

The Welcoming Spirit

October  2026

Bringing you news that's always

Queer ✦ Baptist ✦ Relevant

Legacy of Dissent

Dr. Jon Singletary

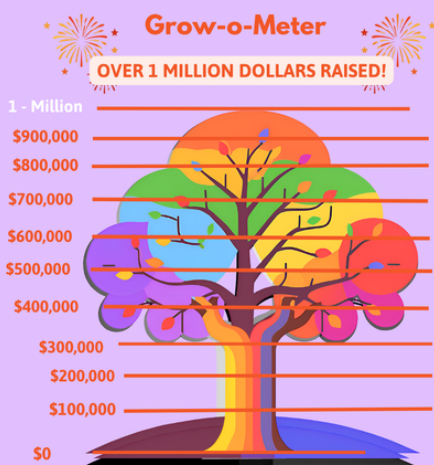
Dr. Jon Singletary holds the Diana R. Garland Endowed Chair of Child and Family Studies in Baylor University's School of Social Work, where he previously served as dean. A friend and supporter of AWAB, Jon received AWAB's Randle R. Mixon Award in 2025. In this reflection for The Welcoming Spirit, he invites us to consider dissent not simply as an act of disagreement but as a spiritual practice—a way of living faithfully when conscience, belonging, and institutional loyalty collide.



In August 1662, roughly two thousand ministers in England were removed from their pulpits because they would not sign a prayer book they did not believe in. They did not suddenly invent a disagreement that summer. They simply remained true to what they believed.

In time, they became known not simply as people who dissented, but as Dissenters. Dissent became more than something they did. It became part of who they were.

Their story is part of a larger legacy of faithful people who have discovered that institutions and conscience do not always move together.



AWAB SUCCESSFULLY RAISES OVER 1 Million Dollars!

**After two years of fundraising AWAB
exceeds ambitious fundraising goal**

Story on page 14

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Views expressed in The Welcoming Spirit are solely those of the authors. AWAB honors the diversity of our Baptist convictions.

Sometimes faithfulness means questioning what has been handed down to us. Sometimes it means challenging the institutions we love. And sometimes it means standing apart when going along would require us to surrender something essential.

So when our churches and schools, governments and organizations call us to dissent, perhaps we are not being asked to take up something new. Perhaps we are being called to answer to an old name.

At its best, dissent is more than disagreement or protest. It can become a spiritual practice—a way of life shaped by daily choices. It is less like making a single decision and more like making a vow and then learning, day after day, how to live it.

Here are three practices that can help make such a life possible.

Feel the dis-ease.

Dissent is a body word. It comes from roots that mean *to feel apart*. Consent is about feeling together; dissent begins when something within us says, *I cannot go along with this*.

Often, our bodies recognize that tension before our minds have words for it. We feel unsettled. Something is not right. We experience a kind of *dis-ease*—the ongoing tension of not being at ease with what is happening around us.

Dissent, then, is not always an argument we first construct in our heads. Sometimes it begins by paying attention to what we have been feeling for a long time. We notice that something does not sit right with us. We recognize the distance between what an institution is asking of us and what our deepest convictions tell us is faithful.

And eventually, we must decide what to do about it.

Prophetic witness often begins there—not with certainty or a carefully prepared statement, but with the willingness to pay attention to the holy discomfort we can no longer ignore.

Disentangle your attachments.

To disentangle ourselves is to discover what we are caught in—and what holds us there.

We all become tangled in the institutions and communities to which we belong. And what keeps us attached is not always belief. Sometimes it is belonging: the privilege, the standing, the recognition, the title, or the way people respond when we tell them what we do.

A position may hold us not because we still believe in everything surrounding it, but because we value the belonging it gives us.

That makes institutional reflection difficult. We can love an institution and still recognize that it needs reform. We can be grateful for what a community has given us and still challenge the ways it causes harm. We can honor our history without pretending every part of that history should be preserved.

When I stepped down as dean, I discovered that I did not know how to separate myself from a role I had allowed to stand in for my calling. My therapist and spiritual director have spent much of the past year helping me distinguish between the false self that was “being the dean” and the truer self underneath—the self that does not disappear when the title does.

The truth is simpler and deeper:

I am God’s beloved.

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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.

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Desk & Chair

Perspective from the Desk of our Board Chair



Lauren Ng
Chair of the
Board of Directors

“A Continuing Legacy”

This month as we reflect on legacy, prophetic witness, and faithfulness in public life, I am deeply grateful for the Association of Welcoming and Affirming Baptists and for every person, congregation, and partner who helps carry this ministry forward.

Legacy is not simply what we inherit. It is what we choose to protect, deepen, and pass on as we advocate for LGBTQ+ people seeking a spiritual home, young people discerning whether the church can be trusted, families longing for a faith community where they don't have to choose between belonging and authenticity, and all who hunger for justice shaped by the love of Christ.

Legacy is not simply what we inherit.
It is what we choose to protect...

October 31, observed as Reformation Sunday, gives Baptists a particularly meaningful occasion to reflect on our calling. The Reformation reminds us that the church is never finished becoming faithful. It must continually return to the heart of the Gospel, examine its practices, repent where it has caused harm, and remain open to the constant movement of the Holy Spirit.

Our Baptist principles and commitments equip us well. They call us to resist any effort that uses faith as a weapon against our neighbors. They urge us to defend the freedom of every person to live, worship, speak, and flourish with dignity. And they remind us that the church has a responsibility to stand with those whose voices, bodies, families, and lives are too often targeted by fear or political expediency.

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The Executive Summary

Views & Inspiration from our Executive Director



Brian Henderson
Executive Director

“Onward, Together!”

As I reflect on these past months in the life of AWAB, the word that keeps rising to the surface for me is gratitude.

I am grateful for our member congregations and educational partners. I am grateful for individuals who believe deeply in this ministry. I am grateful for foundations and other partners who invest in our work. I am grateful for our Board and staff, and for the countless friends who encourage us, pray for us, show up, speak out, and generously share their resources.

Because the truth is, whatever AWAB accomplishes, we accomplish together.

Perhaps nowhere has that been more evident than in the successful completion of our Here We Grow campaign. When we launched this effort more than two and a half years ago with a goal of raising \$1 million, we knew it was ambitious. What followed was an extraordinary collective response. Gifts large and small came from across the AWAB community, each one expressing confidence not only in what AWAB has been, but in what we are becoming.

Reaching—and surpassing—that goal is worth celebrating! But Here We Grow was never simply about reaching a financial milestone. It was about strengthening AWAB for our next season of ministry.

And that next season is already taking shape.

In the months ahead, we anticipate hiring a Program Coordinator, expanding our staff capacity and helping AWAB provide even more resources, programming, and opportunities for connection. As the landscape around us continues to change, we hear regularly from congregations and individuals looking for support, relationships, resources, and encouragement. An expanded staff will help us respond more intentionally and creatively to those needs.

Growth is also happening through our expanding network. In this issue of *The Welcoming Spirit*, we celebrate three new member congregations and a new educational partner. Each represents another community choosing to say publicly that LGBTQ+ people belong fully in the life and ministry of the church and in theological education. Each strengthens the network of relationships that makes AWAB what it is.

This issue invites us to think about legacy, prophetic witness, and faithfulness in public life. Dr. Jon Singletary reminds us that faithful dissent is not simply about what we oppose, but about orienting ourselves toward “justice, dignity, freedom, belonging, truth, and love.” Laura Levens’ reflection on our Fifth Annual Lecture similarly reminds us that we stand on the shoulders of those whose courage helped create possibilities for those who came after them.

That seems especially important for AWAB right now.

We honor those who built this ministry by continuing to build. We celebrate what has been accomplished while asking what faithfulness requires of us next. And we recognize that our legacy is still being written—in congregations, seminaries, divinity schools, classrooms, pulpits, communities, and in the lives of LGBTQ+ people who discover that there are Baptist spaces where they can bring the fullness of who they are.

There is much work ahead. But there is also so much for which to be grateful.

Continued on next page

Thank you for being part of AWAB. Thank you for believing in this work. And thank you for helping us do together what none of us could ever do alone.

May we continue, onward, together!

“A Continuing Legacy”

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This kind of witness can be costly. It may ask us to speak when silence would be easier, to be curious when doubling down with certainty might feel more comfortable, and to act when the path ahead is unclear. Yet we are sustained by the saints who have gone before us. Their courage is part of our inheritance.

The church is still being reformed by the Spirit of God, and our legacy compels us to keep showing up. May AWAB always be part of such holy work.



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



Lecture Report: Standing on Their Shoulders: AWAB's Fifth Annual Lecture

By Laura Levens, Chair of the AWAB Lecture Committee



AWAB's Fifth Annual Lecture on September 18, 2026, was an evening of celebration, remembrance, and renewed confidence in our purpose. We are thankful for the ample hospitality provided by United Theological Seminary of the Twin Cities for the full crowd gathered for the event. It was delightful to see the intermingling of several AWAB members and new faces from area congregations and seminaries in our audience, and a particular joy to welcome previous annual lecturers, Drs. Cody Sanders and Justin Sabia-Tanis, as members of the audience.



Pictured from L to R: Dr. Justin Sabia-Tanis, Dr. William Stell & Dr. Cody Sanders

We began by commemorating how far AWAB has come and celebrating our future. After Board Chair Dr. Lauren Lisa Ng opened our program, we dedicated an AWAB stole handmade by Lori Norvell. We then sang "All Praise Be Sung to the Maker," a new hymn written for AWAB by the Rev. Nathan Russell. Brian Henderson presented four Passion for Equality Awards to Dr. Molly T. Marshall, Lori Norvell, Rev. Nathan Russell, and Dr. Jill McCrory. We also celebrated the more than successful completion of the Here We Grow campaign and its \$1 million goal.



Pictured from L to R: AWAB Executive Director, Brian Henderson with Passion For Equality Award Winners Lori Norvell, Dr. Jill McCrory, Dr. Molly T. Marshall, Rev. Nathan Russell and Lauren Ng, Chair of AWAB's Board of Directors

Dr. William Stell's lecture, "The Power of Queer Religious History," was the heart of the evening. Dynamic and eloquent, he reminded us that we stand on the shoulders of significant leaders in the LGBTQ+ movement. Their lives and work helped create possibilities that many of us now experience, and their stories call us to consider what we will leave for those who follow. Dr. Stell's American Christian history book, *Born Again Queer: A History of Evangelical Gay Activism and the Making of Antigay Christianity*, contains the history of several of these significant trailblazers.



Dr. William Stell

Dr. Stell argued that remembering these Christian leaders and their centrality to movements for LGBTQ+ equality in the mid-20th century is an important means of reasserting and celebrating the longevity of Queer Christianity and that variety of Queer Christian expression throughout the ages. Welcoming and Affirming Christianity is old and comes by many paths, including American evangelicalism.

I appreciate Dr. Stell's encouragement to see history as a living source of courage, guidance, and comfort. I left grateful for those who came before us and energized that their work will not be lost or forgotten in the future. Because future generations will know them, we can stand on their shoulders and continue our work. AWAB will soon make a recording of his lecture available so others can hear his compelling message.

Following a thoughtful Q&A, Board member Dr. Ken Meyers closed the program with a participatory blessing. Guests then gathered for cake and conversation at a reception celebrating Here We Grow.



Folks gathered together enjoying the post lecture cake reception.

I am grateful to Dr. Molly Marshall and United Theological Seminary for their generous hospitality toward AWAB and this event. Thank you, too, to everyone who joined us. Thank you to the Lecture Committee, to AWAB Board members, and especially to AWAB staff for your care, planning, and pitching in to make this event a rousing success.

I hope you will join us for AWAB's Sixth Annual Lecture, hosted by First Baptist Church in Greenville, South Carolina, on Friday, September 17, 2027



AWAB Board of Directors with Lecturer, Dr. William Stell. L to R: Brian Henderson, Ken Meyers, Rick Mixon, Scott Green, Laura Levens, Jason Mack, Lauren Ng, Allen Bartlett

Legacy of Dissent

Continued from page 3

There are other practices involved in faithful dissent, too: allowing ourselves to experience despair rather than rushing past it, and learning to distinguish deep conviction from simply defending a position we have taken.

But there is one more practice that makes all the others bearable.

Desire what matters most.

The word desire carries an image of being drawn toward a star—something beyond us that gives us direction even when we cannot fully reach it. Desire is what remains when everything else that could be stripped away has been stripped away.

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Legacy of Dissent

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Speaking at Spelman College in 1980, Howard Thurman said there is something in every one of us that waits and listens for “the sound of the genuine.”

That sound of the genuine is the deep desire at the heart of dissent. And it is what separates dissent from simply being contrary.

Contrarianism reacts to what other people say or do. In that sense, it is still controlled by them. Faithful dissent comes from somewhere deeper.

It is rooted in a longing that remains within us even when the other voices have gone quiet.

For people of faith, that longing can become a form of prophetic witness: not simply naming what we oppose, but orienting our lives toward what we believe God desires—justice, dignity, freedom, belonging, truth, and love.

But faithfulness is not merely a feeling, and self-knowledge is not an end in itself. Faithfulness has to be lived. It is practiced openly, where others can see whether we meant what we said, and it often costs us something.

You will not reach the star toward which you are traveling.

You are not asked to.

You are asked not to look away.

Perhaps that is one lesson the long history of reform and dissent offers us. Reformation is never simply something that happened centuries ago. Every generation must ask what faithfulness requires now.

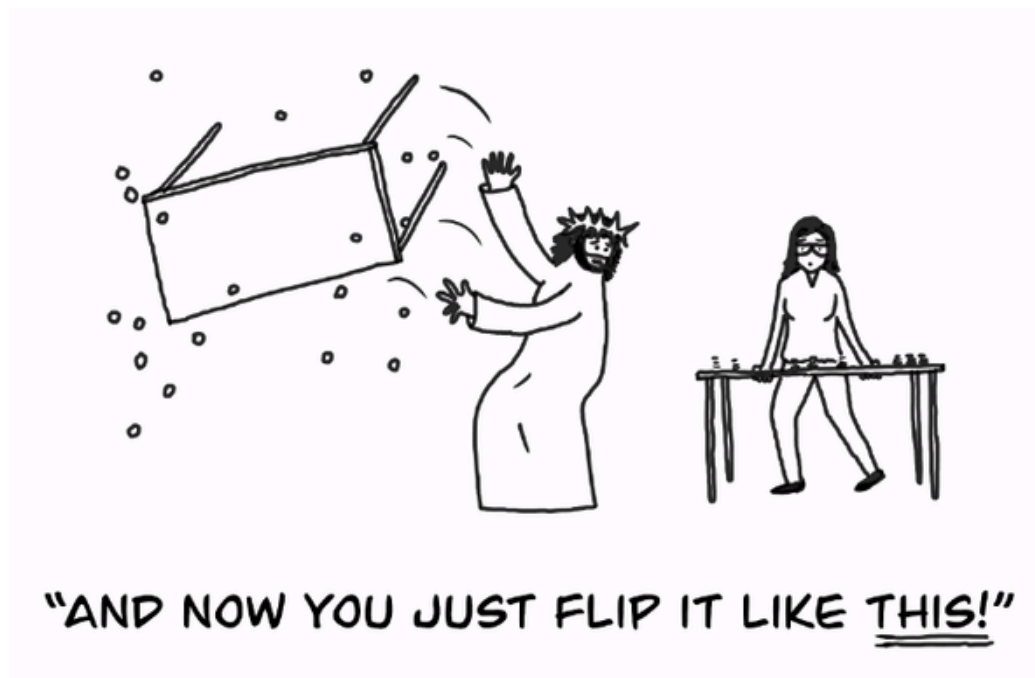
Every institution must decide whether preserving itself matters more than remaining open to transformation. And every one of us must listen for the places where conscience and conviction are calling us to something more.

Perhaps we are not being asked whether we will dissent. Many of us already have, whether we named it that way or not.

The deeper question is how we will live faithfully after making that choice—day by day, listening to the bodies that may have been telling us the truth for longer than we were willing to hear it.

The decision itself may not be the hardest part. Anyone can walk out of a room once.

The harder work comes the next morning, and the morning after that, when we still have to live as the people who walked out—without bitterness, without performance, and without losing sight of what called us to leave in the first place.



This cartoon is used with the generous permission of David Hayward, known as NakedPastor. To explore more of his art and its many meaningful, provocative, and hope-filled messages, visit nakedpastor.com.

Here We Grow. . . Here We GO!

Thank You For Helping Us Grow



We did it—together! By September 18, AWAB's Here We Grow campaign had raised and pledged an extraordinary \$1,027,000, exceeding our \$1 million goal and positioning AWAB for a vibrant next season of ministry.

At the heart of this campaign is the remarkable legacy of Stevie, a trans woman who had experienced rejection by both her family and her church and wondered whether she would ever find a faith community—much less a Baptist church—where she could be fully herself. That changed when she met former AWAB Board Chair the Rev. Dr. Jill McCrory and discovered a Baptist family that welcomed, affirmed, and loved her.



Petra Stephanie "Stevie" Neal, photographed with her dog Lady.

Before her death from a terminal illness, Stevie made arrangements with Jill for her assets to support LGBTQ+ organizations, including AWAB, leaving a legacy that will strengthen this ministry for years to come.

At AWAB's 5th Annual Lecture, we celebrated the successful completion of Here We Grow, honored Stevie's life and generosity, and recognized Jill for her extraordinary commitment to AWAB's work.

And now, as a small expression of our immense gratitude, everyone who contributed to the campaign will receive a commemorative coaster—one that is actually filled with seeds waiting to be planted. What better symbol for what we have accomplished together? Your generosity has planted seeds whose impact we may not fully see for years or even generations.

To every congregation, individual, foundation, partner, and friend who gave, pledged, encouraged, and believed in this campaign: thank you. Here We Grow has always been about more than reaching a financial goal; it is about creating the capacity for AWAB to keep growing, connecting, equipping, and widening the welcome.

Here We Grow...and now, because of you, Here We Go!

AWAB is Hiring: Program Coordinator

The Association of Welcoming & Affirming Baptists (AWAB) is excited to announce that we are seeking a part-time Program Coordinator to join our growing staff team!

As AWAB enters an exciting new season of ministry, the Program Coordinator will help strengthen and expand the programs, resources, and opportunities that connect and equip our growing network of welcoming and affirming Baptist congregations, ministries, educational partners, and individuals.

We are looking for someone who shares AWAB's commitment to the full inclusion and affirmation of LGBTQ+ people in Baptist life and brings strong organizational, relational, and program-development skills to the role.

Learn more, view the complete position description, and find application information at [AWAB.org/Careers](https://www.awab.org/Careers)

AWAB Celebrates the Appointment of Rev. Dr. Cheryl F. Dudley



AWAB celebrates with Berkeley School of Theology (BST) the appointment of the Rev. Dr. Cheryl F. Dudley as Interim President. Founded in 1871 by the American Baptist Home Mission Society, BST has deep roots within the American Baptist tradition and continues its work today as an interdenominational graduate school of theology committed to preparing leaders for ministry, justice, and service.

Dr. Dudley brings decades of leadership across American Baptist, ecumenical, and justice-centered ministries, most recently serving as Regional Executive Minister of the American Baptist Churches of Metropolitan New York from 2015 to 2026. Her previous leadership has included service with the Arcus Foundation, Church World Service, and American Baptist Home Mission Societies.

AWAB is especially delighted to celebrate Dr. Dudley as a member of Madison Avenue Baptist Church in New York City, one of AWAB's charter congregations. Her appointment is another meaningful reminder of the leadership emerging from congregations that have long championed the full welcome and affirmation of LGBTQ+ people in Baptist life. We congratulate Dr. Dudley and the entire Berkeley School of Theology community and offer our prayers and best wishes for this new season of leadership and ministry.

Join AWAB's Queer Clergy Conversation



Queer clergy are invited to join AWAB's monthly Queer Clergy Conversation, gathering on the first Thursday of each month at 1:00 PM ET. This informal, welcoming space offers an opportunity to connect with other LGBTQ+ clergy, share experiences, encourage one another, and build community.

Whether you've joined us before or are considering participating for the first time, you are welcome. Come as you are and be part of a community of queer clergy supporting one another in life, ministry, and calling.

Register [HERE](#)



QCC members smile for a "us-ie" in the Zoom Room.

Celebrate Your Pastors This October



October is Clergy Appreciation Month—a meaningful opportunity to thank the pastors who teach, preach, comfort, challenge, and accompany our congregations. Much of their ministry happens quietly, beyond Sunday morning. A thoughtful expression of gratitude can remind them that their care and faithful leadership are seen and valued.

For churches served by queer clergy, this is also an opportunity to celebrate the gifts, courage, and perspectives they bring to ministry. Amid ongoing hostility toward LGBTQ+ people, our pastors need to know that their congregations stand with them and cherish them in the fullness of who they are.

At AWAB, supporting our churches includes supporting the pastors who serve them. Through relationships, resources, advocacy, and opportunities for connection—including our monthly Queer Clergy Conversation—we help nurture a community where pastors find encouragement and belonging. We encourage congregations to join us in making care for clergy an ongoing expression of our welcoming and affirming commitments.

Consider these ways to express your appreciation:

- Write a personal note naming a specific way your pastor has made a difference.
- Offer a meaningful gift, such as a financial thank-you, a favorite meal, or something connected to their interests.
- Protect time for rest by honoring days off and supporting vacation and renewal.
- Celebrate their ministry in worship, with their consent, through a blessing or words of gratitude.
- Affirm their belonging, including their partner or family, as appropriate to their wishes.
- Turn gratitude into ongoing care by reviewing compensation, benefits, workload, and opportunities for professional growth.

Let October begin a practice of appreciation that continues throughout the year. Our pastors care for us; together, we can care for them.

Honoring National Coming Out Day–October 11

On National Coming Out Day, AWAB celebrates LGBTQ+ people and the many ways we live into the fullness of who we are. Coming out can bring joy, freedom, and deeper connection; it can also carry real risks. Each person deserves to decide when, how, and with whom to share their story.

We encourage our churches to be communities where no one must hide to belong, and where privacy, safety, and personal choices are respected. Whether you are out, questioning, or holding your story close, you are beloved. AWAB stands with you as we work toward a Baptist landscape where everyone can live and serve authentically.

If you want to share your story or connect with AWAB, call 1-888-906-AWAB (2922) and leave a message for our staff. You can also reach the LGBT National Coming Out Support Hotline at 1-888-688-5428.



Education Partners

Welcome Garrett-Evangelical Theological Seminary!



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:**



Cambridge Drive
Community Church,
Goleta, CA



First Baptist Church of
Lewisburg, PA



Chapel of the Open
Hearth, Brevard, NC

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Member Spotlight

Check out what's been happening around the association

AWAB Board Secretary Rev. Erica Saunders preached at the annual Interfaith Pride Service in Charlotte, NC.



St. Luke Missionary Baptist Church held a viewing of “Mama Bears” and was led in a discussion by their pastor and AWAB Board Member, Rev. Dr. Clifford Matthews Jr.



AWAB Board member Rev. Dr. Ken Meyers was honored to preach at new AWAB member congregation New Covenant Baptist Church in DeLand, FL. Pictured with Ken is Kandy Queen-Sutherland, the service's worship leader.

awab Member Spotlight

Check out what's been happening around the association

Congratulations to Rev. Adam Banks,
Pastor of First Baptist Church,
Springfield, OH, on 10 years of ministry
with the congregation!



AWAB Administrative Coordinator Janet Cole attended the annual Bill J. Leonard Summer Institute at Wake Forest University School of Divinity. Pictured with Janet are AWAB friends Rev. Dr. Michael Usey, Rev. Dr. Dorisanne Cooper, Rev. Dr. Molly T. Marshall, Rev. Dr. David Jordan, and Rev. Dr. Jon Singletary.

Dr. Paula Garrett proudly
represented AWAB at the 2026
BWIM/NC Symposium.



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Member Spotlight

Check out what's been happening around the association

Congratulations to Rev. Rebecca Driscoll Mygatt on her installation as pastor of The Baptist Church in the Great Valley in Devon, PA! Pictured with Rev. Dr. Quintin Robertson, Executive Minister of the historic Philadelphia Baptist Association.



Congratulations to Rev. Kurt Kaufman, former AWAB Communications Coordinator, on his installation as pastor of the historic First Baptist Church of Denver! Kurt is pictured here with AWAB friends and installation service participants.

Congratulations to Rev. Joe Greemore on his installation as Pastor of First Baptist Church, Stilwell, KS! AWAB ED Brian Henderson, pictured with Joe and ABC Central Region staff, was honored to offer the installation sermon.



Congratulations to Rev. Dr. Carol Harston on her installation as Pastor of Highland Baptist Church in Louisville, KY!

awab Member Spotlight



Check out what's been happening around the association

AWAB friend Rev. Junia Joplin (in yellow) delivered the 2026 Melanie Duguid-May Christian Faith & LGBTQ+ Experience Lecture, "Unmarked: Transness, Privilege, and the Theology of Visibility." Pictured with Junia are AWAB Board members Evann Hasenauer (far left) and Rick Mixon (far right), and ABC of Rochester Genesee Region Vice President Soe Win.



AWAB ED Brian Henderson and Administrative Coordinator Janet Cole outside AWAB's official office—which really is a closet!—at Crescent Hill Baptist Church in Louisville, KY, after sorting, organizing, and preparing shipments.



awab Member Spotlight

Check out what's been happening around the association

AWAB was honored to visit member congregation Evergreen Grace in Tacoma, WA, where their AWAB swag is catching the attention of neighbors—and their church is growing!



During the HRC Annual Dinner Weekend in Washington, D.C., AWAB was grateful to spend time with our 2026 CBF General Assembly keynote speaker, Skye Perryman, along with AWAB Board members Aubin Petersen and Scott Green. Special thanks to AWAB friend and supporter Paul Dwyer for hosting such a fabulous time together!



Another picture of AWAB at the HRC Annual Dinner Weekend with Dr. Stephen Cady (far left), President of Brite Divinity School, one of AWAB's newest educational partners.

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.