

The Welcoming Spirit

February  2026

Queer  Baptist  Relevant

The Power of the "Whosoever:"

Why I Am Energized for St. Luke in 2026

By Rev. Dr. Clifford Matthews, Jr.



*Rev. Dr. Clifford Matthews, Jr. and his congregation at AWAB Member Church
St. Luke Missionary Baptist Church*

***Lift him up, lift him up, till he speaks from eternity;
And I, if I be lifted up from the earth, I'll draw all people unto me.***

As we navigate the opening months of 2026, it is easy to feel the heavy weight of the world pressing in on us. Locally, statewide, and as a nation, we are living through a season of profound challenge and visible friction. We find ourselves constantly bombarded with words and images specifically designed to overwhelm our senses and discourage our spirits. If we aren't careful, we fall into a trap of perpetual "reaction"—exhausting our spiritual and emotional energy responding to the latest round of lunacy emanating from the highest offices in the land, or the divisive rhetoric of some "wannabe" significant white supremacist who has been fortunate enough to secure a microphone.

I am told that this strategy—"flooding the zone" with chaos and nonsense—is a primary tool of authoritarianism. The goal is to create a vacuum of exhaustion and frustration. By drowning out truth with sheer volume, the strategist hopes that good people will simply retreat, leaving a void that can then be filled by those who seek only power. It is a strategy of endurance, intended to wear us down until we no longer have the will to stand.

Yet, as I look at the life and mission of St. Luke Missionary Baptist Church, I don't feel the discouragement that this world expects of me. In fact, I am more energized than I have been in decades. Why? Because I believe these very challenges have created a unique, divine opportunity for our church to be exactly what the world is crying out for right now.

A Sanctuary from the Storm

The constant bombardment of the modern age is driving people to seek something they can no longer find in the "crowded airwaves" of our day: a sense of belonging and a place of true safety. People are weary. They are searching for a community that communicates, repeatedly and without reservation, that they matter—not because of their utility or their politics, but because of their humanity.

Last year, St. Luke experienced some of its most significant growth in twenty years. This growth isn't a coincidence or the result of a clever marketing campaign. It is happening because we have leaned unapologetically into our identity as a "Whosoever Church."

Proclaiming the Radical Love of God

In a world that seeks to categorize, exclude, and diminish, we are proclaiming a truth that has become radical simply because it is so rarely heard: God loves everybody, no matter who you are and who you love. One need not claim that God is the author of our current political or social reality, but we must be clear: if we are careful and prayerful, we can take advantage of the opportunity this moment provides. This is not the time for the church to shrink back or speak in whispers.

This is the time for us to say it loud and proud, with stiff backs and heads held high, that the grace of God is not a restricted club. This message is nothing less than the spirit of Jesus, who is still very much at work in our world.

The Draw of the Up-Lifted Christ

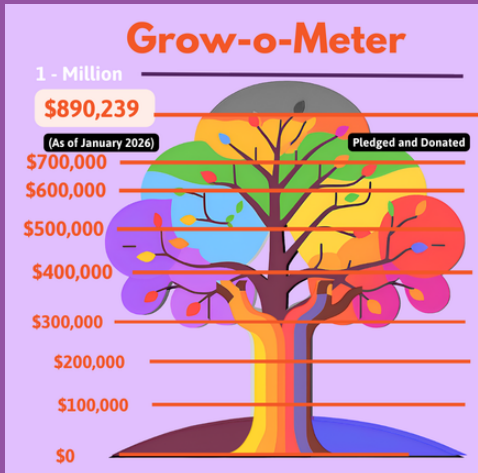
The hymn* reminds us: *Lift him up, lift him up, till he speaks from eternity; And I, if I be lifted up from the earth, I'll draw all people unto me.* When we lift up the message of a God whose love is wider than any human boundary, people are naturally drawn to that light. They are drawn away from the vacuum of discouragement and into the warmth of a community that affirms their worth.

As we move forward into 2026, let us not be distracted by the noise. Instead, let us be energized by the chance to offer a counter-narrative of hope. At St. Luke, our message is clear: Whosoever will, let them come.

#AWhoSoEverChurch #StLukeProud

*Hymn Citation: “Lift Him Up,” words and music by Johnson Oatman, Jr. and Benjamin B. Beall (1903)

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(As of January 2026)

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\$600,000

\$500,000

\$400,000

\$300,000


\$200,000

\$100,000

\$0

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.

As of January 27, 2026, we have already received funds or pledges totaling **\$890,239!**





The Welcoming Spirit is a publication of the Association of Welcoming and Affirming Baptists. Its contents do not necessarily reflect the views or opinions of the Association unless explicitly stated. To submit an article for consideration, please contact our Executive Director, Brian Henderson, at Brian@awab.org. or visit our website www.awab.org/newsletter for more information.

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Desk & Chair

Perspective from the Desk of our Board Chair



Lauren Ng
Chair of the
Board of Directors

“All Belong Here”

I don’t know about you, but these last several weeks I have struggled to say the words, “Happy New Year.” If I remind myself that the word happy is meant to be aspirational instead of descriptive, I can get there. Still, with everything going on in our world, it sits more uneasily with my spirit than it has in the past.

And yet, the new year always brings with it an energy. As I breathe in brisk wintery air and set plans and intentions for what is to come in 2026, I feel a sense of resolve to do and be more of what Jesus asks of me. More love. More compassion. More proximity. More generosity. More courage. More hope.

In a society that continues to “other” and exclude—even criminalize difference—God calls us to cultivate sacred spaces that foster welcome and belonging. AWAB keeps this vision alive day after day, season after season with our dedication to creating and supporting a beloved community of churches, organizations, and individuals committed to the full inclusion of LGBTQ+ persons in Baptist life. In the words of one of my favorite songs by the worship collective The Many: “Come and remember who you are here. Do this to remember who I am. Come and remember you belong here. All belong here.”

In this new year we are giving thanks for your generosity and for the provision of our Lord. We give thanks for past, present and new members of our Board of Directors as we work with staff to chart a promising path forward with fresh momentum. And we continue to set an ever-expanding table for each of you and those you serve, joyfully declaring that all belong here because of the radical and boundless love of Jesus Christ.

The Executive Summary

Views & Inspiration from our Executive Director



Brian Henderson
Executive Director

“Courage, Together”

As we begin this new year, so much of what many of us are facing feels overwhelming. Our LGBTQ+ community—along with so many across our country—are living with deep anxiety and real fear due to the actions of the current administration in Washington, DC. Quite literally, lives are at stake.

And yet, even in this moment, AWAB is profoundly grateful. We are grateful for the witness and testimony of our member churches and friends as we engage together in mission and ministry.

Last fall, I attended an event where AWAB friend and 2025 CBF General Assembly keynoter Paul Raushenbush was speaking. Before the program began, I asked him, “How do we keep facing all that we are facing, Paul?” He answered simply, “Brian, we keep celebrating the courage so many people are displaying these days.”

I believe Paul is right.

I have found hope and renewed energy as I bear witness to the courage people are living with in this season. I see it in my trans siblings, who—despite relentless legislative attacks—continue to live their truth with boldness and strength. I saw it firsthand in Minneapolis, where communities were fortified by collective courage. I experienced it recently over dinner with neighbors who are physicians studying in the U.S. on F-1 visas, bravely pursuing their calling even as their ability to remain here is uncertain. And I see it in AWAB congregation, First Baptist Church of Springfield, Ohio, standing courageously alongside its Haitian members who may face deportation by the time you read these words.

Courage is what we need now. Courage to speak truth to power. Courage to march and protest. Courage to challenge legislators and local officials. Courage to imagine being—and doing—church differently than we ever have before.

Each week, I find courage in you—our AWAB family—stretching across the United States, Canada, the Caribbean, Africa, and Europe. Thank you. May we continue to be courageous together, doing together what none of us can do on our own.

As you read through this issue of *The Welcoming Spirit*, I trust that you will bear witness to courage in many forms. May the stories you encounter here offer you the energy and resolve you need to keep on keeping on—grounded in hope, strengthened by community, and reminded that none of us walk this road alone.



Join today to keep awab here tomorrow!

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Member Benefits Include:

- Special Quarterly Communications
- Free or discounted access to all AWAB events
- Special recognition in our newsletter and website

SCAN ME!



Ministry at the State Capitol

by Rev. Justin Sizemore



Rev. Justin Sizemore

Back in September of 2025, I became one half of the Co-Pastor team at First Baptist Church on St. Clair in Frankfort, Kentucky. FBC on St. Clair recently joined AWAB and I am so excited to continue working alongside the great work and ministry that AWAB is doing.

Frankfort is the state capital for Kentucky and is the heart of where all the laws and political life of the state happen. Prior to coming to Frankfort, I found myself going and speaking with lawmakers and protesting laws that would seek to harm our LGBTQIA+ siblings. Because Kentucky is a mostly red state, each legislative session usually involves those of us that are welcoming and affirming holding our breath and seeing if the General Assembly will do something to harm vulnerable communities again.

This year, sadly, has already proven to be no different. Already there are bills being reviewed by our state government that would make drag shows illegal, put more restrictions on our trans siblings, and bills that say only naturalized citizens can run for office at the state and local government level.

There will be many protest days coming up, I am sure.

One of the new opportunities I have serving as Co-Pastor at FBC on St. Clair is being asked to participate in the opening prayers for the state Senate. On Thursday, Jan 22nd, I stood before the Kentucky Senate chambers and offered a prayer for justice, love, and kindness. Here is an excerpt from that prayer:

You have called us to justice. I pray that the lawmakers in this room would see and understand the immense responsibility they have: to work for justice for ALL in this Commonwealth.

I pray, O God, that they would make laws that help the poor and those in need. That they would make laws to feed the hungry, heal the sick, and make sure ALL folks have access to medical care. That they would consider all their siblings...their LGBTQIA+ siblings, their brown and black siblings, their trans siblings...and Lord, I pray that they would work to welcome the stranger, especially our immigrant siblings, that make this Commonwealth and country great.

I hope the spirit continues to move over that elected body. I hope they choose love over war. I hope they choose justice over injustice. I hope they choose humanity over inhumanity. Time will tell as this General Assembly continues. I hope for peace. I hope that our LGBTQIA+ siblings will stop being scapegoated. I hope our Commonwealth will be a place of justice, love, and humility.

AWAB is grateful for the witness and commitment to justice for all to which Revs. Justin Sizemore and Amanda Smith remain committed. Their courage provides encouragement for us all. To read more about their ministry, check out the news story about First Baptist Church on St. Clair in the news section of this TWS.

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Cleveland, Ohio

Presented By:
awab Association of Welcoming & Affirming Baptists
Peace Community Church
OPEN AFFIRMING FELLOWSHIP

AWAB Celebrates with the Philadelphia Baptist Association on the calling of its new Executive Minister, Rev. Dr. Quintin Robertson



Rev. Dr. Quintin Robertson

After an exhaustive nationwide search, the Board of Directors of the Philadelphia Baptist Association (PBA) announced the appointment of Rev. Dr. Q. Robertson as the next Regional Executive Minister of the region. This decision comes following the formal affirmation of the Search Committee’s recommendation, which was approved by the Board after careful consideration and prayerful deliberation. Dr. Robertson began this role on January 2.

Rev. Dr. Q. Robertson brings to this role a wealth of experience in ministry leadership, a deep commitment to pastoral support, and a vision for unity and growth within the diverse community of PBA’s member churches. His appointment marks a significant step forward in continuing the Association’s legacy of faith, service, and advocacy.

“For more than 300 years, the Philadelphia Baptist Association has served as a foundational pillar for Baptist churches in the region. We are confident that Dr. Robertson's leadership will build upon this rich legacy, strengthen our collective witness, and support our churches in navigating both spiritual and social challenges,” said the Board in a joint statement.

“We give thanks to God for the faithful work of the search committee and for the Holy Spirit’s guidance throughout this process, leading to the call of Rev. Dr. Quintin Robertson as the next Executive Minister of PBA. His years of dedicated service to the local church—especially in Philadelphia—have shaped and prepared him for this moment. His warm and gracious

spirit, which has endeared him to so many, will surely be a steady and life-giving presence as he walks alongside our clergy, congregations, and communities. Let us hold him in our prayers as he enters this new season of ministry, trusting that God will grant him wisdom, strength, and joy for the journey ahead,” said Rev. Dr. Gina C. Jacobs-Strain, General Secretary of American Baptist Churches USA.

AWAB Executive Director, Brian Henderson, adds, “With great joy, AWAB celebrates this new role for Dr. Robertson. Known by many as Pastor Q, I am confident Dr. Robertson will continue in PBA’s tradition of making space for all to engage in ministry and mission. Pastor Q’s heart and commitment to welcoming and affirming ministry will provide ongoing vision and energy for this historic Baptist association, as well as for the larger Baptist landscape.”

LIBERATING THE LECTIONARY:
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Book Review: Finding A Home Among Baptists

**Reviewed by Rev. Art Wright, PhD,
Pastor, Williamsburg Baptist Church, Williamsburg, VA**



With *Finding a Home Among Baptists*, C. Delane Tew has written an outstanding history of the welcoming and affirming movement within Baptist life in America. Beginning in the 1950s, she traces the development of ABConcerned and later the Association of Welcoming & Affirming Baptists (AWAB) within the context of the larger movement toward LGBTQ+ rights within the United States. Organized roughly by decade, the book is easy to follow and a pleasure to read as it chronicles progress, setbacks, conflict and opposition, and courageous acts of public witness. It is inspiring, at times heartbreaking, and always compelling as it tells this important story.

Tew's book lifts up the courage of individuals who risked careers to come out publicly, churches that took heroic action during the AIDS crisis of the 1980s, upstart organizations who dared to be present even when not welcomed, and congregations that joined AWAB at the risk of expulsion from their denomination. At the same time, she shares the growth and vitality experienced by many welcoming and affirming congregations even in the face of opposition. Throughout, she highlights the persistence of queer joy and the courage of allies who boldly proclaim God's love and wide welcome for all people.

For those who have only come recently to this movement, this is an especially important read, as we continue to see the fruit borne by those who have worked for decades to find acceptance and belonging. The book acknowledges how much progress has been made, but at the same time hints at the work yet to be done. In this regard, the book becomes an invitation to readers. As Barbra MacNair wrote in 1987 in the *Voice of the Turtle* newsletter, “Those of us who have been doing this work since the early 1970s are getting tired. We need your support.” (p. 50). The newsletter’s title evokes a quote by James B. Conant, “Behold the turtle: he makes progress only when he sticks his neck out.” (p. 19). Taken together, these themes run throughout the book and offer an implicit and perhaps urgent question to readers: are you also willing to risk something to engage in this vital and life-giving work?

This book deserves a wide readership, certainly among welcoming and affirming Baptist clergy and churches, but also well beyond them. It will be a valuable resource for denominational leaders, seminary classrooms, affirming pastors serving in non-affirming congregations, and congregations which are currently “welcoming” but not yet fully “affirming.” May all who read it be inspired to add our own energy, courage, persistence, and faithful witness to this ongoing story of God’s movement of love and acceptance in the world.



And the Dragons Do Come:

Raising a Transgender Kid in Rural America

Written by Sim Butler

A gripping account of one family’s battle to protect their daughter against transphobia and hate in contemporary America

Our country stands at a critical cultural crossroads, with a wave of anti-trans legislation emerging at unprecedented levels,

targeting trans children, in particular, who face increasing stigmatization and erasure. Sim Butler's *And the Dragons Do Come* is a poignant account of one family's experience of parenting and supporting a trans child against this nightmarish backdrop.

In recent years, the Butler family faced an impossible reality in their home state of Alabama, where trans rights are increasingly under attack. Butler recounts their family's struggles and sacrifices to protect their trans child against the barrage of state-sanctioned intolerance in the legal, educational, and health arenas.

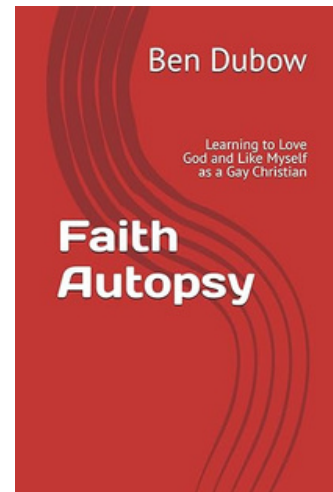
Around the time she turned twelve, his daughter's personal struggles became political fodder. Along with other trans kids, she was outlawed from playing sports and forbidden to use the girls' bathroom. Another law made Butler and his wife felons for seeking trans-affirming health care for her. When her charter school was featured in several gubernatorial campaign ads, local community members began driving through the parking lot to yell at the trans kids.

Serving both as a compassionate story of one family's struggle for acceptance and as a window onto a fraught issue that parents, grandparents, other family members, and friends are confronting across the nation, *And the Dragons Do Come* provides a firsthand perspective on the human cost of anti-trans sentiment.

Sim Butler is a proud father, husband, and communication scholar from Alabama, all of which converge around his family's fight for rights in the state his family has called home for generations. Navigating the social, political, and cultural bedrock of the deep south while advocating for healthcare, safe schools, and legal rights for his transgender daughter, Sim reflects on the journey to nurture, protect, and prepare his child for the world in which we live. It is a world built on community, but also one plagued with dragons. *And the Dragons Do Come* functions as both a memoir of the Butler family's struggles and triumphs but also an auto-ethnographic research project meant to highlight a particular moment in American history within the context of anti-trans sentiment.

Faith Autopsy **Learning to Love God and** **Like Myself as a Gay Christian**

Written by AWAB pastor, Rev. Ben Dubow,
Riverfront Family Church, Hartford, CT



Can you be gay and take the Bible seriously?
Yes—and here’s how.

AWAB pastor, speaker, and writer Ben Dubow invites readers into a clear, honest, and deeply pastoral exploration of Scripture, theology, and lived experience. Part memoir, part field guide, *Faith Autopsy* walks through the seven “clobber passages” with responsible hermeneutics—and then builds the robust, positive Christian ethic LGBTQ+ disciples deserve.

Drawing on real stories, Ben models orthopraxy that bears good fruit. You’ll learn the tools to read well—context, genre, audience, universal vs. occasional commands, and the “Two Fruit Tests” (Jesus’ tree-and-fruit and Paul’s fruit of the Spirit); and you’ll see them applied to Genesis 19, Leviticus 18–20, 1 Corinthians 6, 1 Timothy 1, Romans 1–2, and Jude 7. Then the book turns from defense to construction: Genesis 1–2/Matthew 19 as covenantal kinship, the inclusion arc with eunuchs (Isaiah 56; Acts 8), a one-standard sexual ethic (covenant, consent, honesty, non-exploitation), a chapter for transgender Christians, and practices of an affirming church that are as safe as they are welcoming.





In recent weeks, national religion news outlets have featured stories that reflect the broader landscape AWAB is working within—where faith, public policy, and human dignity intersect.

Below are five recent articles that illustrate this moment and AWAB’s continued engagement within it.

1. Kentucky Church Declines FEMA Aid Over Federal Requirements

In reporting by Baptist News Global, a Kentucky church refused FEMA disaster assistance rather than comply with federal nondiscrimination requirements. AWAB Executive Director Brian Henderson emphasized that religious freedom does not justify exclusion, particularly when public funds are involved. [Read Full Story](#)

2. Public Conversation Explores Faith, Power, and Resistance

A widely shared public conversation examined how religious language is used in moments of social and political conflict, including to justify exclusion. The themes closely mirror AWAB’s ongoing call for Christian leaders to challenge harmful theology and offer a more just, courageous public witness. [Watch Full Video](#)

3. Churches Organize to Support Haitian Immigrants Facing Deportation

Coverage from Religion News Service highlighted how churches in Springfield are organizing to support Haitian immigrants facing deportation. AWAB was referenced for its longstanding advocacy for faith-based justice, affirming accompaniment and protection as core expressions of radical welcome. [Read Full Story](#)

4. Southern Baptist Leader Pushes to Overturn Marriage Equality

Baptist News Global reported on Southern Baptist leader Albert Mohler advancing a renewed effort to overturn *Obergefell v. Hodges*. AWAB responded by reaffirming that marriage equality remains vulnerable and that LGBTQ+ people are created in the image of God and deserving of full inclusion. [Read Full Story](#)

5. Anti-ICE Church Sign Draws National Attention

In reporting by Baptist News Global, a church faced public backlash after displaying a sign critical of ICE and U.S. immigration enforcement. The article includes perspective from AWAB leadership, lifting up the theological grounding behind public advocacy for immigrant dignity. [Read Full Story](#)



**By vote of the Board of Directors
We welcome the following church into our association:**



Holmeswood Church
Kansas City, MO



**By recent vote, AWAB welcomes Rev. Dr. Ken Meyers
to the AWAB Board of Directors**



Coming with vast experience in Baptist congregational ministry, the Rev. Dr. Kenneth Meyers also brings to AWAB a personal family story. Ken's brother, Greg, was a gay man. His life and tragic death brought Ken to a co-conspirator position for the LGBTQ+ community. Professionally, Ken served four churches over forty years. His focus centered around faith maturation that leads to a volitional impetus for actionable ministry. He studied at Southern Seminary (MA), Wesley Seminary (MDiv & DMin) and did two extended sabbaticals at Oxford University in the United

Kingdom. At retirement, he served part-time on staff with the Alliance of Baptists for a few years and then as Pastor of Riverside Church at Park and King in Jacksonville, Florida. Ken is married to the indomitable and terrific New Zealander, Adrienne Meyers. They have three adult children and two grandchildren.

awab Member Spotlight



Check out what's been happening around the association



In late November, AWAB Executive Director Brian Henderson, visited St. Charles Avenue Baptist Church in New Orleans, LA!



AWAB had a booth at the Q Christian Fellowship Conference in Portland, OR. Here is a team of members from AWAB member, Riverside Church, New York, NY.



During the week of January 19, Baptists joined Minnesota communities in Minneapolis in non-violent, direct action protests, protesting the ICE presence in the Twin Cities. Here are AWAB friends gathered one evening for dinner.



During the events in Minneapolis, AWAB friend Paul Raushenbush visited Judson Memorial Baptist Church and was invited to autograph one of Judson's door frames. (If you look closely, Paul added a prayer after his signature, rooted in the Social Gospel movement, "Thy Kingdom Come." May it be so.)

Write for *The Welcoming Spirit*



AWAB is seeking a broader range of writers—people with diverse identities, backgrounds, and experiences—who can speak to the many ways LGBTQ+ affirmation and Baptist faithfulness intersect in our communities. We are especially eager to welcome voices we have not heard enough from: writers of color, women and femme-identifying writers, trans and nonbinary writers, young adults, rural and small-church voices, and those whose stories broaden and enrich the movement we are building together.

Whether you have written for years or are hoping to contribute for the first time, your voice is welcome here.

To pitch an idea or express interest in writing for a future edition, please email: James Rice III, Communications Coordinator — James@awab.org.



A special publication uplifting trans-identified members of AWAB Member Churches

Call for Submissions Coming Soon!

Email James at James@AWAB.org
if you are interested in being a part of this year's publication.