

Blasted Hopes and Advent Dreams

By Mary Alice Birdwhistell
Pastor, Highland Baptist Church,
Louisville, Kentucky



Mary Alice Birdwhistell

In what would be his last Christmas Eve sermon at Ebenezer Baptist Church, on December 24, 1967, Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. shared the following words:

In 1963, on a sweltering August afternoon, we stood in Washington, D.C., and I tried to talk to the nation about a dream that I had. I must confess to you today that not long after talking about that dream, I started seeing it turn into a nightmare.

I remember the first time I saw that dream turn into a nightmare. It was when four beautiful, unoffending, innocent Black girls were murdered in a church in Birmingham, Alabama...I watched that dream turn into a nightmare as I moved through cities of the nation and saw my Black brothers and sisters perishing on a lonely island of poverty in the midst of a vast ocean of material prosperity, and saw the nation doing nothing to grapple with it.

Yes, I am personally the victim of deferred dreams, of blasted hopes. And yet, if you lose hope, somehow you lose that vitality that keeps life moving, you lose that courage that helps you to go on in spite of all. So I close today by saying, I still have a dream.^[1]

Just months after his Christmas Eve sermon, King was shot and killed in Memphis, Tennessee, where he was meeting with Black sanitation workers fighting for better working conditions and higher wages.

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It's now over 60 years later, and I wonder, do we still have a dream?

If you have your own “deferred dreams” and “blasted hopes” this Advent season, you're not alone. We had hoped for a much different outcome to the election, and these days, many of us find ourselves living in anxiety instead of hope. How do we reckon with our own grief, fear, and anger,

How do we reckon with our own grief, fear, and anger, especially during what is supposed to be “the most wonderful time of the year?”

especially during what is supposed to be “the most wonderful time of the year?” How do we hold the weight of all that we are carrying within us alongside our dreams for God's world — dreams that many days feel so far out of our reach?

One of my favorite Christmas songs is “Someday at Christmas” by Stevie Wonder. Originally released in November 1967, near the height of the Vietnam War, it was one of mainstream music's first Christmas songs with an intentionally social and political message. I have to wonder if King might have had the song playing in the background as he was writing his Christmas Eve sermon in 1967, because it beckons us to dream! The song invites us to imagine a world where “all our dreams will come to be, someday in a world where [people] are free.” It challenges us to hope beyond hope for a day, someday, when “hate will be gone and love will prevail.”

Take some time to listen to “[Someday at Christmas](#)” and to read [Dr. King's Christmas Eve Sermon](#) this Advent season. (I especially love [this 2015 version of the song](#) with Stevie Wonder and Andra Day). Stevie Wonder and Martin Luther King had every reason to give in to the weight of their blasted hopes and deferred dreams in 1967. And yet, what if their invitation to us, and ultimately the invitation of our faith, is to give ourselves the audacious permission to dream *anyway*? To hope *anyway*?

What both King and Wonder challenge us to remember is that our dreams must not be passive. Instead, they call us to imagine this “new world that we can start,” and they invite us to dream with our hands and our feet. Our dreaming, they say, must beckon us to keep taking brave next steps toward bringing God's dream to life.

I've always been struck by Luke's telling of the Christmas story, when the angels visit the shepherds in the fields, because they are emphatic that this “good news of great joy” they are bringing is for “all the people.” What an incredible dream! A world of wholeness and liberation and boundless, expansive love for all God's children!

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Yes, we are certainly the victims of deferred dreams and blasted hopes this year. And yet, what if we could garner the energy together to keep dreaming and to keep living into a bigger and better story, and a bigger and better world, for **all** people?

Because “if you lose hope, somehow you lose that vitality that keeps life moving, you lose that courage that helps you to go on in spite of all.” So, may we give ourselves permission to dream this Advent. And may we continue to work together for God’s dream to come to life among us today, and not only someday at Christmas.

^[1] Read the full sermon here: <https://onbeing.org/blog/martin-luther-kings-last-christmas-sermon>.

FROM THE EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR, BRIAN HENDERSON

Greetings, AWAB Family & Friends. This has been a challenging season filled with so much emotion. I know from my travels so many of us are feeling the weight of the US election results in a plethora of ways. There is an angst and grief that is palpable. My word of encouragement to us is to keep leaning into the feelings we are experiencing. As the journey of grief goes, we will each walk through it at different paces. Please do not compare yourself to others or compare others to yourself.



And lest I understate the weight of reality being felt and the implications for what US elections results will deliver, please know AWAB stands in solidarity with you. However much we can be supportive during this time as well as the days ahead, know AWAB stands at the ready.

For now, as you read through this issue of the *Welcoming Spirit*, I trust you sense how together, LGBTQ+ folk and allies, we can do far more than any of us can do on our own. I also trust you sense the energy of our welcoming and affirming movement as it persists even in the face of such overwhelming powers. As we recall the birth narratives and nascent accounts of the Christ child, even as minds and hearts were moved millenia ago in the face of global empires, may minds and hearts be moved yet today. Thank you as always for your part in making AWAB the growing and dynamic organization it is forever becoming.

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 \$10 per month), you can help ensure AWAB is better able to **make the Welcoming and Affirming vision a reality.**

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Thank you for your partnership!



The Beat Goes On!



At the end of this year my term as Board Chair of AWAB will come to a close. Fortunately, it's really not the end, for me, or for AWAB. I get to stick around as Board Member Emeritus to aid in any way I can as AWAB continues the important work ahead. Recent political events make the mission of this organization even more critical in ensuring equal status for all God's children in this confusing world.

My hope for progress in the future was significantly increased when the AWAB Board selected Rev. Dr. Lauren Lisa Ng to fill the Chair position at our recent annual board retreat, and she accepted! Lauren has been a long-time supporter of AWAB and an essential voice on our board for the past two years. Her wisdom and sensitivity in the area of cultural competency has had a meaningful impact on each member of our board and the way we conduct our business. Lauren's professional experience with American Baptist Home Mission Societies and Berkeley School of Theology adds insight to the challenging decisions AWAB faces in the coming days. I am grateful for Rev. Dr. Ng's willingness to lead AWAB into the future.

One thing I have learned from my involvement with various organizations in the past is that the leader can't make any significant progress occur without a willing, capable team to help make it happen. I have been blessed during my time with AWAB with exactly that team. During my tenure we increased the board size from seven to thirteen. Our present board represents the diversity we aspire to for all communities, including gay, lesbian, transgender, straight, black, white, Asian, clergy, and lay members. The common qualities in each member are: their strong belief in the mission of AWAB; their enthusiasm to accomplish the tasks necessary for progress; and their wisdom to apply to those tasks.

Leadership at AWAB does not only come from the Board of Directors, but more importantly from the office of the Executive Director, Rev. Dr. Brian Henderson. Brian creates the spark that makes the whole organization go. His energy is contagious and provides the motivation for board members, church members, financial supporters, and all who he comes in contact with, to support AWAB. His dedication to the mission of AWAB is unquestionable and vitally important as we face a challenging future together.

Working together for the past five years, we have: improved the board number and makeup; created a strategic plan and projected budget;

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created and filled the full-time Executive Director position; created and filled the full-time Director of Development position; created and filled the Communications Coordinator position; established the AWAB Annual Lectureship program; implemented the “Here We Grow” development campaign; established the monthly Rainbow Circle giving program; merged with the activities of the Affirming Network of the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship; and welcomed nearly 80 new church members including the Peace Cathedral in the country of Georgia, just to highlight some of our accomplishments.

I don’t list all these forward steps to brag, but rather to demonstrate that together we can make some progress in our never-ending fight for the full inclusion of all persons in Baptist life, and in our world. Now, more than ever, we must work, and support the work of AWAB as the rights of our friends and colleagues are being threatened every day. Many watch the news of regressive steps being proposed or enacted against our LGBTQ+ community and feel helpless regarding the things that they can do to counter those efforts. Supporting AWAB can provide a material way to

As I step back from my Board Chair position, I remain optimistic about the future of AWAB and the community we serve.

enter the battle to preserve the rights of others. If this is you, please consider a gift to our “Here We Grow” campaign.

As I step back from my Board Chair position, I remain optimistic

about the future of AWAB and the community we serve. This is not pollyanna optimism, but rather well-founded faith in the strength of our organization. With Rev. Dr. Ng and Rev. Dr. Henderson at the helm and a team of gifted, passionate board members to support them, I have every confidence that AWAB will survive and thrive during the storms ahead. That confidence is also based on you. Our team of twenty, or so, cannot do God’s work alone. They depend on the support of the thousands of you that support AWAB, not just with financial help, but with spreading the word of inclusion in your churches and in your lives. Hosting AWAB Sundays at your churches, inviting AWAB speakers to address your congregations, and making your welcoming and affirming positions known in less welcoming places, all go to further our work.

Finally, I wish to thank all of you who have supported me during my time on the board. I’m grateful for the AWAB Board Members and Staff, who have worked diligently to create new programs and make them successful, for the member churches who have maintained a welcoming and affirming spirit, sometimes in very difficult circumstances, and for all who have supported AWAB with financial gifts over these past years. I leave looking forward to continual progress in creating God’s kin-dom here on earth.



AWAB Staff wishes everyone, “Happy Holidays!” We are grateful for your support and encouragement all year long. May you and yours experience a sense of community and hope during this time of year filled with so many holy-days.





FROM INCOMING BOARD CHAIR,
REV. DR. LAUREN LISA NG

After Expectancy

One of the first things I did when I learned I was pregnant with my eldest child was run to the bookstore to get a copy of Heidi Murkoff and Sharon Mazel's seminal work for anyone preparing to welcome a baby into their lives: *What to Expect When You're Expecting*. I consumed that book word for word, page by page, desperate for any information on what was happening in my body and how I could best prepare for such a significant event in my life.

What I know now as a mother of three teenagers—one of whom is already an adult herself—is that the expectant period is over before you know it, and it is what comes after the birth that brims with the kind of mystery, twists and turns, and surprises that could never be contained within the bindings of a book.

The Association of Welcoming and Affirming Baptists, now in its fourth decade of ministry, is well past its incubation stage. With almost 200 member churches, new educational partners, and an established presence as the national voice for Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer, and Allied Baptists, AWAB is flourishing. Our mission is clear, our strategy is sound, and we are poised for continued growth and reach. We are experiencing an abundance of blessings as we proclaim the radical love of God in Jesus Christ to all people. The period of expectancy is over; we are now well into the work of being born.

As we approach the season of Advent, we posture ourselves in holy expectancy as we await the incarnate arrival of Jesus as the Savior to the world. And yet, we also know this season will go as quickly as it came, and that what lies ahead for us in 2025 is unknown. Unimaginable to us but known fully by God, our future will surely have its challenges and disappointments, but through the grace and mercy of the Light of the World, it will also be filled with uncontainable hope.

I step into the role of AWAB Board Chair this January with deep gratitude and admiration for my predecessor, Bob Sittig. Bob is a man of wisdom and integrity whose passion for justice and theological inquiry make him a driven, yet humble, leader. With his help, and that of AWAB's full board of directors and staff, I will strive to continue faithfully on from where his footsteps have so wisely led us.

I covet your partnership as well, AWAB family, as together we live into the holy work of being born, assured of the promise of hope that perseveres after expectancy.



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Thoughts from a cisgender heterosexual working for a Queer organization

By Natalie Aho, Development Director



I enter sacred space with my AWAB community in almost every engagement we have. Spirit, she opened my eyes and ears to see the pain and bravery it must take to claim all of who someone is, made in the image of God, **Imago Dei**.

And in claiming that identity, what then is sacrificed?

Not because *sacrifice* should be required for a woman to desire another woman, or for a man to love another man, or for a person born with a societal expectation to be one gender when they are another.

No, it is only we cisgender heterosexuals who require this sacrifice. It is only in trying to make some one, some experience, some identity “typical,” “normal,” or “assimilated” do we, in the majority, decide what is **required** sacrificed of others.

What we have asked of them is too much.

We have asked them to deny the claim they are wonderfully and fearfully made. We have asked them to ignore the God-given Spirit in their heart, to be outside access to the worshiping community, to be isolated or physically alone.

When every 45 seconds, a queer youth attempts suicide,
I, a cisgender heterosexual,
am on the side that made them feel
death is the only respite.

The longer I've been at this job, the more pronounced my conviction about the role an ally plays. With great humility, I am reminded every day that I should make more sacrifices for my privilege. Equity is about more than giving someone a spot at the table. It is about realizing I need to shrink my space and maybe leave altogether in order to repair the harm that my presence causes to others.

So, it is not too much to ask that I sacrifice my privilege as one of the majority to defeat discrimination. After all, when do I ever have to deny my desires or intimacy to be all the Divine has made me to be?

I long for the day, as my friend Brian Ammons says, when we do not use the word “inclusion.” Because the starting point for this concept is that a circle was drawn, and someone was outside of it. But who drew the circle to begin with?

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I did — the one with the privilege. And now I am the one claiming inclusion is needed.

“Here, let me include you inside this circle I have drawn that put you on the outside in the first place.” [pat me on the back]

But what if the space outside the circle is where God resides?

What if I am left incomplete and missing out on the Kin*dom of Heaven on earth because I am inside the circle, thinking I need to include someone there? When really, I need to leave the circle altogether to find the fullness of the love of God.

It is those of us with privilege who need to remove the circle. We need to do the work to develop a circle-free space.

Allies, our greatest work is with other non-LGBTQ+ people. Privilege can be more powerful than anything — money, partnership, family, hope, peace. We must confront those who hold tight to the circle, who redraw it over and over again, this time in permanent marker.

What does the sacrifice of our privilege look like?

For some of us, it's finances.

For some, it's friendships or family.

For some, it's a job.

Maybe it's our attention and available time.

Or our plans for the future.

Or our talking in the room or even being in the room.

For all of us cisgender heterosexual allies, the time has never been more urgent for us who have it all to give it up for the Kin*dom.

Jesus said, “Then there’s only one thing left to do: Sell everything you own and give it away to the poor. You will have riches in heaven. Then come, follow me.” This was the last thing the official expected to hear. He was very rich and became terribly sad. He was holding on tight to a lot of things and not about to let them go. Seeing his reaction, Jesus said, “Do you have any idea how difficult it is for people who have it all to enter God’s kingdom?”

Matthew 18:22-24, The Message translation

I encourage you to look through the Human Rights Campaign website for more excellent resources for allies and queer folx alike: [HRC.org/religion](https://www.hrc.org/religion). And then let us know how you're ready to sacrifice as allies. We need funders, letter-writers, pulpit declarations; we need hard conversations at the homestead meal, giving up of your TV-watching time or your travel plans.

We need you to erase the circle.

P.S. Sacrifice of our privilege applies to all our “isms” and “phobias,” and we can confront them at the same time.

Congratulations to Colgate Rochester Crozer Divinity School President Angela Sims

Colgate Rochester Crozer Divinity School (CRCDS) is privileged to announce and extend heartfelt congratulations to its President, the Rev. Angela D. Sims, Ph.D., on her recent appointment as Vice President of the American Academy of Religion (AAR).

The American Academy of Religion, the largest scholarly society dedicated to the academic study of religion, represents over 6,000 members worldwide. AAR's mission is to foster excellence in religious studies and enhance the public understanding of religion. By prioritizing academic excellence, professional responsibility, critical examination, and inclusion, AAR has grown from a community of Biblical scholars to an association supporting the academic study of all religions. While it does not operate as a faith-based organization, AAR's membership spans various religious traditions, endorsing no single belief or practice.

Dr. Sims' appointment was confirmed by ballot vote and announced on October 30, 2024. During her term, she will bring her expertise to academic and public dialogues on religion. Her commitment to justice and diversity aligns with AAR's mission, inspiring future scholars and religious leaders.

AWAB celebrates with CRCDS and congratulates Dr. Sims on this prestigious appointment. AWAB is proud to be in partnership with CRCDS.



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A sermon on Baptist freedoms— “Standing: in the gap, on justice”

**Based on Numbers 27:1-11, preached by Pastor
Ari Grubner of AWAB Member Grant Park Church,
Portland, OR**



Today, I want to share with you one of my favorite stories in the entire Bible. Like a good TV show, I think this story has a slow-burn to it that captures my attention. It's like a good piece of commentary on the realities of society and the realities of ministry. I think this story provides space to consider the different happenings around us from a different perspective. And like a good blueprint for the architecture of justice, I think that this story speaks to us, Grant Park Church, in the circumstance and the moment we find ourselves in.

This is our circumstance: as I have been warmly welcomed into a number of Baptist spaces in the last number of years, I have so distinctly come to appreciate the value of freedom. From my time learning church history at Wake Forest from Dr. Bill Leonard, the American and Baptist historian, to my time serving with the congregation and people down in Austin, Texas at First Baptist Austin, to the conversations I have had around tables and spaces with Baptist folks of all kinds... Freedom has been a very clear value.

Specifically, there are those four fragile freedoms that Baptists hold to: Soul Freedom – that each person has the freedom to decide for themselves in their relationship with God, Bible Freedom, Church Freedom – the autonomy of each congregation to organize and govern themselves, and Religious Freedom – that very important separation between Church and State that says “every person decides for themselves.”

I have come to understand you all through these lenses. I have gotten to know, through your recent history and through your long-past history, the ways in which these freedoms are painted on the walls of this church. With your Soul Freedom, your Bible Freedom, your Church Freedom,

**To welcome your
queer siblings
radically and fully
into the fold of your
community is the work
of justice, full stop.**

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and your Religious Freedom, I believe, Grant Park Church, that you have thoroughly aligned yourself with justice:

To welcome your queer siblings radically and fully into the fold of your community is the work of justice, full stop.

And none of this happens in a vacuum, of course. Throughout the history of the Church, the history of churches, local congregations, groups of folks just like us – there have been discussions and differences of opinion. What I have been drawn to so powerfully in the midst of these four Baptist freedoms is the space for diversity within all of God’s creation as we organize ourselves, yet we find company among those who do not necessarily see things exactly the same way we do. It’s with our freedoms that we organize ourselves.

What I have come to learn is... this is very Baptist! To talk about it. And this diversity, this expansiveness of experiences, this shared space is a gift. And so I want to speak to it – our circumstance.

A number of months ago, a letter was authored within our American Baptist family that – to me, a newcomer – seemed to place these Baptist values of Soul Freedom and Church Freedom significantly lower than one might expect in a Baptist letter. The contents of this letter that are helpful to name and point to today comes in one sentence:

“The practice of homosexuality is incompatible with Christian teaching.” I want to name it and talk about it.

Here is where I come in: While the word “homosexuality” was not introduced into the Bible through translations until 1946, queer people have existed in the Church the entire time.

While some believe being queer to be the actions one “practices,” others know and have known for a very long time that being queer is part of how God intentionally and beautifully weaves us together as people.

While some believe that the Church is suffering because queer people dare to exist within its walls, others believe that it is in fact the Church’s homophobia that is suffering from not standing on very stable ground.

I am one of these people. I do not believe the Church is dying, but ultimately it is the unhealthy systems of oppression that have thrived within the Church that are dying.

This is what brings us to Numbers 27.

To continue reading Ari’s sermon, [click here](#).

AWAB Board Members' Work & Legacy Recognized



AWAB Board Member **Donnie Anderson** participated in the presentation of The Rev. Dr. Donnie Anderson Compassion Award by the Rhode Island State Council of Churches to Christine King at their annual Heroes of Faith Breakfast on November 1.



Congratulations to former AWAB Board member **Robin Knauerhase** who received the Outstanding LGBT Alumni Award from the The Alumni Association of Case Western Reserve University, over the weekend of November 17.



IN MEMORIAM

Rev. Bruce Chittick

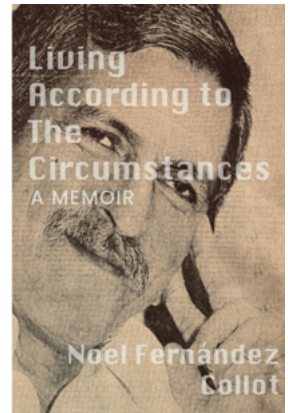
1964–2024

As AWAB honors the life and legacy of the Rev. Bruce Chittick, Past-Board Chair Rev. Dr. Jill McCrory comments, “I served with Bruce on the AWAB board many years ago. He was dedicated to our mission and spreading the word to Baptist churches that AWAB was a resource. I have lovely memories of his hosting some of us on the board at his home. There were many good evenings

when we gathered and dreamed about the future of AWAB. I’m sure Bruce was proud of all AWAB has achieved since those days.” A memorial service honoring Bruce’s life was held at his home church, Seattle First Baptist Church, on Saturday, November 16.

Living According to the Circumstances: A Memoir by Noel Fernández Collot

Cuban pastor Noel Fernandez Collot's memoir *Living According to the Circumstances* has been published in English and is available on Amazon. Rev. Fernandez is the founding pastor and now pastor emeritus of Emmanuel Baptist Church in Ciego de Avila, Cuba. Emmanuel is a member of the progressive Fraternity of Baptist Churches of Cuba. Emmanuel has been a partner church of Northminster Church in Monroe, Louisiana for thirty years. Northminster is an AWAB member congregation. In spirit and practice Emmanuel is a welcoming and affirming congregation.



The book's title is taken from the Apostle Paul's letter to the church at Philippi where he writes of living his life under the circumstances. At the time Paul was imprisoned for his faith. In his early thirties Noel became blind because of retinitis pigmentosa. Despite his disability he has lived a vibrant life dedicated to compassion and justice. That includes for many years being a leader in the Cuban Council of Churches and the World Council of Churches in the area of disability and the church's response to people with disabilities. In his life he has traveled to 50 countries, most of those visits being to champion the rights of differently-abled individuals. Noel has faced other difficult circumstances in his life. He also recounts these in the book and gives thanks for those circumstances helping to make him a more progressive and compassionate person.

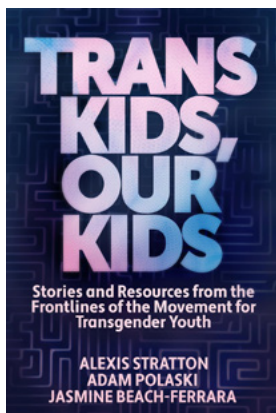
This inspiring memoir is a must read for anyone interested in Cuba, in progressive Christianity and ecumenism in Cuba and, of course, to the church's response to persons with disabilities. It challenges all of us to live our lives according to our own circumstances.

Amazon link: <https://a.co/d/j8y7Pio>

Trans Kids, Our Kids: Stories and Resources from the Frontlines of the Movement for Transgender Youth by Jasmine Beach-Ferrara, Adam Polaski, Alexis Stratton

Over the past few years, we have witnessed a growing wave of anti-LGBTQ+ bills and policies across the United States. According to the ACLU, in 2023 alone, 507 anti-LGBTQ bills were proposed in 47 states; among these, 84 have been passed into law.

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The targets of many of these legislative attacks have been the most vulnerable among us—transgender and LGBTQ+ youth. From “Don’t Say Gay” laws to healthcare restrictions, anti-LGBTQ+ policies are impacting trans and queer youth in almost every sphere of their lives, including the medical care they can access, the sports teams they can play on, what they are allowed to talk about in the classroom, and the books they are allowed to check out from the library. The results of this discrimination are often deadly, with over half of transgender and non-binary youth seriously contemplating suicide, and many others falling victim to violent hate crimes inspired by this hostile climate.

Trans Kids, Our Kids: Stories and Resources from the Frontlines of the Movement for Transgender Youth shares the stories of transgender youth and their families, exploring the choices they are making to survive in today’s environment. The book also gives voice to the medical providers who are providing care to transgender youth, as well as the activists, teachers and faith leaders who are leading the resistance efforts.

By contextualizing and sharing these stories, as well as offering resources and next steps, *Trans Kids* aims to both narrativize the pain and fear experienced by everyday Americans in this cultural moment, as well as highlighting the courage, hope, and resilience of transgender and LGBTQ+ youth, their families, and the people who support them.

Contributing author Alexis Stratton is a member of Williamsburg Baptist Church, an AWAB member congregation.

Amazon link: <https://a.co/d/hvoIQSH>



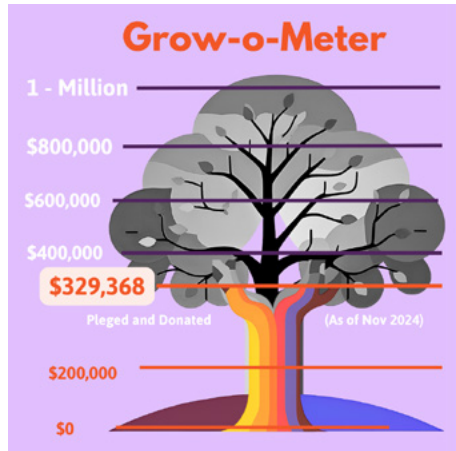
Ordination Service Celebration

AWAB congratulates the Rev. Jonathan Greer of member congregation Royal Lane Baptist Church, Dallas, Texas as he was ordained there on Saturday, November 9. Aubin Petersen, AWAB Board member, was present and brought greetings on behalf of AWAB. Rev. Greer has served on AWAB’s Annual Lectureship Committee.

Here We Grow Campaign Committee Report

By Natalie Aho, Development Director

Our 1-Million Dollar 'Here We Grow' Campaign is a significant step towards strengthening and empowering AWAB. Success allows us to build a robust and collaborative staff and an engaged board of directors, enabling us to provide high-quality LGBTQ+ resources to Baptists worldwide. We aim to become a model of inclusive love for all and demonstrate good stewardship of a ministry with agility and financial stability.



What will the \$1 million 'Here We Grow' funds allow us to do?

- Connect to Congregations
- Resource the LGBTQ+ community and allies
- Support queer ministers and those exploring a call

We've come far already in our Here We Grow campaign! A generous donor asked if we could raise matching funds up to \$25,000 in donations. If you have funds to give to AWAB, **please help us raise \$50,000 by the end of the year: [AWAB.org/support](https://www.awab.org/support).**

This year, we should be close to our annual budget needs of \$350,000. With these gifts, the staff of AWAB was able to:

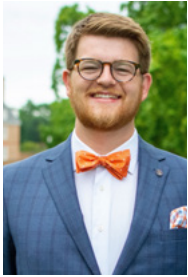
- visit 18 states, plus Washington, D.C., and Puerto Rico
- travel to 2 international locations
- attend 15 events put on by other organizations
- host an in-person Board of Directors retreat for 16 and our annual lecture
- engage with over 4,000 people in person (our best guess!).

In 2025, we'd like to make even more visits, attend more events, host a larger lecture and board retreat, and engage with even more people!

Contact me if you have any questions or creative ideas about how to make this happen (natalie@awab.org).

And if funds are not yours to give right now, we'll need you in other ways, especially in the challenging times ahead under the new administration. Watch for suggestions coming soon.

A Journey of Grace: Weddings, Love, and Unexpected Calling



By Chris West

Chris West is a baptist minister, organizer, and fundraising professional. He is a graduate of Duke Divinity, Campbell University, and the Faith-Based Nonprofit Leadership program at Wake Forest.

My call to ministry has materialized, mostly, in less traditional settings working with churches and faith-based organizations on fundraising and strategy. I do plenty of ministry but my stole normally sits in my guest closet at home.

That is to say, I rarely get invited to “normal” ministerial functions like preaching, conducting baptisms, praying at hospital bedsides, or officiating weddings. In fact, I have long been disappointed that I may never have the opportunity to officiate a wedding.

I have always loved weddings. In college, I had this quirky ritual with a close friend: whenever one of us was going through a breakup or just a

hard season, we would watch wedding videos on YouTube and have a good cry over a carton of chocolate ice cream and glass of red wine.

Weddings always bring me such joy. I love their beauty and elegance, the celebration, the mosaic of strangers united around their love and support of two people, the inevitable drama.

Weddings, to me, have always been profound. My own wedding remains the most special and wonderful day of my life. I will

never forget the feeling of being embraced by the outpouring of love and support as my person and I exchanged rings and a kiss, signifying a life of adventure to come. Weddings always bring me such joy. I love their beauty and elegance, the celebration, the mosaic of strangers united around their love and support of two people, the inevitable drama.

The theological significance of weddings is not missed on me either. Jesus' first miracle was at a wedding, where he kept the party going and restored the honor of a family by turning water into wine. In Ephesians, Paul references the unity of marriage as a symbol for Christ and his church. I have long thought that Christians are a wedding people.

“Christians are a wedding people,” my seminary professor would say. And indeed, we are—believing in the possibility of new life, the power of deep

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relationships, and the strange, transformative nature of love that draws strangers into a unified body.

Like many in the Christian community, I once held rigid views about marriage, unknowingly excluding neighbors from this celebration of joy, unity, and commitment. My interpretation of scripture was well-intentioned but ultimately narrow.

A pivotal moment came on a Thursday night in 2015. Nursing my first heartbreak, I found myself watching wedding videos with my friend. For nearly two minutes into one of the videos, I was waiting to see the groom only to realize there were two brides. My horror, that I might face something I thought might be disgusting and anti-Christian, quickly transformed into wonder and surprise. Instead of turning away, I watched—truly saw—their beautiful, sacred moment. They read scripture, shared communion, and celebrated their love. I quickly realized that what I thought to be true was misinformed and misguided.

Reflecting on theologian Stanley Hauerwas' famous quip about infant baptism—"Do I believe in it? Hell, I've seen it"—I realized my own transformation. I might not have initially believed in same-sex marriage, but I had seen its profound beauty.

A season of reading, conversations, and prayer followed. My friend and pastor, Scott Hovey, walked alongside me as I navigated this new theological terrain, and I came to know many Christians who had, like me, come to see that our God is bigger than our imagination and loves beyond our ability. Gradually, I came to understand that God is far more expansive, strange, and glorious than my limited understanding.

Without hesitation, I chose friendship and inclusivity over institutional conformity, but I wish there would have at least been a celebration.

I had become comfortable in my position, intellectually supporting same sex marriage but never thought it would actually impact me as a straight man. In 2023, this journey took an unexpected turn. I was asked to resign from a church position due to my support of marriage equality. This seemed so unfair. I hadn't even officiated a wedding, I just spoke too honestly about beliefs with the wrong person. Without hesitation, I chose friendship and inclusivity over institutional conformity, but I wish there would have at least been a celebration. I was stuck with having to live in support of the abstract idea and vocal support of real people.

Then came a moment of extraordinary grace and joy. Two of my closest friends—both women—asked me to officiate their wedding. The very

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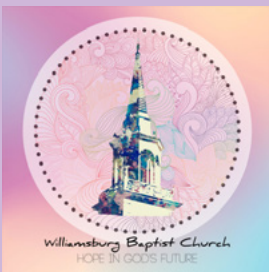
union I might have dismissed in 2015 became a sacred moment of celebration. As I stood before them, my heart simultaneously broke for my past self and rejoiced in my transformed understanding that now allowed me to see God at work in those around me.

This experience has been bittersweet. I know my actions might mark my church resume with an asterisk that closes doors and ends friendships. I have contemplated leaving the Baptist tradition entirely for a more progressive and inclusive denomination. Yet, I remain hopeful. I believe God is moving in the hearts and lives of the people who, like me, once stood blocking the church door.

In more conservative circles, one of the big questions posited in recent years has been whether non-affirming Christians should be permitted to attend same sex weddings. The argument against this typically revolves around not wanting to demonstrate support or participate in non-Christian ceremonies. The Bible commands us to test every spirit (1 John 4:1) but also reminds us not to be anxious (Phillipians 4:6), not to get caught up in the rules that no longer apply (Romans 6:15, Galatians 3), and that those who are not against us are for us (Mark 9:38-41). The Spirit moved in my life when I saw a same-sex wedding and I know others had the same feeling last weekend.

I have found comfort in the story of the Apostle Paul who went from persecuting those who follow Jesus into his message to the Gentiles. Paul invited people like us to a table where we are no longer bound by our previous titles, inherited social identities, or allegiances, but we are all free to boast a new life in Christ.

My prayer is that soon, all people—regardless of sexuality or gender identity—will find not just acceptance, but true belonging in our congregations. I pray that all of our neighbors might find a home in the pews of the church just as they do in the arms of our loving God.



Check out this Podcast with Pastor Art Wright of Williamsburg Baptist Church & AWAB Executive Director Brian Henderson

This hour-long conversation covers a range of topics, including the history, present, and future of AWAB, and the biblical "clobber texts" often used to disenfranchise LGBTQ+ persons. Check it out at bit.ly/wbc-awab.

AWAB WELCOMES 5 NEW CHURCHES & AN EDUCATION PARTNER



Highland Baptist Church
Louisville, KY



Sophia Theological Seminary
Dinwiddie, VA



Harbor Online Community



Emmanuel Baptist Fellowship
Columbia, SC



First Baptist Church
Austin, TX



Kathwood Baptist Church
Columbia, SC



AWAB supports a Canadian Baptist church and association who ordained two ministers from the United Kingdom on October 27 because they could not be ordained in the Baptist Union of Great Britain. To learn more about this story, visit: bit.ly/canada-awab

AWAB VISITS MANY PLACES AND PEOPLE THIS FALL...



AWAB Communications Coordinator James Rice III participated in the Together for Hope Annual Conference

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AWAB was recognized as a sponsor for the Common Good Forum hosted by member congregation, Pine Street Church, Boulder, CO



AWAB Executive Director Brian Henderson and Board Member Erica Saunders visited with our Canadian Baptist siblings

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ED Brian Henderson visiting AWAB's home "office" at Crescent Hill Baptist Church, Louisville, KY, with Pastor Jordan Conley and AWAB's Administrative Coordinator, Janet Cole



Executive Director Brian Henderson preached at Riverside Church at Park & King in Jacksonville, FL



AWAB was had an exhibit table at the Evergreen Association Annual Gathering. ED Brian Henderson seen here with Revs. Anne Scalfaro and Scott Pegues

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ED Brian Henderson with Executive Minister Doug Avilesbernal and members of Mesa Abierta, San Juan, Puerto Rico



ED Brian Henderson participated in the 150th Anniversary Celebrations of Berean Baptist Church, Harrisville, RI, seen here with Pastor Darin Collins (r) and Worship Leader Aaron Coutu-Jones

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ED Brian Henderson visited and preached at services for Crosswalk Community Church in Napa, CA — seen here with Pastor Pete Shaw and Worship Leader Anne Waggoner