

The Welcoming Spirit

August  2026

Bringing you news that's always

Queer ✦ Baptist ✦ Relevant

Telling Our Story Truthfully: Renewing the (American) Baptist Witness for a New Ministry Year

Brian Henderson, AWAB Executive Director



Each autumn, Baptist churches experience a kind of resurrection.

Choirs return to rehearsal. Sunday school classes begin again. Bible studies fill our calendars. New volunteers step forward. Familiar faces reappear after summer travels, and new visitors quietly make their way through our sanctuary doors, wondering whether they have found a place where they might belong.

Long before many of those visitors worship with us, however, they have already begun learning who we are. They have visited our websites, read news stories, searched denominational resources, and tried to understand what it means to be Baptist.

The stories we tell about ourselves matter.

Although the Association of Welcoming & Affirming Baptists serves congregations, ministries, educational institutions, and individuals across numerous Baptist traditions, I'd like to take the liberty in this issue's cover story to speak most directly to the Baptist family in which I was ordained—the American Baptist Churches USA.

I do so with deep gratitude.

American Baptists nurtured my call to ministry. They taught me to love Scripture, to value congregational freedom, to respect liberty of conscience and to believe that Christians can remain faithfully in covenant even when they do not arrive at identical theological conclusions.



My hope, however, extends well beyond one Baptist family. As another church program year begins, I hope Baptists everywhere recommit ourselves to the historic freedoms, covenantal relationships, and theological diversity that have long distinguished our witness.

Recently, a national publication attempted to summarize LGBTQ+ inclusion across Christian denominations. In describing American Baptist Churches USA, it understandably relied upon denominational identity statements and portrayed our Baptist family as far more uniform than it actually is.

Rather than criticizing the publication, I found myself asking a more important question.

Have we made our own story clear?

American Baptists have never been defined primarily by theological uniformity. We have been defined by covenant.

We are autonomous congregations that voluntarily choose to walk together in mission. We believe Christ—not a denominational office—is the head of the Church. We trust local congregations to discern the guidance of the Holy Spirit. We cherish freedom of conscience while recognizing our shared responsibility to one another.

Those convictions have never eliminated disagreement. They have taught us how to live faithfully with it. That is one of the most remarkable gifts of the Baptist tradition. It is also one of the easiest parts of our identity for others to misunderstand.

Today, visitors to the American Baptist Churches USA website encounter two Identity Statements: one adopted in 1998 and another revised in 2005. The 1998 Identity Statement beautifully expresses the historic commitments that have long united American Baptists. It points us toward Jesus Christ, Scripture, evangelism, mission, religious liberty, congregational autonomy, and voluntary cooperation.

It describes a people held together not by complete theological agreement but by a shared commitment to follow Christ together.

The 2005 Identity Statement emerged during a particularly difficult season in our denominational life. Whatever one's perspective on its additions, its continued publication alongside the 1998 statement has had an unintended consequence. Increasingly, journalists, ecumenical partners, prospective members, seminarians, clergy, and those seeking a Baptist church encounter the 2005 statement as though it fully defines American Baptist life.

It does not.

No single statement can fully capture a communion of autonomous congregations intentionally committed to theological diversity.

Across the United States and Puerto Rico, American Baptist churches embody a remarkable range of theological convictions. Some congregations joyfully celebrate same-sex marriages, ordain openly LGBTQ+ clergy, and identify themselves as welcoming and affirming. Others hold different convictions regarding sexuality and marriage. That diversity is not evidence that Baptist identity has failed. It is evidence that Baptist polity continues to do exactly what it has always done.

For more than fifty years, the Association of Welcoming & Affirming Baptists has been one faithful expression of that Baptist diversity. Since our roots in 1973, AWAB has encouraged congregations that have discerned God's call to fully include LGBTQ+ people in every aspect of church life and ministry. We do not ask every Baptist to share our theological conclusions. We do hope our Baptist family will describe itself honestly enough that those outside our fellowship understand the breadth of convictions that genuinely exist within it.

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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.

AWAB

PO Box 7834
Louisville, KY 40257
1.888.906.2922
admin@awab.org

AWAB Staff

Brian Henderson
Executive Director
James Rice III
Communications Coordinator
Janet Cole
Administrative Coordinator

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Jason Mack, Vice-Chair, Executive Committee
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Desk & Chair

Perspective from the Desk of our Board Chair



Lauren Ng
Chair of the
Board of Directors

“Gearing Up for Growth”

As August invites us toward a new ministry season, many of our congregations begin to reengage after the rhythms of summer. This back-to-church moment is more than a return to routine—it is an opportunity to renew our shared commitment to the work of welcome and affirmation that defines us as the Association of Welcoming and Affirming Baptists. It is a time to reconnect, to re-ground, and to remember why this ministry matters so deeply.

At our most recent Board meeting, I felt a renewed sense of energy and wonder for the road ahead. The conversation centered on growth—specifically, the growth we get to anticipate and cultivate because of the seeds we’ve planted and watered, and to which God has given the growth.

Growth is not always an upward trajectory of quantitative measure; it also involves breadth and depth, and a profound understanding—wrought from prayerful discernment— of whom Christ is calling us to be in this moment. As we all know, the work of building truly welcoming and affirming communities is not a short-term effort; it asks for persistence, resilience, and the courage to keep showing up with faith and conviction.

As churches return to fuller participation this fall, I invite each of us to embrace this season with intention. Growing and sustaining this work means investing in relationships, supporting one another, and staying grounded in our shared mission even when the path forward is challenging. The Board is energized by what lies ahead, and I am confident that together, we will continue to expand AWAB’s impact in meaningful and unprecedented ways.

Thank you for the ways you bring courage, commitment, and hope into this shared ministry.

The Executive Summary

Views & Inspiration from our Executive Director



Brian Henderson
Executive Director

“Back to the Work. Back to One Another.”

As another church program year begins, many of our congregations are returning from the rhythms of summer into a season of renewed ministry. There is something hopeful about these weeks. Choirs begin to rehearse again. Bible studies resume. Mission projects are launched. Pastors, lay leaders, volunteers, and congregations recommit themselves to the steady, faithful work of bearing witness to the Gospel in their communities.

For AWAB, this season carries that same sense of anticipation.

One of the great privileges of serving as your Executive Director is witnessing the remarkable work taking place across our network of churches, educational partners, ministry organizations, and individual members. Whether in North America, the Caribbean, or across the continents of Africa and Europe, courageous Baptists continue to proclaim what we have long believed: that God's love is expansive, Christ's welcome is genuine, and LGBTQ+ people belong fully in the life and leadership of the church.

This issue of *The Welcoming Spirit* offers a glimpse into that witness. I am especially grateful that you'll read about welcoming and affirming ministry taking root and flourishing on African soil. These stories remind us that the movement toward justice, belonging, and inclusion is not confined to one nation or culture. The Spirit continues to move wherever people courageously choose love over fear and hospitality over exclusion.

I also find myself deeply grateful for the people who make AWAB's ministry possible every day. Our dedicated staff continue to serve with creativity, compassion, and extraordinary commitment. Our Board of Directors—strengthened this year by an outstanding group of new members—offers thoughtful leadership, faithful governance, and a shared vision for AWAB's future. Together, they are helping steward an organization that is not simply maintaining its work but growing into new opportunities for ministry.

And yes—AWAB is growing.

Across the Baptist landscape, more congregations, educational institutions, ministry partners, and individuals are finding their way into this community. That growth is encouraging not because larger numbers are an end in themselves, but because every new member represents another church, another leader, another family, another LGBTQ+ person, another ally who believes the Gospel is good news for everyone.

I am equally excited about what lies just ahead. We eagerly anticipate gathering for this year's AWAB Annual Lecture at United Theological Seminary in St. Paul, where we will learn together, encourage one another, and continue equipping churches for the work ahead. I am also energized by the upcoming second season of Voice of the Turtle, where we'll continue telling the stories of welcoming and affirming ministry—stories that deserve to be heard throughout the wider Baptist landscape.

This fall also brings us to the joyful culmination of AWAB's Here We Grow Campaign. Watching our community rally around this vision has been one of the great gifts of the past few years. I remain confident that, together, we will accomplish what none of us could have accomplished alone. That has always been the strength of AWAB: a community of churches and people choosing partnership over isolation and hope over resignation.

As you read this issue, I hope you are reminded that welcoming and affirming ministry is not merely about making statements. It is about sustaining communities. It is about nurturing courage for the long haul.

See next page

A “Welcoming Spirit” Bi-Monthly Column

It is about faithfully returning, year after year, to the work Christ has entrusted to us—the work of justice, compassion, hospitality, and love.

Finally, to every donor, volunteer, church leader, member congregation, Rainbow Circle supporter, educational partner, queer person, ally, and friend: thank you. Your generosity, vision, courage, and remarkable tenacity make this ministry possible. You are the reason AWAB continues not only to endure but to flourish.

May this issue of *The Welcoming Spirit* encourage your heart, strengthen your resolve, and bear witness to the beautiful, life-giving ministry that continues to unfold throughout our AWAB family.



Join today to keep awab here tomorrow!

For as low as \$10 a month



SCAN ME!

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



Meeting Two AWAB International Ministry Partners

By retired American Baptist (AWAB) pastor, Rev. Mary Hammond, relying heavily on materials provided by these Ministry Partners.



AWAB partners with ministries in Africa that are doing very significant work in deeply challenging, often politically dangerous contexts. This article will share about two such ministries without offering certain specific identifying details. This helps to both protect the work and guard the safety of those doing such needed work on behalf of marginalized people.



The first partner, CLA, is a non-denominational, non-profit, grassroots community-based organization. Its mission is “to equip, advocate with, and mobilize church leaders and communities into the sacred healing work of peacebuilding, reviving the church’s calling as the hands and feet of Christ participating in God’s shalom.”

In its commitment to this mission, CLA has a multi-pronged outreach. It works with faith leaders dealing with all forms of violence in their communities: direct, structural, and cultural. Workshops and other programs help faith leaders understand how violence hinders God’s reign and prevents the practice of shalom. Through his work as a Global Consultant with International Ministries of the American Baptist Churches USA, the Rev. Dr. Daniel Buttry mentored CLA’s founder and several other African leaders in the area of Conflict Transformation.

When fractured communities seek help resolving disputes constructively, skilled trainers in Conflict Transformation offer role plays and additional tools to foster mutual understanding. This process includes healing circles, prayer, worship, and action. The goal is a restoration of relationship with God, self, others, and nature.

Committed to diversity and inclusion, CLA also reaches out to marginalized communities, reflecting a progressive approach to social justice. Due to extreme anti-gay laws in several African nations, such as Uganda, many LGBTQ+ individuals have fled to safer countries nearby and abroad. The organization supports individuals fleeing violence and persecution wherever possible. It maintains discretion in public communications due to potential risks faced by staff, networks, and beneficiaries. It only takes a cursory google search to learn more about the difficult realities facing LGBTQ+ individuals throughout various parts of Africa.

CLA's leadership team seeks prayer for the following:

- Wisdom, unity, and Spirit-led direction for the leadership team and vision as they navigate current challenges and opportunities;
- The vulnerable people they serve, that they would experience hope, healing, and tangible support;
- Open doors and favor with partners, churches, and communities so the work can expand with integrity and impact;
- The well-being in body, soul, and spirit of staff, volunteers, and their families;
- That the organization's efforts would clearly point people toward Jesus unbound and bring lasting fruit.

A second African International Ministry Partner is Rongo Baptist Church, located in Kenya. Lead pastor, Rev. Oyoo Abiud Ochieng, describes the congregation as “a family of ordinary people who have been rescued and redeemed by the Grace of a loving God.” The church is “united in the Gospel, committed to one another, and we include all as God embraces us all.” It seeks to welcome people in and send them out to minister among their communities. Rooted in the Scriptures, this ministry seeks to help people “flourish within the context of committed, Christ-centered relationships.”



Pastor Abiud asks for prayer regarding the following needs in their communities:

- Food insecurity within many households;
- Malnutrition and hunger among orphans and vulnerable children;
- Youth spiritual needs;
- Evangelism and Church Planting;
- Leadership Development needs for Ministers of the Gospel.

As a white female retired pastor in the United States, I have spent several months learning more about the profound ongoing danger experienced by LGBTQ+ individuals and other marginalized populations in parts of Africa. I have been learning about draconian laws passed that hinder flourishing and continually compromise safety. I have been studying the political realities faced in various nations.

I have been exploring the impact of both colonialism and imported biases against LGBTQ+ individuals in many African churches. I have been deeply inspired by the courage, creativity, and perseverance it takes for faith organizations such as these to continue their ministries in word and deed while facing so many uncertainties, threats, and daily challenges.

I invite member churches to prayerfully consider supporting AWAB International Ministry Partners in your 2027 Church Mission Budgets. It is not too soon to approach a Mission or Finance Committee to connect the church's Mission Giving to these organizations. If you are an individual AWAB member and wish to learn more about supporting one or both of these ministries, please contact Brian Henderson, AWAB's Executive Director, by using: admin@awab.org.



Save the Date: AWAB's 2026 Annual Lecture

Friday, September 18, 2026

United Theological Seminary of the Twin Cities, St. Paul, Minnesota



The Association of Welcoming & Affirming Baptists is delighted to invite you to our 2026 Annual Lecture, featuring Dr. William Stell, one of the leading emerging scholars in the fields of religion, LGBTQ+ history, and American Christianity.

Dr. Stell is a historian of religion and sexuality in the United States and he currently is an affiliate fellow at Princeton University's Center for Culture, Society, and Religion. Previously, he taught at New York University. Before earning his Ph.D. at Princeton University, he served as the pastor of First Presbyterian Church in Bordentown, New Jersey. He is ordained in the United Church of Christ.

His acclaimed first book, *Born Again Queer: The History of Evangelical Gay Activism and the Making of Antigay Christianity*, offers a groundbreaking examination of LGBTQ+ activism within evangelical Christianity and challenges long-held assumptions about the movement's history. He is also writing *The Moses of the Gay Liberation Movement*, the first scholarly biography of Rev. Troy Perry, founder of the Metropolitan Community Churches and one of the most influential LGBTQ+ Christian leaders of the twentieth century.

This year's Annual Lecture promises to be a thought-provoking and inspiring evening as Dr. Stell helps us better understand the complex history of LGBTQ+ people within the Christian tradition and the ongoing work of justice, inclusion, and hope.

Following the lecture, AWAB will host a special celebratory reception. Together, we will mark the successful culmination of the Here We Grow Campaign, giving thanks for the generosity and vision that have positioned AWAB for a strong and faithful future. During the reception, we will also dedicate a newly commissioned AWAB stole, created as a symbol of our shared ministry, and introduce and sing a new hymn written especially for AWAB's work and witness.

It promises to be a meaningful evening of scholarship, worship, gratitude, and celebration as we gather with friends from across the Baptist family and beyond.

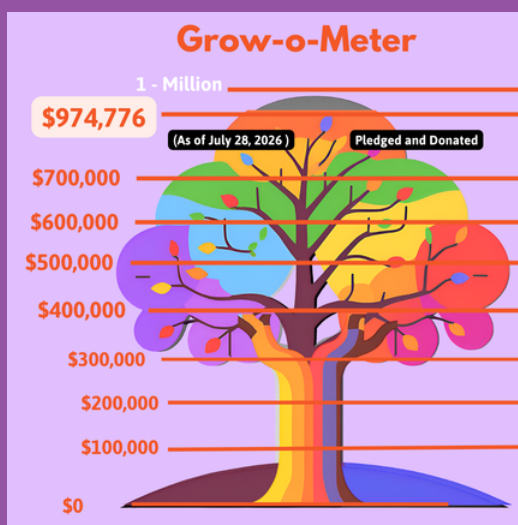
We hope you will make plans now to join us in St. Paul for this special occasion. Additional details, including registration information, will be available soon.

The Final 25K!

Over the past two years, your generosity has brought AWAB within reach of our \$1 million Here We Grow Campaign goal.

Now, with just \$25,000 left to raise, we are inviting our community to help us finish strong by September. Every gift will move us closer to fully funding the vision that has guided this campaign and strengthening AWAB for the work ahead.

Will you help us raise the final \$25K?



Give by scanning below or visit
www.awab.org/HereWeGrow



As of July 29, 2026 , we have already received funds or pledges totaling **\$974,776!**

A Queer Gospel: Jesus's Life through Rainbow Eyes

By Kali Cawthon-Freels, AWAB Pastor, Williamsburg
Baptist Church, Williamsburg, VA

HALI CAWTHON-FREELS



Jesus's Life through Rainbow Eyes

Foreword by Brandon Robertson

Who is allowed to see themselves in Jesus?

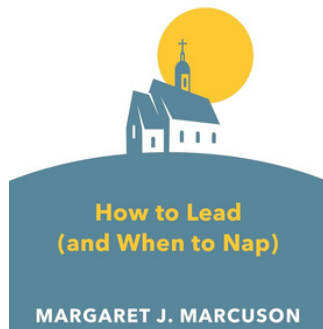
If you grew up going to Sunday School, then the typical Sunday School answer may be echoing in your mind: "Everyone!"

While that answer may be the truth, mainstream Christian culture often responds poorly when anyone who is not a cishet white man attempts to see themselves in Jesus. This exclusion is especially true for the LGBTQ+ community, which is often demonized by those who claim to follow the Gospel of Jesus. But what if queer folks are more like Jesus than society believes?

In *A Queer Gospel*, Kali Cawthon-Freels will introduce you to the natural queerness of Jesus, his life, and his ministry. You'll see Jesus participate in the ritual of coming out, as well as experience the all-too-common pain of being outed. You'll watch as he identifies his chosen family, just like modern-day queer people do. You'll sit with what it means for Jesus to be God's drag persona and for Jesus to undergo transition at the Transfiguration. You'll see how queerness offers a way for us to better understand Jesus's most perplexing teachings. And, of course, you'll also see him get murdered by this hate-filled world, then resurrected through the power of reclaiming the authority inherent to his queer identity.

This is, truly, a queer gospel. Thanks be to God, for it means all of us can see ourselves in Jesus and Jesus in ourselves.

SUSTAINABLE MINISTRY



Sustainable Ministry: How to Lead (and When to Nap)

By Margaret J. Marcuson, long-time AWAB
friend and supporter

If you're a pastoral leader, you're likely finding ministry tougher now than ever. The old way of doing church no longer works. Numbers continue to go down. You don't know what to do to move forward. You want a sense of satisfaction in your life and work. Instead, you struggle with an overwhelming sense of failure and loss.

Sustainable Ministry: How to Lead in Tough Times will help you develop a more vibrant, more effective relationship with your work, with other church leaders, your congregants, and with someone you may neglect: yourself. This book isn't about the technique of ministry leadership. It's about you and how you bring your best self to your ministry.

Celebrated clergy consultant Margaret Marcuson shares a clear message: Church leadership is you in thoughtful relationship with the work you do and with those you lead. Marcuson helps pastors find a way to better experience their life in ministry now so they can use their best gifts to help the church and to change lives. The result is nothing less than greater satisfaction in ministry and greater capacity to contribute for the long-term sustainability of your congregation.

“Telling Our Story Truthfully. . .”

Continued from Page 3

This is why I believe the time has come for American Baptist Churches USA to renew its public witness by allowing the 1998 Identity Statement once again to serve as the denomination's primary public description. Such a step would not revisit old debates or erase theological disagreement. Rather, it would acknowledge that disagreement honestly.

It would communicate to the wider Church that American Baptists remain what we have long claimed to be: a covenant of autonomous congregations united in Christ, committed to freedom of conscience, and willing to live faithfully alongside one another despite differing theological convictions. That witness is not weakened by diversity. It is strengthened by the integrity with which we describe it.

As another ministry year begins, one of the most important acts of stewardship before us may not simply be sustaining our ministries. It may be stewarding our story.

Our words matter. The way we describe ourselves matters. The stories we tell about ourselves shape how others encounter us long before they ever worship beside us.

As welcoming and affirming Baptists, we have long believed that truthfulness is itself an act of hospitality. When we tell our story honestly, we invite others into the remarkable breadth of the Baptist tradition—a tradition shaped by freedom, conscience, covenant, cooperation, and an abiding trust that the Holy Spirit continues to guide Christ's Church.

That is good stewardship. That is courageous leadership. And as churches gather again this fall, may we recommit ourselves not only to welcoming people into our sanctuaries, but also to telling the truth about the Baptist tradition that welcomes them there.



Education Partners

Welcome Brite Divinity !



Current Education Partners



WELCOME TO

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Association of Welcoming & Affirming Baptists

We're Building a Church for Everyone!



**By vote of the Board of Directors
we welcome the following churches into our association:**



Awaken Church,
Calgary, Alberta, Canada



St. Paul's Baptist Church,
Philadelphia, PA



Good Shepherd Baptist
Church, Lynwood, WA

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Member Spotlight



Check out what's been happening around the association

First Baptist Church, Pottstown, PA, and PRISM LGBTQ+ Center hosted on June 11 Admiral (Ret.) Rachel Levine for a fireside chat.



Here a monthly group of AWAB pastors and church members gather for lunch. At their June lunch, they bid farewell to Rev. Dr. Marcia Bailey, as she retired from First Baptist Church of Pottstown on June 28.

Congratulations to Hyde Park Union Church, Chicago, IL, which installed its new pastor, Rev. Dr. Joel Mitchell on June 28.



awab Member Spotlight

Check out what's been happening around the association

Who says Baptist churches do not participate in Pride Parades!? Here Binkley Baptist Church marched in Chapel Hill, NC, Pride.



And here The Tabernacle Fellowship of Birmingham, AL, marched in Birmingham Pride.



As did Southside Baptist Church of Birmingham...



And Baptist Church of the Covenant!



awab Member Spotlight



Check out what's been happening around the association



Executive Director Brian Henderson is wearing the newly created AWAB stole. This was generously created and donated by Lori Norvell of Judson Church, Minneapolis, MN.

AWAB Administrative Coordinator, Janet Cole, and Communications Coordinator, James Rice, III, are with AWAB Board Member, Rev. Jordan Conley.



The AWAB booth was a hub of nearly nonstop activity at the General Assembly of the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship in Jacksonville, FL, June 17-19.

awab

**Member
Spotlight**



Check out what's been happening around the association



AWAB was honored to host its annual CBF General Assembly breakfast with Baptist News Global and Good Faith Media.



Our AWAB/BNG/GFM breakfast was one of the largest meal programs at CBF.



Here, AWAB, BNG, and GFM staff stand with the breakfast music artist, Dr. Tony McNeill, and keynote speaker, Skye Perryman.

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.