Disturbing the Waters

By Rev. Dr. Jill McCrory, Past AWAB Board Chair, Interim Pastor Bethesda United Church of Christ, Bethesda, MD

I recently had a delightful zoom call with AWAB Executive Director, Rev. Brian Henderson. He was in Puerto Rico, about to meet with the local Baptists. It brought to mind the last time I was in Puerto Rico with AWAB, at the ABC-USA Biennial back in 2011. At the time AWAB was unable to exhibit at the Biennial and our workshops and hospitality took place at an adjoining hotel. The rainbow choir sang outside the convention center, reminding people that we were there. That year I happened to be Board Chair and also happened to have an AWAB credit card. It’s a long story, but due to a glitch in the exhibit rules I was able to purchase a booth on site. Within no time we had our banner and a table with AWAB literature. It was several years before we exhibited again, but that action “disturbed the water” enough to begin something.

Disturbing the water is my metaphor for how creating a disturbance causes something new to emerge. In January, Baptism Sunday included a reading from Genesis 1’s creation story and Mark’s version of Jesus’ baptism. In both cases, water is disturbed, and the result is a new beginning. Genesis states, “in the beginning of God's creating” and Mark prefices Jesus’ baptism with “The beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ.” When we are baptized, we literally and figuratively disturb the water, and anticipate a new beginning of our faith journey.

As I look back at photos from AWAB through the years, I saw that so much of our progress has been the result of disturbing the water. At the very beginning of the welcoming and affirming movement in Baptist life,
brave pastors disturbed the water of the status quo and declared themselves American Baptists Concerned. From this foundation grew what we know and love as AWAB. But at every turn, AWAB leaders and AWAB congregations created a bit of disturbance that created another step in that progress. I am confident that we will see just how this all unfolded when the history of AWAB is published.

Each of us disturbs the water in our own faith setting, whether it is in the process of becoming a welcoming and affirming church, addressing the needs of our queer community, acting on issues of injustice, or any of the many “new beginnings” that we encourage. In each case, something new bursts forth as we burst forth from the baptismal waters. It is my prayer that just as our faith communities enthusiastically welcome the one being baptized as they come out of the water, that they are equally welcoming to new ideas and activities.

It is with all this in mind that I am so grateful that we have disturbed the water once again and have forged ahead with Brian as full-time Executive Director and an ambitious budget. It is yet again a time of new beginnings for AWAB, and just as God said “it is good” at creation and “you are my beloved” at Jesus’ baptism, I know that God declares AWAB good and beloved and blesses the work of Brian, the Staff, and the Board. Now let's go disturb some water!

FROM THE BOARD CHAIR, BOB SITTIG

Lest We Forget

This title phrase is primarily used in remembrance of those who have given their lives for a noble purpose. You often hear it at Memorial Day services for our departed service men and women. After the conflict is past, the importance of the struggle and sacrifice may tend to fade a bit from our everyday consciousness. We need a reminder sometimes to re-awaken us to the cost of a better life. I’d like to think that this reminder might equally apply to those who are still with us and still fighting for a noble purpose as well.

This thought came to mind recently when our Executive Director, Rev. Brian Henderson, came to preach at Seattle First Baptist, my home church. His visit reminded our congregation that our church was one of the founding organizations of AWAB over thirty-one years ago. SFBC was performing commitment ceremonies in the late 1970’s and has been an active champion of LGBTQ+ rights for all these years since. Because
of this history we tend to take our welcoming and affirming stance for granted. This sounds like good news, but is it?

AWAB has been blessed to have added more than a dozen new member churches in the past year. Our application documents require prospective member churches to complete an in-depth discernment process with the entire congregation to ensure that all will honor our welcoming stance. For most of those new member churches, this process, and its profound meaning, remains fresh in the minds of the gathered. However, as time goes by we get comfortable with our affirming posture, and eventually it becomes “just the way we are.”

While Seattle First Baptist Church and many other long-standing member churches of AWAB are proud of, and living out their welcoming and affirming commitments, do they sometimes lose sight of the struggle that goes on for other members of the queer community as they seek full inclusion into Baptist life? American Baptist Churches-USA, The Alliance of Baptists, and The Cooperative Baptist Fellowship have over 7000 churches in America and AWAB is approaching 200 member churches. The significance of those numbers is not the 6800 churches that are not yet AWAB members, but rather the many thousands of our brothers, sisters, and colleagues in the LGBTQ+ community who cannot find a comfortable and accepting Baptist Church to worship in. These are the ones that we cannot and must not forget.

It is clear that AWAB has much work to do. We are encouraged as we enter into 2024 with our Staff and dynamic Board of Directors. To truly make progress in creating God's Kin-dom, where everyone is accepted and affirmed, we need your support as well. As always, we ask for your financial support, both from individuals as well as member churches, but we also need your support in other ways, such as attending our webinars, lectures and meetings either by Zoom or in person. We ask that you consider having an AWAB Sunday at least once a year at your church where an AWAB Staff member or Board Member could be available to attend and discuss the progress that AWAB has made. There will be other opportunities to participate coming soon as well. We need you to be an active part of the AWAB family.

Each one of us is a child of God and each deserves a place at God's table. Thank you for your support of our mission.
Let’s Celebrate Giving!

By Natalie Aho, Director of Development

A few interesting giving trends to AWAB for 2023:

- Individual gifts to AWAB now support our budget more than congregations do.
- Rainbow Circle membership is over 110—more than doubling in one year.
- All individual donor gifts came from over 170 individuals, including 90 new gifts and 36 increased gifts.

![INDIVIDUAL DONOR GIFTS](chart)

New gifts 53%
Increased gifts 21%
170+ Donors

Introducing in 2024, we have new levels of donations.

MONTHLY RAINBOW CIRCLE OPTIONS:

- **Coming Out: $10.** “Coming out is the process of self-identifying and self-acceptance that entails the sharing of their identity with others... There are many different degrees of being out, and coming out is a lifelong process.” [https://pflag.org/glossary/](https://pflag.org/glossary/)
- **Turtle: $25.** Per the Voice of the Turtle, the 1979 newspaper for American Baptists Concerned, “Behold the turtle, it makes progress only when it sticks its neck out.” James B. Conant.
- **Lavender: $50.** “The “lavender scare” was a moral panic about homosexual people in the United States government which led to their mass dismissal from government service during the mid-20th century.” [https://www.wmht.org/blogs/pride/why-lavender-represents-queer-resistance/](https://www.wmht.org/blogs/pride/why-lavender-represents-queer-resistance/)
- **Glitter: $75.** “Parity, a faith-based LGBTQ-focused organization based in NYC, says that glitter is a part of this tradition because, like love, it’s ‘irresistible and irrepressible’ and ‘never gives up.’” [https://parity.nyc/glitter-blessings](https://parity.nyc/glitter-blessings)
- **Pride: $100.** “Pride, as opposed to shame and social stigma, is the predominant outlook that bolsters most LGBT rights movements.” [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/LGBT_pride](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/LGBT_pride)

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Returning to giving trends:

- As of December 2023, we had 160 member congregations.
- Of these churches, we had 66 donations, including 16 new gifts and 9 increased gifts.
- However, our total for the year was about the same as 2022.

![Congregation Gifts Diagram]

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<th>Category</th>
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</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
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<td>24%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Increased gifts</td>
<td>14%</td>
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Combining the last 5 years, we'd like to celebrate our top giving churches that were all above the Lavender level for $5,000 or more:

- **First United Church, Bloomington, IN**
- **Watts Street Baptist Church, Durham, NC**
- **Seattle First Baptist Church, Seattle, WA**
- **Riverside Baptist Church, Washington, DC**
- **Central Baptist Church, Wayne, PA**
- **Ravensworth Baptist Church, Annandale, VA**

We also had another 13 churches that reached at least the $2,500 Turtle level, and 19 congregations that reached at least the $1,000 Coming Out level. What did your church give?

What a celebration of support for AWAB this past year!

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**AWAB IN PHOTOS**

AWAB begins conversation with Baptists in Tblisi, Georgia with Bishop Malkhaz Songulashvili
By signing up for a regular monthly donation from your credit card or bank/credit union (for as little as $10 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:

- **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 EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR, BRIAN HENDERSON

Thank you to so many of you who have sent notes, emails, and cards congratulating me as I assumed in January the role of AWAB’s full-time Executive Director. You have reminded me that the work of our organization is not the work of one individual. AWAB, since its inception, has been the collective work of people who have courageously sought for the full-inclusion of all persons within Baptist life. AWAB will continue to build today upon the course many before us prepared. I’m excited to see how AWAB will expand its ministry in the months and years ahead.

The Baptist families from whence we each come are diverse and dynamic in a multitude of ways. My prayer is for AWAB to continue to reflect our Baptist diversities.

As we enter into a travel season complete with conferences, church visits, and meetings with new friends and partners, AWAB welcomes your prayers as we do together what none of us can do on our own.

Board Members in Focus

AWAB is so fortunate to have a very active, engaged, and experienced Board. In this issue we want to highlight two of our thirteen members.

Rev. Erica Saunders (she/her/hers) currently serves as communications manager with BPFNA–Bautistas por la Paz. One of the first openly trans women ordained to ministry in Baptist life, Erica sits on the boards of the Association of Welcoming & Affirming Baptists and the Alliance of Baptists. Holding the M.Div. from Wake Forest University, she was ordained by Wake Forest Baptist Church in Winston-Salem, N.C., in 2019. Erica lives in Charlotte where she enjoys playing with her cat, Biscuit; taking leisurely walks through the woods and calling it hiking; baking for friends; and telling cheesy puns. She’s grateful for AWAB’s witness and honored to be a part of its holy work.

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Victor Crentsil (he/him/his) joined the AWAB Board in March 2023. He identifies as a Black Queer Christian dog dad who loves to love on his blood and chosen families. He is a new resident of Oakland, California and has been embraced by various communities there. He loves singing in the Oakland Gay Men’s chorus. And when he isn’t singing or hiking with his dog Benji or having fellowship with other queer Christians, he works on UCSF’s electronic healthcare system to earn a living. He previously lived in Madison, Wisconsin for almost 15 years and worshipped at First Baptist Church, an AWAB church in Madison. He also served there as a lay leader where he initially learned about AWAB’s ministry. He now worships at Oak Life Church, an affirming but non-denominational church in downtown Oakland. As a member of the board he meets (mostly virtually) with other board members to approve new members to the AWAB community, review and encourage our staff as they help share our work, and plan for the future. He’s excited to serve with such passionate and gifted people on the AWAB board and is looking forward to forging new relationships and strengthening others as we seek to make more religious spaces welcoming and affirming for LGBTQ+ folks.

AWAB IN PHOTOS

AWAB Executive Director, Brian Henderson, along with Rev. Doug Avilesbernal, Executive Minister of the Evergreen Association (ea-abc.org) visit Baptists in Puerto Rico to discuss welcoming and affirming ministry possibilities.
AWAB’S UPCOMING BOOK

Finding a Home Among Baptists: The Fifty Year History of Welcoming & Affirming Ministry in Baptist Life by C. Delane Tew. This exciting contribution to welcoming and affirming ministry in Baptist life is soon to be in your hands. The book is nearing its production stage. It’s not too late to support this project and have your name included in this work. Please visit: awab.org/50th-anniversary-book

Welcome to our New Congregations

Fellowship Baptist Church
Americus, GA

First Baptist Church
Columbia, MO

Lime Rock Baptist Church
Lincoln, RI

St. Charles Avenue Baptist Church
New Orleans, LA

Phillips Memorial Baptist Church
Cranston, RI
IN THE NEWS...

**LGBTQ students at Samford say they face harassment without protection**
[link to article](baptistnews.com/article/lgbtq-students-at-samford-say-they-face-harassment-without-protection)

**Fuller seminary senior director fired for refusal to sign non-LGBTQ affirming statement**
[link to article](religionnews.com/2024/02/02/fuller-seminary-senior-director-fired-for-refusal-to-sign-non-lgbtq-affirming-statement)

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College Park Baptist Church, Greensboro, NC ordains Meagan Holleman. Congratulations Rev. Holleman!

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**Ministry Opportunities and Jobs**

Did you know AWAB maintains a ministry opportunities/Job posting page? If you're looking for a place to serve, check this out:
[awab.org/ministry-opportunities](awab.org/ministry-opportunities)
Broadway Baptist Church, Ft. Worth, TX, launches new library program

Broadway Baptist’s LGBTQ+ Hospitality and Advocacy Group opened an LGBTQ+ inclusive section in the church library with selections for readers from young children to adults. Books/resources on LGBTQ+ stories, history, theology, etc., can be found in this new collection.

Broadway’s Hospitality and Advocacy Group Committee Chair, and AWAB Board member, Scott Green, comments, “Broadway has taken some bold steps over the years to embrace the LGBTQ+ community, and to send a very clear message that being gay and Christian are not mutually exclusive. So...we are ready to take the next step in our journey as a congregation. We have a unique opportunity...a call... a command, really, to further show that Broadway carries the transformational banner of love, inclusion, and of justice. We must always communicate that everyone is a child of God...again, worthy of love and compassion. If you look behind me you will see a poster that says: ‘In a world where you can be anything, always be kind.’ And I add: Always be love.”