

The Welcoming Spirit

April



2026

Queer ✿ Baptist ✿ Relevant

Resurrection on the Dance Floor

How joy, movement, and beloved community become acts of holy resistance



Rev. Jordan Conley

**Jordan Conley, Pastor of Celebration Church,
Ft Worth, TX and AWAB Board of Directors**

A few weeks ago, on Valentine’s Day, my husband and I found ourselves on the dance floor with our new congregation in Fort Worth, Texas. Our church is a vibrant, fun-loving community that primarily serves LGBTQ+ folks, and that night our fellowship hall had been transformed into a dance hall. For a church literally named Celebration, we were truly dancing out our identity – Texas-two-stepping boots and all!

As we danced the night away, I began to see our Valentine’s Dance as much more than a church social event, as important as those can be. I began to see our dancing as a sign of rebellion, a reclaiming of life in a state and in a country that is increasingly trying to put the LGBTQ+ community back in the closet, pushing us even further out on the margins.

Many of us on the dance floor that night never had the chance to attend dances as our full selves. In our formative years, many of us were busy attending to the exhausting and dehumanizing work of hiding our true selves. Being someone else meant staying away from those kinds of dances, or going with a friend to cover for us, or making the excuse of going solo “just to be social.” As a closeted gay kid with a non-dancing Baptist background, the thought of going to the Prom or other dances was enough to make me want to hurl.

The shame of showing the world who we really were led so many in our community into a closeted, secretive kind of existence that God never intended or desired for anyone.



As Michael Bronski, Harvard Professor in the Studies of Women, Gender, and Sexuality writes, “Shame...is a first-rate form of social control. Shame is what keeps us in line, what prevents us from discovering not so much who we are, but what we might become.” Our community has carried the burden of shame for generations, and the story of shame is a story as old as the scriptures themselves.

In the Garden of Eden, the Bible says that after Adam and Eve ate of the fruit, they “knew they were naked” and they sewed fig leaves together. The scripture says that when they heard the sound of God walking through the garden in the cool of the evening breeze, they didn’t run toward God – they hid. Shame had caused them to cover their bodies, and then shame caused them to retreat from the presence of God altogether.

And isn’t that what shame always does? It tells us to be a little less vulnerable, a little more guarded. It tells us to hide to survive. So, Adam and Eve hid themselves from the presence of God.

But when God comes walking through the garden, God does not shame them. God simply calls out, “Where are you?” Then, when God finds them, God clothes them. God feeds them. And as they leave the garden and head out into a wild and uncertain world, God goes with them — ready to journey with them into the unknown.

That Valentine’s night, as we two-stepped and laughed and tried to keep up with the Macarena, something beautiful was happening. Where shame had once pushed us into hiding, bodies were now moving freely across a dance floor...in church, no less! In a time when our country continues to debate the dignity and belonging of our LGBTQ+ community, that dance floor became much more than a party. It became a place of resurrected life. We were leaving shame behind. We were giving one another permission to live more fully into our beloved-ness as children of God.

That night, resurrection looked like dancing among those who were once hiding. It looked like joy among those who once wept. And in our rhythm, it felt as though the hymn had become embodied within us,

Dance, then, wherever you may be, I am the Lord of the dance, said he,
And I'll lead you all, wherever you may be,
And I'll lead you all in the dance, said he.”

The One who comes looking for us in our shame invites us to gather on the dance floor.



AWAB has joined Instagram!

Follow us at

@AffirmingBaptist

AWAB Launches Holy Week Directory 2026

AWAB's Holy Week Directory is now live, connecting people with welcoming and affirming Baptist churches for Holy Week and Easter worship. Now in its third year, the directory helps those returning to church, exploring faith, or searching for a community where they and their loved ones will be fully welcomed and included.



As our Communications Coordinator, James Rice III, shares, “We know this season often leads people to reconnect with church, sometimes for the first time in a long time. Our hope is that when they go searching for a welcoming and affirming church for themselves, their family, or their kids, they find one of the churches in our movement.” We invite you to explore the directory at www.awab.org/holyweek.



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

“Daily Resurrection”

As we move into this sacred season of Easter, I find myself reflecting on what resurrection means for us as a community of Welcoming and Affirming Baptists. Easter is, at its heart, a story of renewal — of life breaking forth where once there was despair. For our AWAB family, this truth reminds us why we labor faithfully for inclusion, justice, and hope across the Baptist landscape and beyond.

In a world so often shadowed by fear and division AWAB continues to live out a resurrection faith — one that insists every person, every congregation, and every act of love can be part of God’s redemptive story. This Easter, may we remember that resurrection doesn’t just happen once; it unfolds daily each time we choose compassion over comfort, courage over silence, and welcome over exclusion.

While we suffer daily deaths, we also find hope in daily resurrections. Romans 6:5 says, “For if we have been united with him in a death like his, we will certainly be united with him in a resurrection like his.” Even in the darkest, coldest, and driest tombs, life takes root. Like God breathing life into dry bones, death becomes the locus for hope and resurrection.

I’ve seen resurrection in our churches embracing those who once thought there was no spiritual home for them. I’ve felt it in the conversations where people listen deeply to stories different from their own. And I’ve witnessed it in our collective commitment to be Christ’s hands and feet in a time that so desperately needs both.

A “Welcoming Spirit” Bi-Monthly Column

Resurrection is happening every day, before us and within us. My prayer for all of us this Easter is that we carry forward the light of this daily resurrection – not as a symbol of triumph alone but transformation. May this season renew your hope, strengthen your compassion, and remind you that love, truly, has the final word.



Join today to keep awab here tomorrow!

For as low as \$10 a month



You can help ensure AWAB is better able to make our welcoming and affirming vision a reality.

Member Benefits Include:

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

SCAN ME!



The Executive Summary

Views & Inspiration from our Executive Director



Brian Henderson
Executive Director

“Still Standing: Resurrection Power for a Time Like This”

In this season of Easter, we proclaim a truth that sits at the very heart of our faith: love cannot be buried.

The story of resurrection is not only about what God has done — it is about what God continues to do through us. It is about the power that rises when people refuse to give up on one another, when communities choose courage over fear, and when love insists on having the final word.

So far this year, I have witnessed that resurrection power in profound and personal ways.

I saw it in Minneapolis, in the midst of an ICE occupation, where faith leaders and communities stood together, refusing to let fear and injustice have the final say. I experienced it through gatherings like the Interfaith Peace Summit and the Together for Democracy Conference, where people of conscience came together to organize, to encourage, and to act. I saw it at Perkins School of Theology’s Baptist House of Studies, at Grant Park Church’s 100th Anniversary celebration, and in the countless emails, phone calls, and conversations with our AWAB community from literally around the world.

Again and again, I have seen what happens when we stand together.

I have also witnessed this same power in the collective efforts of AWAB’s staff and Board of Directors — people who are deeply committed to our shared mission of welcome, affirmation, and justice. Their work is not always visible, but it is essential. It is steady. It is faithful. And it is making a difference.

And still, we know: this is not an easy time.

We must keep standing together.

We must stand with our trans siblings, especially as there are forces within our current administration that seem intent on erasing their dignity and denying their full humanity. We must continue to stand with our immigrant siblings, who are experiencing profound harm under the weight of unjust policies and practices. We must stand with our broader LGBTQ+ community when leadership at institutions like Baylor University appears to offer greater affirmation to far-right organizations like Turning Point USA than to those who embody a gospel of inclusion.

We cannot stop standing together.

If we are honest, many of us wish there was a way to fix all of this overnight — a way to wave a wand and make the world as it should be for those we love and for whom we care. But that is not the reality we inhabit. And so, our work continues.

This may sound dramatic, but it is also true: lives are at stake.

As we revisit the passion and resurrection narratives this season, I find myself wondering about those earliest followers of Jesus. What did they fear? What did they risk? Did they worry about being erased, misunderstood, or dismissed? Did they feel pressure to hide — to shrink themselves, to stay quiet, to remain in the shadows?

And yet, the story does not end in hiding.

The tomb could not hold love. The stone could not contain it. Death itself could not silence it.

In many ways, that tomb was its own kind of closet — a hewn-out space meant to confine, to conceal, to end the story. But resurrection reminds us that love refuses confinement. It breaks through barriers. It emerges, alive and uncontainable, in the lives of those who dare to live truthfully and courageously.

A “Welcoming Spirit” Bi-Monthly Column

This is the power we are invited to embody.

The courage I see in AWAB congregations and individuals every day — the courage to speak, to resist, to affirm, to love boldly — continues to resurrect in me a deep desire to keep going. To keep standing. To keep protesting. To keep working so that our churches and institutions reflect the expansive, liberating love of Christ.

And I trust that same courage is alive in you.

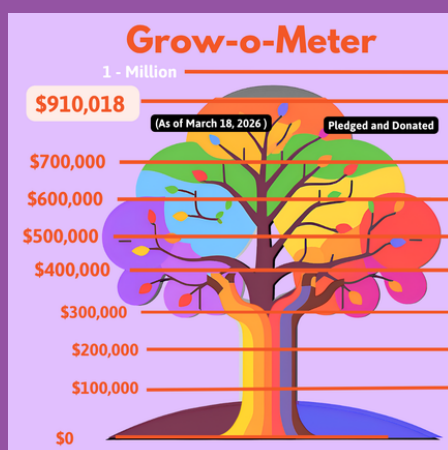
Even as you read this issue of The Welcoming Spirit, I hope you can feel it — that quiet but persistent strength that reminds us we are not alone, that our work matters, and that love is still rising.

Thank you for your ongoing support, your courage, and your care.

AWAB stands with you. And together, we will keep standing. Thanks be to God.



We've Almost Made 1 Million!

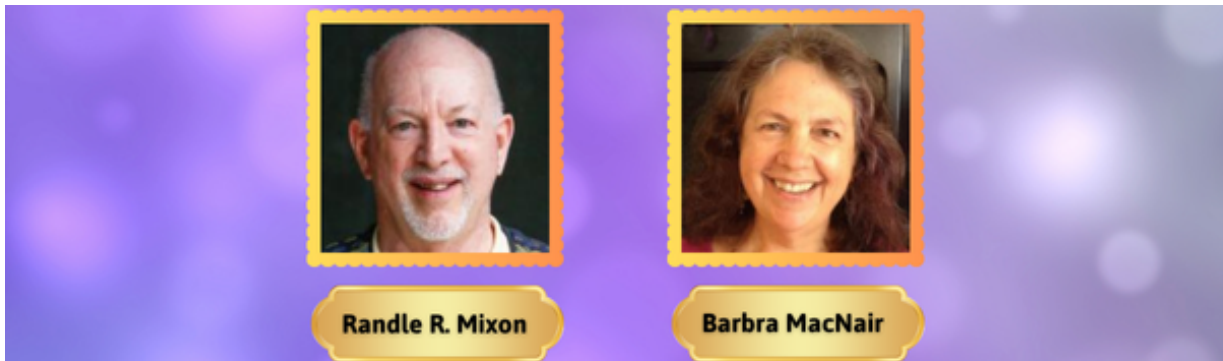


Our 1-Million Dollar ‘Here We Grow’ Campaign is a significant step towards strengthening and empowering AWAB. Success allows us to build a robust and collaborative staff and an engaged board of directors, enabling us to provide high-quality LGBTQ+ resources to Baptists worldwide.

As of March 18, 2026 , we have already received funds or pledges totaling **\$910,018!**



Call for Nominations!



AWAB is now accepting nominations for two honors that recognize faithful leadership, courageous witness, and lasting impact in the welcoming and affirming movement. Nominations opened on April 1 and will remain open through April 30.

The Randle R. Mixon Award for Christian Service is given to a clergy person whose work has helped increase the inclusion of sexual minorities within Baptist bodies and has advanced justice by educating congregations and organizations about sexual orientation and gender identity. The Barbra MacNair Award for Christian Witness honors a layperson whose life and advocacy have fostered greater understanding and affirmation of lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender people by opening dialogue, expanding acceptance, and helping others move toward deeper inclusion.

To submit a nomination, please email the nominee's name and a letter of recommendation to awards@awab.org by April 30.

Join Us At Space for Grace!

If you're planning to attend the American Baptist Home Mission Societies' 2026 Space for Grace & Care Givers Conference in Cleveland, OH, April 21-23, look for AWAB and check out the workshop being led by AWAB's Executive Director, Brian Henderson, "Coming Out: Testimonies of Faith, Identity, & Advocacy." Click on the image for more information.

SPACE FOR GRACE & SPIRITUAL CAREGIVERS CONFERENCE

LEARNING EXPERIENCE PRESENTERS:

Jennifer Holt Enriquez

Rev. Judy Fentress-Williams, Ph.D.

Dr. Jonathan Fung

Rev. Dr. Brian Henderson

Courtney Hester, MDiv, MHA, BCC

STORYTELLING:
Discovering Its Power for Faith Leaders Today

April 21-23, 2026
Cleveland, OH

REGISTER NOW



Our AWAB community mourns the loss of the Rev. Dr. Sarah Ruth Welton who served since 2009 as pastor of AWAB charter member congregation, Church of the Covenant, in Palmer, Alaska. Rev. Welton was a tireless advocate for LGBTQ+ rights and justice. The light of her legacy will continue to shine brightly reminding many of the work of justice always needing to be done. We hold Rev. Welton's family in thought and care during this time.

Join Us in Cleveland!

Whether you're in town for Space for Grace or local to the Cleveland area, we invite you to join us for this special event. Purchase tickets by clicking the graphic below or visiting www.awab.org/flamy.

One Night With



FLAMY GRANT

Tickets \$35

Tickets include heavy appetizers and beverage options (alcoholic and non-alcoholic).



Monday, April 20, 2026 | 6:30 PM

The Alex Theater at Metropolitan at the 9

Cleveland, Ohio

Presented By:



Peace Community Church



awab
Association of Welcoming & Affirming Baptists



OPEN AFFIRMING COALITION



In the wake of the Supreme Court's ruling in *Chiles v. Salazar*, AWAB spoke out clearly and without apology. In our public statement, we named the decision as a harmful step backward that fails to protect vulnerable young people from the well-documented harms of conversion therapy. We also reaffirmed what remains true regardless of any court ruling: LGBTQ+ people are created in the image of God, fully and wonderfully made, and conversion therapy is not ministry. It is abuse.

Below are four recent articles that highlight AWAB's response and the broader conversation unfolding around this decision:

1) LGBTQ faith leaders say Supreme Court's conversion therapy ruling will harm youth

Religion News Service featured AWAB Executive Director Brian Henderson among faith leaders responding to the Court's decision and lifting up the hope and solidarity needed in this moment. [Read Full Story](#)

2) Supreme Court says conversion therapy is protected free speech

Baptist News Global reported on AWAB's public statement, including our clear witness that conversion therapy causes harm and should never be confused with faithful ministry. [Read Full Story](#)

3) 3 ways churches may respond to the violence of conversion therapy

In this Baptist News Global opinion piece, Cody J. Sanders offers practical and pastoral ways churches can respond with visible affirmation, care, and courage. [Read Full Story](#)

4) There is no need for conversion therapy

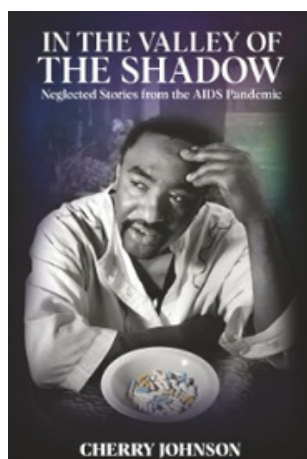
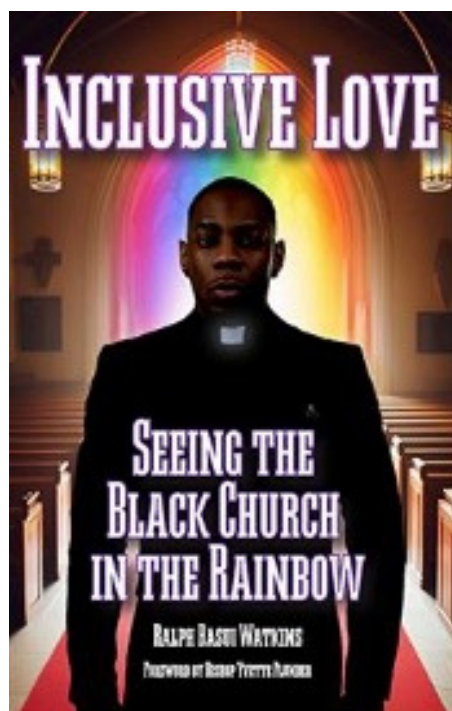
In Baptist News Global, AWAB Board member Jordan Conley names conversion therapy as a harmful and shame-based practice and calls the church back to the liberating love of God. [Read Full Story](#)

Inclusive Love

Seeing The Black Church In The Rainbow

Written by Rev. Dr. Ralph Basui Watkins

In this moving, passionate reflection upon his own life and ministry, Rev. Dr. Ralph Basui Watkins examines his relative privilege experienced while growing up in a culture that valued strong masculinity, as exemplified by boys like him. But more than that, he compares his experiences to those of the LGBTQ+ community, deeply considering what it may have been like to grow up without a support system or role models in the church. He shares how he journeyed from a tradition that denied community and belongingness to LGBTQ+ people to a faith-driven acceptance and love for all. He encourages the church to better support all members of the Kingdom of God by focusing on the liberative and loving messages of the Gospel.



In the Valley of the Shadow

Neglected Stories from the AIDS Pandemic

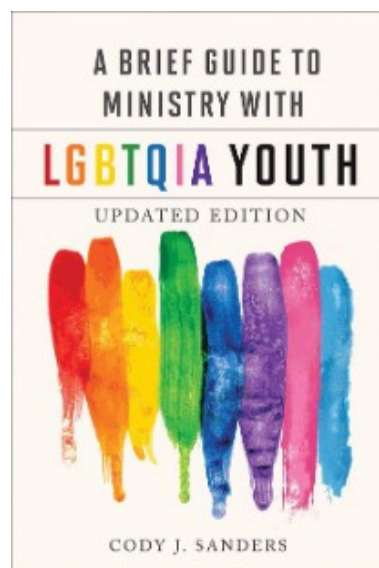
Written by Cherry Johnson,
AWAB Member Seattle First Baptist Church

Cherry Johnson, member of AWAB charter member congregation, Seattle First Baptist Church announces her new book: *In the Valley of the Shadow: Neglected Stories from the AIDS Pandemic*. Johnson shares a deeply personal and compassionate account of life, loss, and resilience during the AIDS crisis in the United States. Drawing on decades of experience as a social worker at Bailey-Boushay House in Seattle — one of the nation's first facilities dedicated to caring for people living and dying with AIDS — Johnson presents a powerful collection of stories that illuminate the human side of the epidemic.

A Brief Guide to Ministry with LGBTQIA Youth

Updated Edition

Written By: Rev. Dr. Cody Sanders



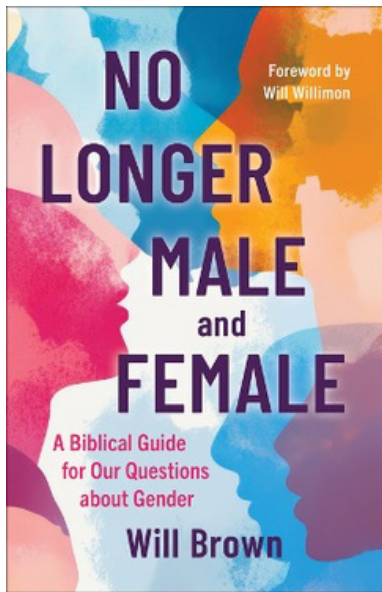
AWAB friend and supporter, Rev. Dr. Cody Sanders, will help you empower LGBTQIA youth in your church with the help of practical guidance, compassionate care, and fresh insights designed to build affirming, supportive faith communities.

Despite our best efforts to create welcoming and affirming congregations, the reality is that church can still be a harmful place for LGBTQIA youth. *A Brief Guide to Ministry with LGBTQIA Youth, Updated Edition* helps pastors and church leaders reflect on the various trials that adolescence brings for LGBTQIA youth and understand how an affirming stance toward LGBTQIA people can positively affect the day-to-day experience of teenagers in a church setting.

This newly updated resource provides insight and practical advice for important questions like:

- How can a pastor, youth minister, or volunteer embrace, nurture, and provide skillful care for LGBTQIA youth in a congregation or community?
- How can we encourage LGBTQIA teens who want to fully live out their Christian faith and their gender identity or sexual orientation?
- How should I respond to parents who are anxious or unwilling to support their LGBTQIA children?

New to this edition is a chapter on the intersections between LGBTQIA identity and neurodivergence, and extra attention to how churches can respond to the assault on diversity and transgender rights in the current political climate. An updated glossary of terms and list of national and local resources that can be used to support LGBTQIA youth are also included.



No Longer Male and Female **A Biblical Guide for Our Questions about Gender**

Written by Will Brown

Coming in September! Pre-order now. *No Longer Male and Female* provides a helpful guide and Bible study for people of faith who seek to understand gender in ways that may feel strange and new, helping readers better understand both their faith commitments and their communities.

Gender used to seem as simple as buying a pink or blue baby blanket. But now, pronouns in email signatures and debates over trans rights in the news may seem bewildering and strange. Christians especially wonder what to think about transgender and nonbinary identities when they consider Scripture that says God created humans “male and female.” How can someone be neither male nor female or say that their inside doesn’t match their outside?

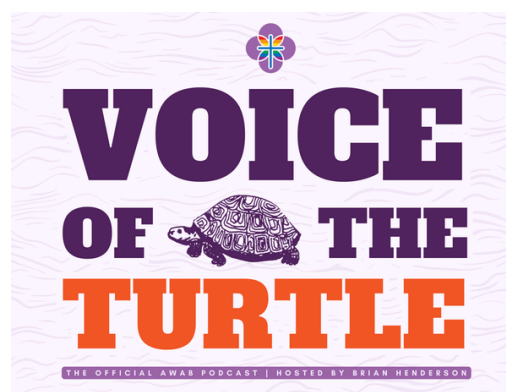
To help readers wrestling with these topics, Will Brown, AWAB friend, a Baptist minister, and parent of a nonbinary child, provides this insightful Bible study. Throughout, he examines what Scripture can tell us about gender identity, providing pastoral approaches to pressing questions like:

- What do we mean by “male” and “female?”
- Why should we trust how people say they feel on the inside?
- What’s the deal with sharing pronouns?
- How can one person be “they?”
- How should the church relate to gender-expansive people?
- What do we do when we disagree about LGBTQ+ inclusion?
- And finally, if Paul says that in Christ, “there is no longer male and female,” does gender still matter?

Focusing on curiosity and understanding, each chapter engages Scripture to shed light on our broader conversations about gender in the church. Brown's pastoral approach leads readers to deeper insights into the underlying concepts of gender and enables a more thoughtful understanding of our neighbors and ourselves. With discussion questions included for each chapter, this book is ideal for individual reflection, for small-group and congregational study, or for families to read and discuss together.

AWAB Announces New Podcast

AWAB is excited to announce the launch of The Voice of the Turtle, a new podcast created through a partnership between the Association of Welcoming and Affirming Baptists and Good Faith Media, co-sponsored by American Baptist Home Mission Societies. Listen on all podcast platforms!



For more than 30 years, AWAB has supported LGBTQ+ people, allies, and welcoming congregations across Baptist life. Now, through this new podcast, we are expanding that witness by sharing the stories of individuals and churches who have chosen courage, authenticity, and faithfulness even when the road has not been easy.

The podcast's name draws from a quote often associated with progress and risk: "Behold the turtle, it makes progress only when it sticks its neck out." That spirit is at the heart of this project. The Voice of the Turtle will spotlight stories of discipleship, leadership, and transformation from communities AWAB has walked with and learned from along the way.

As Executive Director Brian Henderson shares, "We want to make these available for others to hear and experience." By lifting up these stories, the podcast offers encouragement to congregations and individuals who need the reminder that they are not alone. It is one more way AWAB is helping tell the truth about where God is moving and how communities of radical welcome continue to grow.

awab Member Spotlight

Check out what's been happening around the association

AWAB was honored to participate in the Interfaith Peace Project Summit with AWAB international member Peace Cathedral from Tbilisi, Georgia. Members of the Peace Cathedral, Mosque, and Synagogue, traveled from the country of Georgia to meet with friends and supporters from around the globe, February 8-10, in Broomfield, NJ, at Temple Ner Tamid served as the host community.



11 AWAB congregations participated in the summit: Pullen Memorial Baptist Church, Providence Church, First Baptist Church in America, Peace Cathedral, Royersford Baptist Church, Calvary Baptist Church of Denver, Lake Shore Baptist Church, Third and James Baptist Church, Glendale Baptist Church, Washington Plaza Baptist Church, and Noank Baptist Church.



Congratulations to AWAB member Grant Park Church, Portland, OR, as they celebrated the church's 100th anniversary on March 15.

awab Member Spotlight



Check out what's been happening around the association



Here AWAB friend, Paul Raushenbush moderates a panel of faith leaders, discussing various calls to action in relation to the current administration.

Among several AWAB friends at the conference, here are Revs. George Mason of Wilshire Baptist Church (Dallas, TX) and Dorisanne Cooper of Watts Street Baptist Church (Durham, NC).



AWAB's Executive Director, Brian Henderson and AWAB Mixon Award recipient, Rev. Jon Singletary with the Right Rev. Marrian Edgar Budde of the Washington National Cathedral



AWAB was pleased to attend Democracy Forward's Together for Democracy Conference in Washington, DC, January 28-30.



awab Member Spotlight



Check out what's been happening around the association

AWAB exhibited at the annual Samuel DeWitt Proctor Conference, Inc., which took place in Chicago, IL, this year. The Proctor Conference mobilizes progressive African American faith leaders, clergy, and laypeople to advance social justice. Founded in 2003, it educates and acts on issues like human rights, poverty, and environmental justice, often acting as a "safe space" for activists.



AWAB was glad to exhibit near Baptist colleagues from Judson Press as well as members from the Alliance of Baptists.



Executive Director Brian Henderson with Rev. Dr. John W. Kinney.

awab
Member
Spotlight

**Check out what's been
happening around the
association**

AWAB visited educational partner The Baptist House of Studies at the Perkins School of Theology/SMU, Dallas, TX



Congratulations to Rev. Sheree Gidcomb Clark as she was formally installed as pastor of Northside Community Church, Ann Arbor, MI, on Sunday, March 15.

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.