voices to demand a ceasefire now? For what will we take a risk and put our bodies on the line? On this first Sunday of Advent my hope is that we would not sit idly by while our neighbor's life is at stake. (Leviticus 19:16)
Our 2024 goal is to reach 200 Rainbow Circle members. Can you help us?

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!
ASHES FOR VALENTINE’S DAY
By Natalie Aho, Director of Development

If you are a clergy member, you’re likely aware that Ash Wednesday 2024 falls on Valentine’s Day. It only happens six times in this century! The first was in 1923, then in 1934, 1945, and 2018. It will happen once more in 2029.

On February 14, 2024, wearing ashes on our foreheads will be a powerful experience while we buy flowers and candy for loved ones. The stark mix of mourning death and celebrating love is something queer folks and allies know intimately and walk with daily.

Recognizing this paradoxical reality, we are launching the “Ashes for Valentines” fund. We would like to commemorate those who we mourn because of the loss of their life as LGBTQ+ folks and/or celebrate those who have endured. After the first of the year, you will see details about how to donate:

- in memory of someone whose ashes came too soon because of a lack of acceptance and affirmation of who they are and/or
- in honor of someone who has shaken the dust off their feet from those who do not celebrate their sacredness.

We pray these gifts allow for healing and peace to the giver and strength and renewal to our AWAB family.

When you give to “Ashes for Valentines,” we will use the funds specifically to:

- Provide resources for LGBTQ+ leaders and church members related to Church trauma, reconciliation, healing, wellness, and positive mental health,
- Offer support to families and individuals experiencing difficulties reconciling their sexual orientation and gender identity, and
- Share stories from individuals and congregations about how they have navigated their Welcoming and Affirming journey.

Following our campaign, we will include these gifts in an annual report with our donors and member congregations and on our website. There are ways to give anonymously or in memory or honor of someone anonymous. Ultimately, this is a way to proclaim God’s love for all proudly.

May this fund help us work with congregations, ministers, and leaders to know we do not do this work alone. While we’ve made much progress this century since the first Valentine’s Ash Wednesday in 1923, what do we hope will be accomplished by 2029 when it comes around again? We at AWAB believe a fully Welcoming and Affirming world is necessary – and possible.
From the Executive Director, Brian Henderson

As mentioned in AWAB Board Chair Bob Sittig’s article, I am excited to begin as AWAB’s full-time Executive Director beginning in January. I am grateful for the opportunity to serve in this capacity. This is a significant transition for me and my family, for AWAB as an organization, and for the congregation I’ve served over the past 12 years. We covet your prayers through this time of change. I look forward to diving in and getting started soon. AWAB is blessed with a gifted Board, staff, and growing community of congregations, ministries, institutions, and individual supporters. Our work today is a work that has been made possible by so many people over the years. Indeed, we stand on the shoulders of giants. As we move into another chapter of AWAB’s history, as we live out an energizing strategic plan, as we partner with Welcoming and Affirming Baptists across the country and world, will you join me in helping us do together what none of us can do on our own? We have hope to offer, lives to save, and ministries to build up. Let’s go.

Latest from the Religious Archives Network – check this out!

The Historical Development of BIPOC Trans-spiritual Leadership.

Initiated through a special gift from Sr. Luisa Derouen, LGBTQ-RAN invited Enoch Page, Ph.D. to be the curator and content manager for this online presentation. In this exhibit Dr. Page weaves together historical analysis, interviews, artifacts and images to explore the historical context and development of BIPOC trans-spiritual leadership. Recognizing that transgender people have always existed in every ethnic group, this exhibit takes a multi-faceted, long-ranging look at how some transgender, intersex, and gender non-conforming people of color of the past and in the present have been working to reclaim the right of their communities to practice their spirituality.
ABC/USA Calls new General Secretary

The Board of General Ministries of American Baptist Churches USA has affirmed the call of the Rev. Dr. Gina Jacobs-Strain to be the next General Secretary of the denomination. Dr. Jacobs-Strain’s term of service will begin on February 1, 2024.

In announcing the call of Dr. Jacobs-Strain, ABCUSA President Jim Wolfe noted that Dr. Jacobs-Strain was the unanimous choice of the search committee. “The committee committed itself to prayer and the discernment of God’s will in this process. We believe Dr. Jacobs-Strain is the person that God has chosen to lead our denominational family. She has the academic background, professional and personal skills to lead this diverse family into the mission that God has prepared for us.”

Currently, Dr. Jacobs-Strain serves as the Executive Director of American Baptist Women's Ministries. She has held various pastoral roles including Transitional Pastor at First Baptist Church of New Market in Piscataway, N.J., Interim Pastor at St. Paul Baptist Church in Atlantic Highlands, N.J., Associate Regional Pastor for Women in Ministry for American Baptist Churches of New Jersey (ABC-NJ), and serves as an Associate Minister of Christian Education at St. Paul Baptist Church in Montclair, N.J.

Rev. Jacobs-Strain has been invited as a guest preacher/lecturer at institutions such as Drew University Theological School, New Brunswick Theological Seminary, ABC-NJ Academy, and the Wellness Lounge Webcast. She also contributed to the “Testify: ABC-NJ Devotional” book, published in 2015. In 2016, she co-launched the Christian Education Workshop Series, “Leading Interactive and Engaging Bible Studies (L.I.B.S. TM)” at the ABC-NJ annual Church Officers and Leaders Conference (COAL). In 2017, she initiated a conversation series, “The Intersection of Leadership and Healing.”

Rev. Dr. Jacobs-Strain earned a bachelor’s degree in Psychology from Rutgers University and graduated Magna Cum Laude with a Master of Divinity degree from Drew University’s Theological School. She was also honored with the Old Testament Studies Scholar Award from the Biblical Studies Department. In 2015, she received a Certificate of Excellence from Palmer Theological Seminary & ABC-NJ Academy, and in 2017,
she completed the Nehemiah-Leadership Program. In May 2020, she attained a Doctor of Ministry from Duke University. She is married to Clifton Strain, and together they have three sons. They currently reside in Morristown, N.J.

Rev. Brian Henderson, AWAB’s Executive Director said, “AWAB is so pleased by this recent announcement and we look forward to supporting Rev. Jacobs-Strain as she leads the American Baptist family. I believe our work together will continue to impact many in welcoming and affirming ways.”

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**Seven Sundays with Donnie, by Seth Chitwood**

*Check out this new book* about the life and journey of AWAB Board member, the Rev. Dr. Donnie Anderson.

Seven Sundays with Donnie is a series of snapshots detailing the experiences of an ordained Protestant minister who undertakes the affirmation of her genuine gender identity as she transitions from male to female through surgery, counseling, and her undying faith that she is doing the right thing – even in light of the potential for damaging professional outcomes and difficult family responses. Tracing a story of some three years in the making, author Seth Chitwood, a journalist for a USA Today affiliate in the South Coast region of Massachusetts, offers a story of seven Sundays in the life of a truly pioneering pathfinder.

Seven Sundays With Donnie is for people who want to understand more about the transgender experience and how that experience intersects with the world of faith. If you’re exploring your own gender identity, or you’re acquainted with or love someone on a journey of gender exploration, or if you want to know more and be a more effective ally of the transgender community, this is a helpful and inspiring story about someone who wants to share the joys, comfort, and ease of living without the burden of gender dysphoria. Available in both ebook and paperback formats.
In Memoriam: Dr. Dennis Tanner

September 12, 1944 – October 25, 2023

AWAB celebrates the life of Dr. Dennis Tanner. Dennis was a supporter of AWAB since its inception in 1993. AWAB expresses its sympathy and love to the Tanner family during this season.

“Dennis was a confidant and friend. He truly embodied through his words, actions, and generous support what it means to be truly, welcoming and affirming,” shares AWAB Executive Director, Brian Henderson.

Words Dennis shared not long before dying, encapsulate the spirit of the man he was: “Even though I know where the path leads, I must stay nimble on the path. What a wonderful, blest (OK, blessed if you must) life I’ve been entrusted with, surrounded by an all-star cast who far exceeded any reasonable expectations. Thank you for marching with me.”

AWAB thanks you, Dennis, for marching with us toward that day when all will be welcomed and affirmed for being children of God.

BRITE DIVINITY SCHOOL VISIT

In October, Rev. Brian Henderson visited and participated in Baptist Studies activities at Brite Divinity School, Fort Worth, Texas. Rev. Henderson is seen here with Rev. Dr. Aretha Fluker, Director of Community and Spiritual Life and Director of Baptist Studies.
Welcome to our New Congregations!

Buechel Park Baptist Church, Louisville, KY

First Baptist Church of the City, Washington, D.C.

Crosswalk Community Church of Napa, Napa, CA

Towne View Baptist Church, Kennesaw, GA