



©2000, ABC  
Behold the turtle: it makes progress  
only when it sticks its neck out.  
— James B. Conant

# Voice of the Turtle

A Publication of American Baptists Concerned for Sexual Minorities ▼ [www.rainbowbaptists.org](http://www.rainbowbaptists.org)

Vol. 23, No. 1, March 2000

## General Board Amends Vote, Dismissed Churches Remain in ABC

On November 20, 1999, the General Board of the American Baptist Churches/USA voted to amend its June 1999 action that denied the appeals of four California churches to remain cooperating churches of American Baptist Churches/USA. The churches had been dismissed from their region because of their membership in the Association of Welcoming & Affirming Baptists, an organization dedicated to incorporating gay, lesbian and bisexual persons into the life of the church.

The amendment only changes the time line by which the June actions will take effect. By a vote of 97 yes, 48 no, and 6 abstentions, the General Board voted to postpone the date of dismissal from the denomination of each church until June 30, 2001, effectively allowing a significant period of time for each to seek membership in one of the other 33 regional bodies that are part of the denomination. "The 5,800 congregations that comprise American Baptist Churches USA are members both of regions and the national denomination; the General Board action provides time for the regionally dismissed churches, through new regional affiliations, to avoid any questions of their status within the denomination," according to the American Baptist News Service.

The churches filing appeals; First Baptist Church of Berkeley, Lakeshore Avenue Baptist Church in Oakland, New Community of Faith in San Jose, and San Leandro Community Church were all former members of American Baptist Churches of the West.

The amendment by the General Board is viewed by most people as a good compromise by which the churches will be

able to remain part of the ABC/USA. Many supporters of the congregations still believe that the proceedings in June, in which the churches' appeals were denied, focused on the churches' inclusion of sexual minority persons and not a violation of the common-criteria, the only grounds for dismissal of an ABC/USA church.

The General Board action provided agreement to stay, until June 30, 2001, the call for adjudication brought by eight American Baptist regions in response to the General Board votes to dismiss the churches. The regions that requested adjudication are the American Baptist

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## 2000 Retreat in Seattle

*Reclaiming the Word* is the theme of the 2000 American Baptists Concerned Retreat, June 9-12 at Seabeck Christian Conference Center in Seabeck, WA. The Retreat leader is Dr. Rembert Truluck, author of the recently published book, *Steps to Recovery From Bible Abuse*.

At one time or another all of us have seen the Bible used as weapon to marginalize sexual minority people. Come join us in Reclaiming the Word and celebrating the grace, inclusion and affirmation that Jesus taught. At the retreat you will have the opportunity to worship, study and fellowship with other lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and supportive Baptists in a safe and affirming environment.

The retreat center is situated on picturesque Hood Canal, ninety minutes from Seattle by car or ferry. There will be ample time to enjoy the nature trails and views of the snow capped Olympic Mountains that abound.

The retreat begins with dinner, Friday June 9 and concludes with breakfast on Monday, June 12. The cost of the retreat is \$185 per person for members, \$200 for non-members. The registration deadline is May 1, 2000. A

\$50 deposit per person is due at time of registration. Please make plans to be with us for this spiritually uplifting experience.

For more information about the retreat speaker, Dr. Truluck, or his book visit his website, *Steps to Recovery from Bible Abuse*, at [www.truluck.com](http://www.truluck.com). For registration forms or more info. visit [www.rainbowbaptists.org](http://www.rainbowbaptists.org) or contact us by mail, phone or email ▼

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# A Family Outing

By Jim Singletary

When my partner Jim received an invitation to preach one Sunday on Martha's Vineyard, we both looked forward to the opportunity, for despite having lived in Massachusetts for a combined total of 12 years, it was a part of New England that neither of us had ever been. Being overrun every summer with tourists, and not made any better by regular presidential visits, it's the sort of place that those of us who hate crowds find more reasons to avoid than to visit. But this would be a Sunday in late February, and since my partner's two sons, ages 10 and 8, spend their weekends with us, it seemed like a great opportunity for a real family outing.

Well, like many such planned excursions, the day held in store more than we bargained for. No, we didn't experience any disasters on that day, the ferry didn't capsize or anything like that, nor did the rain that came in the afternoon quite qualify as a dreaded "nor'easter," but we were confronted with one of those incidental experiences that remind us that living honest queer lives out of the closet is a bit more complicated than we are sometimes willing to believe.

The drive to the ferry dock on Cape Cod would take a full two hours from our home in Salem, which meant having to rustle up a couple of cranky boys very early on the Sunday morning, though a couple of Happy Meal breakfasts kept them pretty well pacified on the way down. Although the kids wanted to listen to music on the radio, I couldn't quite take their favored hip hop that early in the morning, so after surfing the dial a bit we settled for what we thought at the time was a local public radio station. The reason we thought we had public radio was because we found ourselves listening to a rather lengthy and impressively well balanced news profile of an "ex-gay ministry," in which the voice of reason coming from a representative of the Human Rights Campaign was more or less given the last word. Jim and I were delighted to discover that the station we had been listening to was in fact a local pop music station fulfilling their FCC mandated public affairs programming requirement on a Sunday

morning. We just wished the spot had run at a time when more of the regular listeners would have been likely to hear it. Nevertheless, Jim and I had to agree that it was nice to think that honest treatments of gay lives have finally hit the mainstream. Yet when we finally arrived on the island, we were reminded that for all that newfound honesty and openness in the secular media, churches can be an altogether different matter.

When the ferry arrived, we were delighted to be greeted at the pier by Roger Spinney, the pastor of the church who extended the invitation to Jim to preach. As it turned out, Roger was on vacation that week, and didn't know if he was going to be at church that day or not. He only knew that he didn't want to have to produce a sermon. As it turned out, Roger did decide to stick around and served as our tour guide later in the day. But since Roger was not planning to be a part of the service at all, the task of introducing Jim fell to the liturgist. In her introduction she mentioned his professional credentials and a bit more about his background. But as for personal info, she noted only that Jim was a "fine fella" who was present on that day with his two sons.

Now, it was a small enough church, and this being decidedly the non-tourist season, that everyone in the congregation would have easily been able to identify the preacher's two sons, sitting in full view in the front pew. But the congregants must have been

somewhat perplexed regarding the identity of the tall, equally unknown man, sitting between them. When Jim took the lectern after the intro, he felt obliged to fill in the congregation on the identity of the mystery man by mentioning that he was also "also here today with his friend Jim Singletary."

It felt good to be acknowledged, and for me, to be described as a "friend" was perfectly satisfactory. But as I discovered later, on the long drive home, having me relegated to the status of "friend" was not satisfactory to Jim. In fact, he felt terrible about it, but admitted that he didn't want to take a chance on getting a friend and colleague, the pastor of this church, in trouble. Especially since Roger proved to be such a gracious host, taking us out to brunch at the famous Black Dog Tavern, then for a tour of the island, including (appropriately enough) the stunning cliffs at Gay Head.

It is no doubt a friendly church, and gracious in their interaction with us during coffee hour. And we were quite impressed that it seemed so racially and socio-economically diverse; the liturgist herself was an African-American woman. But has that same level of diversity has yet extended to the issue of sexual orientation? If it is anything like the great majority of Baptist Churches then it is quite unlikely.

Perhaps we are being a bit too hard on this church and are second-guessing the situation. Perhaps the question of Jim's sexuality would not have been a problem if it had been made clear from the beginning. These were the things Jim and I discussed many hours later, after the long wet drive home, over a well deserved delicious Thai dinner. Jim, still

**Voice of the Turtle** is published by  
**American Baptists Concerned**



American Baptists Concerned is the national Baptist caucus advocating the inclusion and affirmation of sexual minority people. The name or address of a person or business herein is not to be construed as an indication of sexual orientation.

If you are interested in further information about American Baptists Concerned, or would like to submit writing, please write to the preceding address. We are always interested in having writing submitted by our readers.

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feeling guilty about not being able to publicly acknowledge me as his partner, came to the decision that hereafter, he would refuse to be a kind of gay Uncle Tom, shying away from any implication of making waves to protect the status quo. Whenever he is asked to preach, he will confirm with the pastor that he will be bringing his partner and will be introducing him from the pulpit.

Given the controversy currently raging in many regions of our denomination over the inclusion of gays and lesbians as members in our churches, it stands to reason that none of us can really take for granted how congregations will feel about out gay and lesbian ministers. As gay and lesbian and bisexual Baptists, our struggle for a place at the table (to use author Bruce Bawer's phrase) depends on our visibility. But we cannot afford to win that visibility at the expense of putting our straight (and sometimes gay) allied in professional jeopardy, thus risking those vital allegiances. Real danger does exist, but it is truly counter productive if we avoid opportunities to make our presence known and our voices heard when the danger is more perceptual than evidentiary. I feel that Jim made the correct decision in the pulpit on that day, especially considering it had to be made in a split second. But, as we both realized later, it might have been avoided had we taken proper precautions, which will be done in the future. So I hope if you are an active queer clergy or lay person, I hope you are as far out of the closet as you can possibly be, and I hope our little learning experience can be of help to you as well.



# General Board Amends Vote

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Churches of Connecticut, American Baptist Churches of Metro Chicago, American Baptist Churches of Metropolitan New York, Philadelphia Baptist Association, American Baptist Churches of Massachusetts, American Baptist Churches of the Rochester/Genesee Region, the American Baptist Churches of Wisconsin and the American Baptist Churches of the South.

The regions had alleged the General Board actions lacked procedural due process and violated local church autonomy. They also contend that it had not been proven that the churches had violated the common-criteria (Standing Rule 5.1) to which all cooperating churches subscribe.

The regions agreed to stay the call for adjudication upon adoption of the change in the time line for dismissal and upon commitment of the General Board and the General Executive Council to participate in the "Common Ground" process of discussion and understanding regarding the issue of the churches' denominational status. The regions agreed that adjudication proceedings will be dismissed without prejudice as soon as each of the four churches has either had a new regional relationship recognized by the General Board or failed to establish a new regional relationship by June 30, 2001.

action was brought by representative William Apel of Oregon. The motion read: "In order to help resolve certain pending issues including eight adjudications between regions and the General Board, and in order to minimize conflicts which divide us and distract us from doing the work of the Lord to which we are called, I move that the General Board amend each of its votes of June 20 and 21, 1999 concerning appeals of the First Baptist Church of Berkeley, Lakeshore Avenue Baptist Church, the New Community of Faith, and the San Leandro Community Church to read as follows: 'The appeal is denied, such denial to take effect as of June 30, 2001.'"

At a meeting in Philadelphia in September, between representatives of the dismissed churches and most of the regions requesting adjudication, a pledge was made to provide regional support to the churches. It was also decided that each of the churches will apply to a different region. This will prevent any one region from becoming a target of any faction within the denomination. First Baptist Church of Granville, Ohio, whose appeal was upheld in June, pending review, has now been accepted into American Baptist Churches of the Rochester/Genesee Region.

*Portions from the American Baptist News Service*

The motion to amend the General Board



## Need Someone to Talk To?

Fenway Community Health Center's Gay and Lesbian Help line offers a wide range of information and support for adults and youth.

**1-888-340-GLBT (4528)**  
Adults 21 and over

**1-800-399-PEER (7337)**  
High school and college-age teens peer listening line

## Don't Let God's Children Be Victims of Intolerance



Matthew Shepard  
1977 - 1998

Art by Dick Alexander

"Matt is loved by God. It is love that has radiated out of the midst of this tragedy, love which empowers his parents to speak compassion rather than condemnation, love which inspired his friends to acts of prayer and witness, love which is more powerful than any voice of hate.

He was not always a winner according to the world's standards. He struggled to fit into a world not always kind to gentle spirits. What was important to Matt was to care, to help to nurture, to bring joy to others in his quiet, gentle way."

— Rev. Anne Kitch

## As We Approach The Next Millennium, Where Are We As American Baptists?

By Heather Rittenhouse

Where are we as American Baptists as we approach the millennium? As a lifelong American Baptist, I have found this question surfacing in my mind more and more regularly as the new year, and new century, nears. Certainly for those of us who represent the affirmation of sexual minority persons in the ABC, this past year has been a disturbing and disheartening one in light of the General Board's June decision to exclude several of our sister churches from fellowship on the basis of their inclusive ministry to gays and lesbians. How do we survive as a family of faith in the midst of such division and disagreement? *Can* we survive as a family of faith, agreeing to disagree and reconcile our differences before we are irrevocably and irreversibly severed?

As I have sought some clarity and insight into these questions and where we are as a denomination, I am struck by the fact that what is happening right now in my family of faith is very similar to what is happening in my family of origin. Just as a number of local churches have gradually reached their point of "coming out" to the larger ABC family as being welcoming and affirming (and yes, that number has been much higher than just the four California and one Ohio churches that have been on the front lines of late!), I have undergone my own personal journey of coming out to my family as happily lesbian. While it would be an understatement to say that neither family has been especially overjoyed to hear this news, I am not sure whether they have found it more disconcerting that we really are who we say we are or that we can be so happy and at peace while being who we are. At any rate, I have found myself caught in the painful vortex of these two families struggling with the reality that all is not as they thought, trying to come to grips with a family member that no longer acts or thinks or says the words of the script that has seemingly held us together for so long.

We are, all of us I believe, in a period of

wrestling with the angel, similar to the experience of Jacob in Genesis 32. This is a passage that has always intrigued me; I have continually been fascinated by the idea that Jacob, a mere human, could successfully engage in a physical tussle with a divine being and not immediately be crushed into dust. After all, aren't most of us taught as children in our faith that none of us can hold a candle to the tiniest ounce of God's power and might? Yet, on one level, this text is as much about our wrestling with the other members of our family as it is about our wrestling with God. Jacob had spent his whole life wrestling with his family — first with his brother, Esau, over birthrights and paternal favor, then with his father, Isaac, over his place of legacy in the family line, and finally with his father-in-law, Laban, over wives and property. Each time the struggle centered around each party's desires to be on top in the relationship and to be heard as people with something important to say. Without a doubt, we, like Jacob, are in conflict with our family members. As a family of faith, we wrestle with each other to try to be heard and understood, valued and recognized, perhaps even obeyed and favored. We cannot agree upon who should be in the family and who should be left outside the gates; we cannot hear or voice the pain and fear behind our actions; we cannot at times even come to the table to talk about what it is that makes us a family in the first place. We as American Baptists are a family in terrible conflict, wrestling with each other as we try to understand who we are and where we have been. Some of the family has been displaced and the pain that is felt is heavy and piercing. We are not OK, we are not at peace with each other, and so we wrestle together through the night.

I experience this struggle in the same kinds of ways as have many of you. Perhaps you were there with me at the Biennial meeting when the word of the General Board vote became known and the breath was taken from us, as if we had been punched hard in

the stomach and thrown onto the ground, gasping for air. Perhaps you were among those who marched into the meeting hall holding rocks or crosses, or who sang hymns of freedom and peace in the hallway until your throats ached as much as your hearts. Perhaps you felt, as I did, that the family all of a sudden got a little smaller and a lot sadder because you and I were no longer welcome at the table. Perhaps even some of you experienced the crippling weight of returning home and discovering that your family of origin felt the same way as did your family of faith, and the wrestling began all over again.

Yet despite our pain and our struggle, the story is not as bleak as it may seem. Although Jacob's struggle with the angel was torturous and exhausting, that incident also marked for him his great moment of truth, the moment when his eyes were opened and he understood for the first time what God was trying to do in his life. I believe that this is a moment of truth for us as well, a time when we have the potential to have our eyes opened and emerge from our wrestling as people changed by what we have experienced. This is indeed a moment of truth for us as we struggle to define who we are and construct some new guidelines regarding how we relate as family members. Unfortunately, for the ABC family as well as for my own personal family, we could choose to go our own separate ways and remain closed, estranged, divided, scarred. We could let the chasm between us grow to the point where it cannot be bridged, or we can choose to be reconciling, peaceful sisters and brothers, parents and children who can finally greet each other in love, as Jacob and Esau learned to do after this fateful night. Can we do this, *will* we do this in the ABC? The struggle is still among us and the outcome is not certain, but anything is yet possible. This is the moment of truth for us, when we decide how we will be in relationship and what our family will look like when the night is past.

Unfortunately, much of what happens in the larger family is beyond our individual control. I cannot by myself heal the pains inflicted and felt in my own family, nor can those who have been outcast by the ABC ultimately decide by themselves whether they will be welcomed or not. However, the end of Jacob's story holds out hope for all of us who find ourselves on the short end of the stick in this wrestling match. When one wrestles with angels, as Jacob found out, there is no real chance of being victorious and asserting absolute power and control. Yet there is the promise of receiving what Jacob had struggled with everyone in his life for — the blessing. The whole point of Jacob's struggle with the angel was to receive a blessing, a goal he reached only *after* he had been wounded in the fight. Many of us would prefer to walk around free and unscathed, and many of the people in our families of faith and origin try valiantly to step over the blood oozing from our wounds, but we will miss the blessing if we avoid the wounds.

There is no blessing to be found in pretending that the issues are not real or that there is not a conflict going on; the real blessing comes to those who hang on until the end, through the wounds and the pain. Once the fight was over and the blessing was about to be imparted on Jacob, the angel told him that the significance of this moment was to be found in the fact that Jacob had struggled with God *and* humanity and had overcome. The victory for him came not in asserting complete control and power, for he did not. Rather the victory came in hanging on through the wounds to receive the blessing of God. Our victory in this struggle will not be found in getting our way or winning acceptance and love from the rest of our family members. While those might be desirable outcomes that we can continue to work and pray for, that will not be the source of victory. For those of us who feel outcast, hurt, betrayed, and abandoned, the victory will come in holding on for the blessing. Where are we as American Baptists as we face the new millennium? I do not know if any of us in the family are really certain. Yet we can be certain that a blessing is coming for those who are wounded in the struggle and hold on until the break of the new day.



## We Need Your Help!

As we move into the next millennium, American Baptists Concerned is asking for your help to continue our ministry on behalf of lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender Baptists, their families and friends. 1999 was a busy and unexpectedly expensive year for ABCConcerned. We extended our outreach, support and ministry with the launch of our website Rainbow Baptists. At the ABC/USA biennial meeting in June, we held workshops on being Christian and gay and coming out within a family. Following the biennial, we held our annual retreat.

The actions to expel the four California churches taken by the General Board prior to the Biennial, caused us to incur a number of unexpected expenses. We purchased materials to build the four wooden crosses that were carried in processions and displayed in solidarity of the disfellowshipped churches at the biennial. We acquired a half-ton of rocks that were carried by people from the Welcoming &

Affirming Baptists worship to the Veterans Auditorium and the prayer wall in support of the four congregations, and had the rocks removed afterward. We also produced much literature that was used to inform people of the un-Baptist action and how it threatened local church autonomy and Baptist freedom.

In the coming year, we want to expand Rainbow Baptists, participate in the Millennium march in Washington, D.C. in April, take part in the Welcome 2000 gathering of welcoming church groups in August, and make our June retreat in Seattle an outstanding event for sexual minority and supportive Baptists. We also want to resume quarterly publication of Voice of the Turtle, which we have been unable to do, partly because of insufficient funds. Please help us sustain our ministry and continue to outreach to those who feel alienated and abandoned by the church. Help us share the affirmation and grace of God's love.




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## WOW 2000 Gathering

*Witness Our Welcome: God's Promise is for You*, the first ever ecumenical gathering of the "welcoming churches" movement. Some 2000 participants from eight denominations in the U.S. and Canada are expected to attend. A meeting for people from the ABC/USA and Association of Welcoming & Affirming Baptists will be structured as part of the event and will take the place of the AWAB gathering which is held in alternative years from the ABC biennial.

Planning for the events, which will take place at Northern Illinois University in DeKalb, about 60 miles west of Chicago, is well advanced. Speakers and leaders who are already confirmed include Jimmy Creech, Chris Glaser, Carter Heyward, Virginia Ramey Mollenkott, Jane Spahr, Mel White, and Walter Wink.

For additional information and registration material, contact WOW 2000, PMB #111, 5250

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# An Open Letter on the Future of the ABC

## The Time for Dialogue is Over!

Brothers and Sisters in Christ,

As a concerned member of an American Baptist church and one who has grown up in ABC churches, I have watched the developments and process of the General Board and spoken with several of its members about the issues involving disfellowshipped churches. Though a stay of execution has been granted to these churches, and many in the theological center of our denomination seem placated with the board's decision at the fall meeting, the danger to our denomination is now even closer at hand.

A collective sigh of relief rose from some around our denomination when the General Board allowed the four disfellowshipped churches in California time to seek membership in a different regional organization than the one that threw them out. There is a feeling that I have sensed that many on the inclusive side of the issue believe that cooler heads have prevailed, the immediate problem is put off if not solved and we can continue to dialogue about human sexuality and inclusiveness with our Conservative/Evangelical brothers and sisters in the ABC - all in the hope of finding "common ground." Just the opposite is true.

The issues of human sexuality, Welcoming and Affirming churches, disfellowshipping and the Authority of Scripture are woven into a fabric - in the ABC and other denominations - that is tailor made to unravel.

The regions that have called for adjudication have pulled back and once again there is a call from the middle for dialogue on the issues of human sexuality. The General Board is ready to exercise its new tool of Common Ground process for dialogue and many seem to think that the darkest of the days are now behind us.. But those who believe that this problem will be solved by any process of dialogue have completely misunderstood our conservative/evangelical wing (CEW).

For those who would support disfellowshipping, this is not an issue about homosexuality or human sexuality. The issue - in its entirety - is one of Scriptural Authority,

the Inerrancy of Scripture as seen through the lens of *Verbal Inspiration of Scripture* (or a similar theory). Anyone who believes it possible to dialogue with the CEW on any other basis than this has failed to understand the entire debate.

No scientific, medical, sociologic, societal or historic arguments will hold any water with the CEW. Likewise any theological argument based on understandings other than a literal scriptural understanding is pointless. No one is going to change the fundamental beliefs of our CEW friends, to attempt to do so is futile.

Where does this leave us? Can the ABC manage to sustain the extremes of diversity? What is there to talk about?

The answers to these questions are difficult and troubling. Unless the freedom to hold differing understandings of Scriptural Inspiration, Inerrancy, and Authority can be accepted by all, without using the majority opinions to dictate membership requirements for individuals and churches, this denomination will unravel. But how can the CEW be faithful to their beliefs and yet remain in a denomination that does not share them. For them it is a simple and theologically correct answer, they can not. Either they must find a way to change the ABC or they must leave it. This is precisely the motivation behind the American Baptist Evangelical's (ABE's) call for "Renewal."

The CEW in conjunction with the ABE have over the past several years been attempting to change the ABC, purify and cleanse it by rallying the conservative and evangelical members of ABC with a call for denominational standards for membership that conform to their understandings of scripture. This is most evident in the ABE's call for a change in the Common Criteria for Cooperating Churches. In stating that it has "become necessary to add biblical standards to the Covenant of Relationships and the Common Criteria for Cooperating Churches," they offer this addition: "Uphold the teachings of Scripture and not to promote or permit practices and teachings that are contrary to its clear meaning."

If the ABE got their way and this amendment was adopted into our Covenant of Relationship it would set up a system of tyranny by the majority - squelching any varying views of scripture and interpretation. Why? Because a majority could tell the minority - by their vote - what the "clear meaning" of scripture is. In such a case any real diversity in our denomination would soon cease to exist.

Unable to foresee an immediate change in the national Common Criteria the ABE encouraged individual regions to make this or similar changes in their regional Covenant of Relations and Common Criteria. The changes that have been made in the American Baptist Churches of the West (ABCW) in this area are ominous and must be deemed unacceptable by ABC/USA. If Regions are allowed to undercut our traditional stance supporting inclusivity and sever the covenantal link local churches have with ABC/USA, dire consequences will follow.

Consider the following: First, a change in the ABCW's regional Covenant of Relationships banned membership by any cooperating church in a Welcoming and Affirming or like organization. In a Machiavellian move on the part of the ABCW, this change in the Covenant of Relationships was approved by majority vote with the very next order of business being to charge the four (now) disfellowshipped churches with violating that very change in the regional Common Criteria for Cooperating Churches instituted just moments before! The cold, mean spirited, calculating, expedience displayed in this action is unworthy of any calling themselves Christians.

Second, an action with national denominational implications by the ABCW and at least one other region may provide for the ground-work for the dismembering of entire Regions from the ABC/USA. These regions have changed their Covenant of Relationships so that cooperating churches can be members of the region but not members of ABC/USA. Why is this so threatening to our denomination? Because, coupled with statements by evangelical members of the General Board and published

statements in the ABE's newsletter, *ABE Connections*, it gives ominous hints as to the CEW's game plan.

If the CEW can not change the ABC/USA and mold it into their theological ideal - and they will continue to try for the foreseeable future - then they, like schoolyard sore losers, will try to pick up their marbles and leave. Unfortunately these "marbles" are not round pieces of glass worth but a few cents, they are regional camps and conference centers, church properties, regional headquarters and invested funds.

One has only to cast a critical eye to the recent statements and actions by the CEW and the ABE to see the plan behind them. Two major actions have been noted above. Now the reader must focus on the following:

1) The ABE, in an article entitled "Who owns your church building and assets?" (*ABE Connections*, Oct. 99), strongly supported the right of local churches to leave our denomination - even when the pastor breaks his/her vows in the "Covenant and the Code of Ethics for Professional Church Leaders of the ABC/USA" and leads the church out - taking with them all church property even if there is a sizable minority of ABC loyalists who wished to remain a cooperating church.

The ABE asks the question, "To what extent is regional and denominational involvement in local church ownership disputes appropriate?" This is a sticky issue, no doubt, and requires much thought and wisdom, but more important to the denomination is that the ABE takes the question to the next level. They contemplate whether or not a region can remove itself from the ABC/USA and retain all of the regions assets - both infrastructure and monetary resources. This is why allowing churches to be members of a region and not the ABC/USA can not be tolerated. For once conservative/evangelical churches are in the strong majority in a region they can vote to leave the ABC, attempt to take all the region's assets and leave loyal churches twisting in the wind!

In its article the ABE is clearly laying the ground work for their plan 'B' - that is if they fail to change the ABC/USA into their likeness, they will work both locally and regionally to leave the ABC and take the assets of loyal ABC members (and of course ABC/USA's) assets with them.

2) But if this is not troubling enough a General Board representative from Maine (Who has publicly affirmed his pride in being an ABE member) made the following statement at a gathering of interested parties to discuss human sexuality and disfellowshipping issues at Immanuel Baptist in Portland, ME. In response to a question asking, in general, what the future holds if the four disfellowshipped churches are able to remain in the ABC by way of uniting with other regions, he stated, "I don't know how we will avoid a [denominational] split." It is not much of a stretch to assume that this statement represents the thoughts of members of the ABE in general.

In summery, the actions of the ABCW in changing their Common Criteria for Cooperating Churches and Covenant of Relationships coupled with the above statements of the ABE draw a picture of a coordinated movement toward the reality of either theologically dominating the ABC or dismantling it church by church and region by region.

My friends, now is not the time for more dialogue. The two sides have been talking past each other for years because the statements from each side spring from different paradigms. We will not be able to resolve this issue as long as one side insists on ousting the other. This is exactly what the CEW wishes to do. They do so from a theological viewpoint that they see as inviolate, and their minds will not be changed.

Now is not the time for adjudicating regions to back away from their demands, because there can be no "common ground" when one side has denied ground for the other to stand on in the first place.

Now is not the time to be placated with the remaining eighteen months accorded the four California churches to find another region to accept them, thinking that this is one problem solved. The fight has just begun and the longer we deny this reality, allowing the CEW and the ABE to organize and recruit from outside our denomination (by bringing conservative/evangelical churches in regionally but not nationally), the more difficult it will be to retain our historic identity as American Baptists.

What time is it then? It is time that as a denomination we reaffirm that inclusivity - of

differing understandings of scripture, theology, biblical inspiration, scriptural authority, and church identities and calling on a local, regional and national level as well as races, languages, worship styles, (and if necessary, add in writing, sexual orientations), etc. - is an inextricable component of what it means to be American Baptist.

Yes there will be some who will not be able to abide this stance and they may feel called to leave the ABC. In this case they will leave of their own free will (but not without making a lot of noise) - no one will force them out. They have other denominations to align themselves with; SBC, Conservative Baptists among others. But as inclusive American Baptists, if our denomination is changed by the CEW and ABE, we have no where else to go.

The reader may think that these are the rantings of a paranoid pastor from an out of the way town in Maine, your right - but it does not mean that they're not after us! Please get a copy of "A Hill On Which To Die" by Judge Pressler if you think what I have stated above can not happen in the ABC. It is his detailed, first person account of how he and other Conservative Evangelical's took over the Southern Baptist Convention.

Finally, there may be a flicker of hope in all this darkness. And if there is any common ground to be found it is here: If we can fully appreciate what Jesus meant when he pointed out the universal nature of human sin then we will stop splintering and return to logging (Matt. 7:1-5). If those who hold to the view that the practice of homosexuality is incompatible with Christianity (as well as the rest of us who hold differing views) would only take stock of their own habitual sins and thus their own need for God's constant grace, then we may find a way to truly be an inclusive denomination. The only common ground that is large enough for all sides in this hurtful debacle is ground made of a soil comprised of sin and grace mixed in equal parts. In soil such as this does the Rose of Sharon grow and bloom. In this common ground when seed is scattered it finds only good soil in which to take root. For over this common ground, from this good soil, does the vine spread its branches, flower and bear an abundant crop.

Rev. Greg Thomas  
Bowdoin, ME



## Marching in the Light of God

By Ross W. Dekle

When I moved to Boston in 1992 I was looking forward to living in a city that is both rich in traditions and also a place where being openly gay is widely accepted. I knew from a previous visit that I would be able to find a warm and welcoming spiritual home at the Old Cambridge Baptist Church. What I didn't realize was how all three of these things would come together on Gay Pride Day. Shortly before my first Pride Day in Boston I saw an advertisement in the local GLBT newspaper for a Pride Interfaith Service to be held just before the Parade. I went and was astonished to find the Old South Church packed with a large and joyful crowd of people who had come together to worship God in their many ways on this very special day. I soon learned that not only was this service a long standing Boston tradition, it also is the oldest such service in the country. It wasn't long before I found myself representing my church and the local chapter of American Baptists Concerned on the planning committee now called the Pride Interfaith Coalition.

1999 was the twenty-second year the Pride Day Interfaith Service was held in Boston and it's theme was 'Hope for the Future.' About 900 gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender people packed the church. Colorful banners from a wide variety of religious organizations hung from the balconies and would later be carried before their groups in the parade. The opening procession marched to the front in a swirl of rainbow flags and jingling bells as the congregation sang "Lift Every Voice and Sing". A welcome was given by one of the United Church of Christ ministers of Old South Church. Then the haunting sounds of three Shofars, the traditional Jewish rams horn, was blown by members of Am Tikva, Boston's community of GLBT Jews, as a call to worship. Candles were lit by a leader of the American Ethical Union to remember those in our community whom we have lost, to celebrate the freedom we have today, and to look to the future with hope.

Readings were given from Audre Lorde by a

Unitarian/Universalist minister, the book of Isaiah by a member of Dignity, the Catholic GLBT advocacy group, and the book of Luke by a priest from the Paulist Center. The sermon, entitled 'Hope for the Future,' was given by Rev. Joan Saniuk, the pastor of Boston's Metropolitan Community Church. Special music was provided by Boston's GLBT acappella choir, Coro Allegro and the Pride Tones, Boston's Lesbian choral group. Special awards were given in absentia to Rev. Jimmy Creech and Rev. Gregory Dell for their courageous work in the United Methodist Church, and were accepted by two of their Methodist colleagues. A benediction was given by a Lutheran vicar, and then we all marched out singing "We are Marching in the Light of God."

As I was racing to pull down my church's banner and rushing off to find our group and get into place for the Pride Parade I couldn't help reflecting on the words of Jesus, "In my father's/mother's house are many mansions." I felt that day that I had caught a glimpse of that glorious and many roomed dwelling. And as I joined my church family as we marched in that vast crowd of gay, lesbian transgender, bisexual and straight people I felt that we were all truly marching in the light of God ▼

## A Call for Jubilee

By Ross W. Dekle

I come from a family with a history of Baptist service. A history that stretches back long before the Civil War. My great-grandfather and grandfather were both Baptist preachers. My parents active in the diaconate and youth programs of several churches. My brother is a missionary and my sister is a Christian education leader. I have followed in their faithful footsteps as a Sunday School teacher, trustee, missions society chairman and Deacon. I don't say this in order to boast. I know that many people can match or surpass this record. But as Christians we can only boast in the saving work of Jesus. I am merely trying to show that I have had a long and committed exposure to Baptist beliefs and principals.

And coming from this background I must

say that I am appalled at the disfellowshipping of the churches in California. This action would suggest that our long held beliefs in Soul Liberty and the autonomy of the local church are to be overthrown in order to worship at the altar of the false idol of a false unity. False, I say, because as Baptists we have always held that true unity comes not from reciting the same creed, preaching the same theology, or belonging to the same associations. True *unity* can only come through union with our Lord Jesus Christ. Imposing new criteria by which fellow churches will be welcomed or cast out will never bring about a lasting unity. Instead it opens the door for more and more criteria until our whole denomination will be torn apart by those trying to impose their views on others and by those that resist that

coercion. And how many more will flee from the ensuing chaos?

So, please, let us return to the Baptist principles our spiritual forebears bequeathed to us by welcoming back our sister churches, and together work for a real and lasting Jubilee unity ▼

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# Georgia Baptists Expel Two Affirming Churches

**Macon, GA** - The Georgia Baptist Convention voted November 16, to expel Oakhurst Baptist Church in Decatur and Virginia Highlands Baptist Church in Atlanta. This marked the first time in the 177-year history of the state Southern Baptists convention that it has taken such an action. The GBC changed its constitution last year to exclude congregations that "affirm, approve or endorse homosexual behavior."

"The Georgia Baptist Convention encourages, indeed urges, our churches to minister to everyone including homosexuals," the Rev. Robert White, the GBC's executive director, said in explaining a recommendation by the GBC's executive committee to cut ties to Oakhurst and Virginia-Highland.

"The problem is what is the church's disposition toward the sin of homosexuality? Does your church minister to homosexuals ... or does your church go beyond that to honor the sin of homosexuality?" White said. "We believe that honoring homosexuality in this way is an error,"

Both Oakhurst and Virginia-Highland are congregations that embrace their diversity and openness, which their pastors say is a response to the urban communities in which they are located. At Oakhurst, gay men and lesbians serve as Sunday school teachers, choir members, deacons and ministers. Virginia-Highland has gay and lesbian members and has held a same-sex blessing ceremony.

"This community of faith owes an apology to no one for its ministries and for its witness as a church on mission," the Rev. Timothy Shirley, pastor of Virginia-Highland, told the convention. "The ministry that lesbian and gay Christians offer so joyfully to our church is a blessing and a crucial part of the life of this congregation," said the Rev. Lanny Peters, pastor of Oakhurst.

The votes for expulsion came after messengers (delegates) refused a request by

Peters for a period of reconciliation and conversation among the state's Baptist churches about the issue of homosexuality. "Our church has been in dialogue for 20 years about homosexuality," he said. "We do not believe such an important matter should be dealt with in 10 minutes at this convention."

Urging the convention to act immediately and "draw a line in the sand, written in blood," the Rev. James Merritt, pastor of First Baptist Church in Snellville, said, "The issue before us is not homosexuality. . . . The issue before us is fidelity to the truth of the word of God."

But the Rev. Chris Graham, pastor of the Church of the Savior in Roswell, cautioned, "There are people here today who have gay children, gay grandchildren and who work with people who are gay. They will go home with the question where, in this great body of Christ that we uphold, will those children, those grandchildren, those friends find a home?"

"Oakhurst and Virginia-Highland need the Georgia Baptist Convention," Graham said, "but you are mistaken today if you don't think this convention needs Virginia-

Highland Baptist Church in Atlanta and Oakhurst Baptist Church in Decatur."

The real was always about Baptist principles, although the Georgia Baptist Convention thought that it was about *sin*," according to Jack Smith, a member of Oakhurst. "Historically, Baptists for centuries have had defining principles - two of which were violated by expelling Oakhurst and Virginia-Highland - autonomy of the local congregation and the right and responsibility of the members of the congregation to study and interpret the Scriptures." Autonomy of the local congregation, means that local churches set their own course in ministry and congregational life. At Oakhurst every member is a minister - no one is a second-class member, according to Smith. On the interpreting of the Scriptures, he says Oakhurst has struggled mightily with the issue of homosexuality for twenty years. Consensus has come down that the Bible says that there is room at God's table for all.

"This violation of Baptist principles by the Georgia Baptist Convention will have consequence beyond expelling Oakhurst and Virginia-Highland, and naming homosexuality as sin," says Smith "Who will be the next congregation to be expelled and because of what sin?"

*Portions from the  
Atlanta Journal-Constitution*



## FBC Granville Joins Rochester/Genesee Region

The First Baptist Church of Granville, Ohio, was welcomed into the American Baptist Churches of the Rochester/Genesee Region in November. Bright yellow signs announcing "Welcome, First Baptist Church of Granville" were scattered around Colgate Rochester Divinity School where the meeting was held.

The move which requires denominational approval received the required approval by the General Board at its November 1999 meeting. ▼

## Join the Millennium March for LGBT Rights

On April 30, 2000 join the Millennium March on Washington (MMOW). It is the fourth national civil rights march to promote equal rights for all gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender individuals. American Baptists Concerned is a supporter of the march.

If you're going to Washington for the march and rally and would like to connect with other American Baptists Concerned members or groups, please let us know. We will do our best to put you in touch ▼

# Reflections on Lynchburg

By Doug Donley

I never even got close enough to the Rev. Jerry Falwell to touch him, make eye contact or shake his hand. But that's all right. There were enough people doing that. Besides, I figured it was more important for him to shake hands with and encounter gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender (gltb) folk than this non-gay white guy, even though he is a fellow Baptist Pastor. I was much more interested in meeting his people.

I was one of 200 people who traveled to Lynchburg, Virginia recently to meet the Rev. Jerry Falwell and his cohorts in order to encourage them to tone down the rhetoric against the sexual minority community. I was one of seven people from the Bay Area, including fellow church member Dave Chandler. We know so well that *hate* speech leads to violence. We also know that hate speech comes from ignorance. We all had stories to share. And we were determined to share them. A month ago, I wrote Jerry Falwell a letter and in it I said:

"Many of the gay and lesbian members of my community would not dare step foot in a church, let alone a Baptist church. They have been too wounded by the judgmental, cruel and shortsighted pronouncements made by Baptist ministers such as yourself. Many have contemplated suicide. Many have lost their faith in God. As a fellow minister, I know this must horrify you. Sadly, people less intelligent than you and I will see your attacks against gay and lesbian people as justification for their own violence against gay and lesbians. I pray that you will cease using public media to spread fear and misunderstanding about homosexual people."

This is personal to me. I was denied ordination twice because I would not say homosexuality was a sin and I now serve as Pastor of San Francisco's only Welcoming and Affirming Baptist church. Most gay members of my church have been the victims of gay-bashing at one time or another. I am also a brother of a lesbian sister and I would not dream of encouraging her to change her orientation since it is part of who she is. I see her orientation as a gift from God. That's why I had to go to Lynchburg.

The people who traveled to Lynchburg were not pie-in-the-sky passive pawns. No, we were committed to active nonviolence. We each logged on to [www.soulforce.org](http://www.soulforce.org) and took a seventeen-step course in nonviolent social change. *Ain't* the

internet great? For months, we prayed for Jerry and his followers. We prayed that our spirits be renewed. We knew that if we were not able to love Jerry, yes—love Jerry Falwell, then we were not ready for this encounter.

The nonviolence training changed me. Nonviolence has two goals. The first is your own personal spiritual renewal. The second goal is to transform society. As an activist for the past two decades, I can tell you that I have heavily weighted my activity on the other side—the transforming of society side. I will march down streets. I will get arrested. I will preach. But I will also let my anger get the better of me. I will fall into the abyss of depression. My words will contain the bite and sting of distrust and cynicism. Who wants a transformed society with a bunch of people who look and act like that? The weekend in Lynchburg renewed my spirit.

I had to confront the fact that for all of my idealism and activism, if my spirit was not renewed, then I had no business there. If I was not right with God; if I was not willing to love my enemies and pray for those who persecute me and those I love; if I was not willing to take the insults and the blows without retaliating—taking the suffering upon myself; if I was not willing to be relentless in the struggle, then I was not ready for nonviolent social action.

I had to come to grips with my own blinders. I don't tend to trust folks who continue to demonize those whom I love. But when I let that hatred consume me, I lose part of myself. I hand my best self over to my enemies. I walk around angry and depressed. Gandhi and Martin Luther King teach us that love is more powerful than hate. When we are armed with the truth, we have already won. And in the process we are transformed. Gandhi taught that our passion is released only when we leave behind the clutter of our lives. This includes our own petty hurts, our worry about our position and privilege. This kind of prayerful focus was new for me. This meant searching my own soul—even realizing that some of my words and actions had not been loving.

And yet, if you are aware of the blessings and the mercy of God and the sureness of your mission, I learned, then you are on the way to spiritual renewal. And only renewed people can effectively change society for the better because those kinds of people seek a new kind of community, not just a victory.

On Saturday afternoon we began to create that

new community. I sat down at a table with a student and a professor from Liberty University, the college that Jerry founded. In between speeches from Jerry Falwell and Mel White (his former ghostwriter, author of *Stranger at the Gate: to be Gay and Christian in America*, and gay activist) we rushed through our stories. One of the main reasons for the hatred of the glbt community is ignorance. Folks don't know out-of-the-closet gay folks. Too few folks know "straight" Baptist ministers who welcome glbt people as full members of their congregations without making them change their sexual orientation. We came armed with the truth. Jesus said, "you shall know the truth and the truth shall set you free."

The college junior sitting at my table had decided only the day before that she would attend. If they were judgmental against us, it didn't show. But they were nervous. Once the ice was broken, however, we laughed, cried, spoke about family, careers, friends, hopes, dreams and fears. We began a relationship that I hope will last.

Those in positions of power don't always want to hear the stories, because they are hard to refute—they add validity to the cause of the opposition and they undermine their domination. That is why this meeting was so historic. For the first time, we were able to share our stories one with another across the gulf that divides too many of us. We tend to demonize our opponents, which keeps us where we are. And there is an odd safety in tradition, in predictability. But it also rots our souls.


Jerry Falwell surprised me. He surprised us. He started out by apologizing for his violent words and vitriolic fundraising letters. He vowed to watch his words and his actions very carefully. When he told parents of gays and lesbians to love their children and not kick them out of their homes, we stood on our feet and applauded. Mel White was right when he said, "Jerry, that statement alone will save lives." Jerry Falwell took a huge chunk out of the wall of division which he helped to create. The wall is still pretty much intact, but it's not as strong as it used to be.

Jerry Falwell has a long way to go. He still says "hate the sin, love the sinner." He doesn't understand that calling homosexuality a sin is a form of spiritual violence. He still uses "the gay lifestyle" when talking about the supposed sin of homosexuality. He needs to start talking about orientation, but to do that would admit that God created people gay or lesbian. Jerry Falwell doesn't understand (yet) that having an angry ex-gay on the podium talking about how he left the life of gay debauchery to be a Christian is also an affront to the deep faith of our glbt sisters and brothers. Jerry Falwell continues to lump homosexuality with

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## Reflections on Lynchburg

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drunkenness and promiscuity—sins which he says need to be conquered. But he was right in saying that he has spent more time and energy loving those other sinners than he has loving gays and lesbians.

But we should not lose the importance of the victory in Lynchburg. Jerry Falwell called on people to love their gay children. He called for an end to physical violence against gays and lesbians. He said he was wrong to caricature the glbt community based upon the outrageous actions of the fringe. What we showed him was that a large part of this community is not a whole lot different than his community: *boring*.

One of our Buddhist friends shared the following quote which we held as a mantra for the weekend: “The thought manifests as the word. The word

manifests as the deed. The deed develops into habit. The habit hardens into character. So watch the thought and its ways with care. Let it spring from love born out of concern for all living things.”

But the important victory in Lynchburg was not reflected in the speeches or the sound bytes or the posturing. The real victory is that we shared stories. There are now 200 stories which cannot be denied in his community. We also have 200 stories and more from our Lynchburg counterparts, which we need to share. The community is being created across the gulf that has divided us. And somehow, that gulf does not seem so insurmountable anymore. I have a little more hope that if either of my two young daughters should realize that they were lesbian, that they might live in a church and a society that

embraced them without judgement, fear or violence. But it will take a lot more work than a weekend in Lynchburg.

Now comes the hard part. Not only do we need to defend Jerry Falwell for what he promised, we have to hold him to those promises. And we need to do the hard work of making this world a better place. We have to expand the use of Soulforce principles and foster understanding above posturing about crucial issues.

There is still a lot work ahead, but what a beginning. In Lynchburg, I met 400 sweet gentle people committed with all their hearts to the pursuit of justice. I know my spirit has been renewed by this experience. And I am ever more committed to taking the next chunk out of the wall that separates my glbt sisters and brothers from the rest of the household of faith ▼

*Rev. Douglas M. Donley is pastor of  
Dolores Street Baptist Church  
in San Francisco*



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