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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. 2, June 2000

## Family, Religion and Rights Are the Focus at Millennium March

**Washington, DC** - After two years of work and a week of dreary weather, fate finally seemed to smile on the organizers of the Millennium March. On April 30, hundreds of thousands gathered in the sunshine on Washington, D.C.'s National Mall to rally in support of gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender rights.

The six-and-a-half-hour event featured speeches and performances from some very prominent supporters of gay rights, including Ellen Degeneres, Billy Bean, Margaret Cho, and Melba Moore. President Clinton also addressed the crowd on videotape. Organizers had two goals for the March: to rally around a civil rights agenda and to celebrate the diversity of lifestyles within the movement.

Most attendees expressed satisfaction with the lineup of speakers and excitement at the turnout, which initial estimates put at over half a million — a figure that could make it the largest gay rights gathering ever. "I'm moved," said Ben King, 22, of North Carolina. "I've been crying all day — just because of the number of people here, the spirit, and the sense of community."

Many of the couples, families, and individuals who attended spent the afternoon lounging in the sun in the middle of the Mall, eating picnics and applauding the speeches. Others sought shade on the edges of the Mall or waved signs and rainbow flags. Family and religion were the most common themes. Three men pushing baby carriages made their way up and down the Mall with a sign reading "Men with strollers." Another pair stood next to an anti-gay Christian protester, holding a sign asking, "Since when has Christianity been an exclusive club?"

The fear of organizers and rally-goers alike seemed to be that the energy on the Mall would not turn into political action in participant's home states. "I just hope people don't forget why we came here," said one spectator. "It shouldn't have been just to party."

Most of the speeches drove home that same message. "I'm tired of marching, and I'm mad because we should not have to be here," said longtime Los Angeles gay activist Lorri Jean. She urged listeners to

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## Roles of Sexual Minorities and Women At Issue for UMC & SBC

The inclusion and role of sexual minority people and women in the church are items of contention at the gatherings of two denominations. On May 11, two United Methodist bishops were among a group of 31 people arrested in Cleveland, OH, during a protest that temporarily halted proceedings at the General Conference of the United Methodist Church. On June 13-14, messengers (delegates) to the Southern Baptist Convention's annual meeting in Orlando, FL, will vote on a proposed statement of belief declaring that women should no longer be allowed to serve as pastors.

The action at the United Methodist convention is believed to be the first time anyone has been arrested on the floor of the denomination's General Conference.

Bishops C. Joseph Sprague of Chicago and Susan Morrison of Albany, NY, were among those arrested. As the 27 were escorted from the Cleveland Convention Center, their supporters - among them General Conference delegates - shouted "Shame!" to the police officers for removing the demonstrators and to the

assembly for passing anti-gay legislation. The supporters joined together singing "We Shall Overcome." Several delegates, overcome by emotion, burst into tears, and the presiding officer called a 15-minute recess.

Those arrested were charged with "disrupting a lawful meeting," a

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# Who is Our Neighbor?

By Heather Rittenhouse

*This sermon was given at Crossroads Church in Kansas City, Missouri on May 9, 2000. Heather Rittenhouse is a member of the Steering Committee of American Baptists Concerned and currently serves as Secretary.*

The parable of the Good Samaritan is one that is likely familiar to many of you. In this story, Jesus tells of a man who was traveling from Jerusalem to Jericho and who was beaten, robbed, and left for dead while on his journey. Shortly thereafter, a priest happened to walk by, and upon seeing the man, quickly crossed over to the other side of the road. Not long after that, a Levite came along and did exactly the same as had the priest. Finally, a Samaritan came upon the man, saw him, and took pity on him. He immediately went to him, bandaged his wounds, took him to a place of shelter, and provided money for his care, while also promising to return later and pay whatever other expenses were needed.

This part of the story is one that is told over and over again, but what often gets left out is why the parable is told in the first place. As was often the case with Jesus' stories, this one was prompted by a question from an expert in the law. In an attempt to take issue with Jesus and test his mettle, the lawyer asked Jesus what he had to do to enter the kingdom of God. Jesus responded to this question with a question of his own for the lawyer. Now, I do not know how you feel, but I hate it when someone answers my question with another question. If I go to my boss, for instance, and ask for advice on how to solve a problem that has completely mystified me, the last thing I want to hear is, "Well, how do you think you should solve the problem?" Yet that is precisely what Jesus did with the lawyer. When the lawyer asked what he had to do to enter the kingdom of God, Jesus answered, "Well, what do you think you need to do? How do you interpret the law?" The lawyer gamely replied by quoting the Jewish scripture - "Love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul, strength, and mind, and love your neighbor as yourself." Jesus had no problem with this answer and affirmed the truth of the lawyer's statement. I get the feeling that

Jesus began to turn away at that point, that the question had been answered and thus the conversation was over. In light of the numerous others who tried to trap Jesus with endless questions and verbal tricks, I can almost hear him saying in his mind, "Finally, an easy one! This guy already knew what the right answer was!"

However, the lawyer was not satisfied yet. He wanted to justify himself and prove that he had already done what he needed to do to be close to God. Surely the law did not mean that he had to love everyone, so he sought a means of putting limitations on whom he needed to love. If he could do that, he could more easily fulfill the requirement and appear righteous before God. So he called Jesus back into the discussion by asking one more question — "And who is my neighbor?" Who exactly was it that he needed to love as himself? The parable, then, is Jesus' extended answer to that last question.

If I asked you to step into the parable yourself for a moment, which of the characters in the story would you most identify with? Whom do you consider yourself to be most like? Some of you, for a variety of reasons, might resonate with the priest or Levite. Both of them were

extremely religious people and were supposedly closer to God than anyone else. Yet both of them intentionally chose to cross the road to avoid having any contact with the wounded man in the ditch. Why would they do such a thing? For a long time, I thought that they had just made a mistake, an error in judgment. They knew they were supposed to help the beaten man, but they chose not to at the last second, looked the other way, and probably felt guilty about their choice later. Their faith and their church had taught them to help those who needed help, but they had in a moment of weakness gone against what they knew to be right.

But what if this understanding of the story is skewed? What if the priest and the Levite crossed the road because they thought that was the right and holy thing to do? In that case, their faith and their religion would have told them to avoid certain people because contact with them would contaminate the faith. If they touched such people, they themselves would become unclean. I now am inclined to believe that they had been taught in no uncertain terms *not* to love everyone, for there were some who would make their faith and religion unclean. Their church excluded and oppressed, and that was not only okay, it was demanded and expected.

In many ways, I do not think the church is all that different today. Groups of people are still excluded and oppressed and that is okay. Overall, I believe that the church has done a fair job of reaching out to the poor, the hungry, the homeless. A less adequate achievement has been made with regards to racial and ethnic minorities and their acceptance and integration into the mainline

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



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church. However, I believe without a doubt that the group of people whom are most excluded and oppressed by the church today are the gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgendered. I could tell many stories, as probably could many of you, of how this is true. I will come back to just one of those in a moment.

First, however, the parable which Jesus told points us to another means of responding. The fact that the person who stops to help is a Samaritan is a highly significant detail. Samaritans were the most hated of foreigners to the Jews; they were considered to be physical and spiritual half-breeds. These two clans were openly hostile toward each other and would do each other violent harm if they were the slightest bit provoked. The modern keepers of similar hostilities are the Catholic and Protestant factions in Northern Ireland, the Arab and Palestinian forces in Israel, the Serbs and Croats in Kosovo. In sharp contrast, then, to the expected behavior of a Samaritan toward a Jew come the actions of the man in Jesus' parable. He is moved with pity at the sight of the wounded one, he personally applies medication to the wounds, he provides ambulance service, he spends two day's wages on shelter and medical care for the stranger. A majority of us likely would not do that for the person sitting in front of us. We might make a low-interest loan perhaps! Yet the Samaritan did all of that with no thought of repayment for himself.

Before we leave the priest and Levite at this point, I suppose the possibility exists that they might have had another reason for not stopping. Maybe they were simply afraid of what would happen to them if they got involved. They might have been afraid for their own safety and been concerned that they might get beaten and left for dead too. We might ask the same kinds of questions about our own security today if we choose to get involved with difficult or controversial people. "What will happen to my job, my prestige, my status if I take a stand on this issue?"

However, the truly caring person always reverses the question. In his writings on this parable, Martin Luther King, Jr. recognized this truth. He wrote, "Albert Schweitzer did not ask, 'What will happen to my prestige

and security as a university professor if I work with the people of Africa?' Rather he asked, 'What will happen to these millions of people who have been wounded by the forces of injustice if I do not go to them?' Abraham Lincoln did not ask, 'What will happen to me if I issue the Emancipation Proclamation and bring an end to slavery?' Rather he asked, 'What will happen to the Union and to millions of black people if I fail to do it?'" The Samaritan in Jesus' story did not ask, "If I stop to help, what will happen to me?" Rather he asked, "If I don't stop to help, what will happen to him?"

Earlier I challenged each of you to figure out which character in the story you most identified with. Just as some of you most closely saw yourselves as the priest or Levite, so too did some of you likely identify with the wounded man, for some of you have been wounded and oppressed, ignored and excluded by the church. I want to share with you the tale of one who was like that, the story of a young woman wounded by the church. This young woman grew up in a very faithful American Baptist family and spent her whole life in the church, where she grew to develop a great and strong faith. She became a youth leader and counselor as well as the first woman deacon of her small church, and was widely looked upon as a strong role model of faith for both the youth and adults of the congregation. After graduating from college, she felt called by God to pursue ministry more fully, so she went off to seminary and did magnificently there. She graduated at the top of her class, she was chosen to be a leader of the student body, and she was so well-respected by the members of the faculty that she was selected to be one of the speakers at commencement ceremonies.

Yet in the midst of this journey, a problem began to emerge - she had slowly come to realize that she was a lesbian. For quite some time she hid this knowledge from the world, for she knew the consequences of this reality for her ministry would be high. Eventually, though, she decided that living a lie had no integrity, so she gradually started to reveal her discovery to trusted family and friends. The one major obstacle she feared, however, was her father. She knew that he was not accepting of homosexuality and she dreaded his reaction. Yet at the same time she also

wanted him to know her for who she truly was, so she decided to reveal her true sexuality to him.

His reaction was immediate and determined. The next day, he traveled from house to house, telling all of his family members and the key members of her church about her. He told her that, in his eyes, she was a punishment sent by God to him for all the mistakes he had made in his life and that she was no longer welcome as a lesbian in his home. Furthermore, he also began the process within her church by which her ordination and professional recognition would be revoked. The eventual outcome of this story is that the young woman no longer has a meaningful relationship of any sort with her father. Her ordination was suspended this past January by her church by a vote margin of 96 percent - all by the same people who had earlier lifted her up as a role model of the faith. This is a young woman who was tossed out by her family of origin and by her family of faith, one who truly is a wounded outcast left by the side of the road bleeding while the religious folk pass by on the other side.

I suppose I must tell you now that I am the young woman. I understand how it feels to be left for dead by the roadside; I know how it feels to be told, "You're not welcome, by us or by God." This is a pain that is worse than being beaten by an enemy that one hardly knows. I have been beaten by my family of faith, by the people who taught me that God loves everyone, and that is so much worse.

And that brings me to the point of this message and the point of Jesus' story. The lawyer had asked for Jesus to define for him just who exactly was his neighbor. Jesus' parable seemingly gives a clear answer - anyone who is wounded and in need is our neighbor. The man by the side of the road is never identified; he could be anyone. Our neighbor, then, is apparently anyone whom we meet on the way, anyone who crosses our path, anyone who comes to us for help. Yet there is more to it than just that, for if this is our full understanding of neighborliness, then we have no need to change. This definition of neighbor does not call us to move beyond our routines. If only those

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whom we happen to meet by chance along the way are our neighbors, then this is a love that stays on its own front porch.

At the end of the parable, Jesus asks the lawyer another question, one which gets at the heart of this issue. The lawyer had asked whom he needed to love, but Jesus turns that around and asks who in the story had done the most loving. His implication is that the person by the side of the road is not the one who defines neighborliness; the one who walks by and enacts love defines a neighbor. The Samaritan was a neighbor because he approached the wounded and entered into his situation. He approached someone not like himself, someone who had suffered injustice and violence, someone who needed help from one who could be compassionate. The man needed one who could suffer alongside, one who could act out of care and concern rather than religious obligation, and the Samaritan was that person.

My message to you is that there are many who need you to be this kind of church. There are many outside the doors of this building who need you and there are also many inside with us right now. Especially those who identify as gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgendered need you to be this kind of church. There are so many who are longing to know God and be in relationship with God, yet the church insists on passing by on the other side. Statistics tell us that almost all GLBT persons will become victims of discrimination, hatred, or violence at some point in their lives. GLBT youth are seven times more likely to attempt suicide than their peers and are ten times more likely to suffer from drug and alcohol addiction. As horrible as these statistics are, I find this to be the most tragic personally — more people are currently dying every year of gay-bashing hate crimes than were lynched during the Civil Rights movement.

The obvious truth is that most churches and most Christians are just not getting the job done. Our fancy worship services and loud singing mean nothing if we insist on continuing to pass by on the other side. Consider the words of God as recorded by

the prophet Amos: “I hate, I despise your feast days. I will not smell the incense in your holy assemblies. Though you bring me offerings, I will not accept them. Shut up your noisy singing. I will not listen to the music of your orchestras and choirs. Instead, let justice run down as waters, and righteousness as a mighty stream.”

Theologian Dietrich Bonhoeffer said, “The role of a Christian is not just to bandage the victims pulled out from under the wheel, but to put a spoke in the wheel itself.” I know that you are a congregation that affirms the faith, witness, and experience of GLBT persons, a church that bandages the victims pulled out from under the wheel. Yet I urge you to keep on reaching out — become educated about the situations and issues GLBT folk face, get to know their stories

and how God has moved in their lives, value their experience as equally important to God as your own. Keep on building relationships with them and focus on loving them, choosing to put all judgment away.

Then also be a congregation that puts a spoke in the wheel itself. Advocate for the acceptance of GLBT persons into the life and work of the church. Do not ask, “If I stop to help, what will happen to me?” Rather ask, “If I don’t stop to help, what will happen to them? What will happen to God’s family?” Put a spoke into the wheel that continues to grind out injustice and violence, for our worship means nothing if we pass by and let these things go on. Make no mistake GLBT persons cannot change this situation by themselves. We need you to

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## Millennium March

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action, saying, “If we are not completely free, then we are not really free at all.”

Corey Johnson, the 18-year-old captain of his high school football team, agreed that there was much progress still to be made, but in describing his own experiences he demonstrated that society has already come a long way. Of his teammates he said, “They were unbelievable. They were supportive the whole way through.... They shattered and broke all the stereotypes. They wanted t-shirts from all the gay clubs in Boston. And the other co-captain came to events with me and spoke as a straight ally.” (*Read about Corey elsewhere in VOT.*)

Like many of the speeches, Johnson’s moved listeners to both tears and laughter. “It’s all sort of bittersweet,” said one woman. “Things are changing so fast — Vermont and the Reform Rabbis show that — and it’s so

nice to see so many people here. And yet we still don’t have basic rights.”

Author and activist Keith Boykin spoke in support of a multiethnic, multifaceted gay movement. “I speak because not all blacks are straight and not all gays are white,” he said.

Aside from the political purpose, many on the Mall said they just wanted to celebrate being out. Ellen DeGeneres recalled, “I wasn’t out for the last March [in 1993], and I sat at home and watched it on TV and cried, because I was not a part of a family that I knew I belonged to.” After years of being rejected and ridiculed, she said, “We need a day like this to overcompensate as much as we can. We need this love and support.” ▼

Portions from *PlanetOut*

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## On Reconciliation and Radical Hospitality

Recently I reviewed a book by David Switzer entitled *Pastoral Care of Gays, Lesbians and Their Families* (Augsburg Fortress 1999). Switzer offers a limited but useful guide for pastoral caregivers in more conservative settings in which the struggle for openness and affirmation is still lively. Though his own heterosexism leaks through, the book is carefully researched and addresses the struggle with grace and deep concern.

The final chapter of this book is written by John Thornburg, pastor of the Northaven United Methodist Church in Dallas, Texas. His chapter is entitled "The Congregation as a Caring Community for Gay Men and Lesbians." This chapter is a culmination of the concern for caring community which runs through the entire volume. I have been fond of saying in my work with the substance abusing population, "You are responsible for changing your own life *and* you cannot do it alone." Though this may sound like a cliché, I believe deeply that we need each other, that the experience of community is essential to our health and well-being if not our very survival. Both Thornburg and Switzer help us understand this truth.

As people who have been stigmatized and marginalized, where do we find this kind of community? Surely we should be able to find it within the beloved community of those who profess to follow Jesus, the Christ. Yet we are only too painfully aware that the church has been among the most insidious and venal persecutors of sexual minorities. Time and again we have asked for bread and been given stones. As children of God, made in the image and likeness of God, where are we to find the acceptance, the welcome and affirmation that we need?

Fortunately, there are congregations of many denominations which have found the way to being welcoming and affirming. Over thirty of these congregations are within Baptist tradition. These congregations have stepped out in courage to proclaim the reconciliation and practice the hospitality which is life-giving for many of us.

Thornburg argues, and I agree, that fundamentally this openness in a congregation is rooted in believing how vital the understanding and practice of hospitality is to the gospel. He says, "Being a re-created congregation must be rooted in an initial act of radical hospitality. Because very few congregations make it plain that gay men and lesbians are as welcome as anyone else, merely making an internal statement of the intention to be inclusive is not enough. It's one thing to have an open house. It's quite another thing to actually invite people to come into it."

It may not be easy for a congregation, steeped in tradition and desiring to be seen as respectable, to engage in radical acts of hospitality, but does the encounter with radical love – that is, God in Jesus Christ – offer us any other choice? The focus here shifts from evaluating and judging what we perceive as another's sin (God's business) to embracing and caring for God's richly diverse creation (our business.) Over and over again Jesus shows that there is room at the table for all, that "whosoever will may come." God has made sure that the table is large enough, love's banquet is lavishly unending. The challenge for those already seated is to make

sure there is genuine welcome as the company grows.

Switzer tells us that in this type of pastoral care "[a] final goal is to bring about reconciliation within the family, because reconciliation is the will of God." It is not all right for any of us to decide who is in and out, who is welcome or not at Christ's table in God's household. This does not mean that we may not find ourselves for a time in exile, drawn naturally to like-minded sisters and brothers for nurture and support, but this reconciling work is ultimately for all. "God is in Christ Jesus reconciling all of creation to Godself."

This kind of reconciliation is defined by Switzer as: "Reconciliation is a relationship in which the persons accept and love one another as they are; are honest with one another, even when not always approving of all attitudes and behavior; forgive easily and fully; and enjoy one another." Simply said, this presents an enormous challenge. It means there can be difference and even disagreement without division in the faith community. It means there can be the kind of real intimacy which leads to health and wholeness within the beloved community. It means there is a fundamental belief in God's capacity to bless and grace the whole of creation so that we might do likewise on God's behalf.

The time is now to welcome one another in acts of radical hospitality and to affirm one another as kin in a family characterized by God's all-embracing love.



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# Breaking Stereotypes: A Football Hero Comes Out!

By Chad Konecky

*Corey Johnson is a senior football player at Masconomet High in Topsfield, Massachusetts, who found support and acceptance when he announced to his family, school and community that he is gay.*

Stereotypically speaking, things just didn't add up for Corey Johnson. At Masconomet High, he was the guy everybody liked. A gridiron hero with a great heart. He was mainstream suburbia — homogenized, not homosexual. He was on his way to a career average of six tackles a game as the hardest hitter in a football program that would go 25-8 with Johnson starting at linebacker. But Johnson's secret was eating him alive. Finally, the first in a series of touchstone moments set him on the road to freedom.

**January. 25, 1998:** A teen attendee at Corey's Super Bowl party launches into a derogatory tirade about gays, saying, "People like that need help." The effect is devastating. "That's the first time that it struck me that's who I was," says Johnson. "I got up and I walked to the bathroom, shut the door and cried. That's when everything started happening."

**February 1998:** Corey tells his guidance counselor, Connie Mosher, and later his biology teacher, Tammy Due, he is bisexual and receives unequivocal support. "It was my way of releasing while still hedging about who I was," says Johnson of the term he first chose to describe his sexual orientation.

**April 1998:** After skipping a day of school, Corey attends lacrosse practice as an observer, per team rules. Head coach and history teacher Andy Bigelow presses him about whether he had something to tell him. He assures Corey he need not be afraid. There, on the muddy sideline of a drizzly preseason lax practice, Corey Johnson tells another human being for the first time he is gay.

Johnson carefully guarded his secret all summer following his sophomore year, keeping himself occupied with off-season workouts. By the end of his junior season, he had shared his secret with a handful of faculty members. Elected co-captain at the team breakup banquet that December, he returned to school from Christmas vacation and decided to tell his parents, Ann and Rod.

**January 4, 1999:** "I walked in the house and asked my mom if we could talk about something and if we could go for a ride in the car," recounts Johnson. "We just don't go for rides in the car in my family. I was shaking. I said, 'Mom, every morning before you drop me off at school, you tell me you love me. And every night before I go to bed, you tell me you love me. I don't want that to change, but I have something very important to tell you: I'm gay.'" The words couldn't spill out of Ann's mouth quickly enough.

"As Corey told me he was gay, he was crying," says Ann. "I said to him, 'Please don't cry. You should never cry about who you are.' Sure, it was a little bit of a shock. But later, I felt like I really did my job as a parent. He came to me with the biggest thing in his life and he trusted I was going to be there for him and it never would have entered my mind not to. Later, when he told me he wanted to come out to the team, I was concerned, but I said to myself, 'I can't deny him that because that would be telling him that I'm ashamed of who he is and I'm not.'"

Ann's reaction meant the world to Corey. "It felt great and we sat in a parking lot and we talked and we cried," he recalls. "I felt like an anvil was just lifted off my entire body. She's told me ever since I could speak that if there was anything I ever needed to talk about, no matter what it is, I could come to her. She meant it."

Johnson came out to his father three days

later. Rod was very supportive. He then told his 10-year-old sister, Melissa, who was "fine with it."

**March 25, 1999:** Corey attends the annual Gay, Lesbian and Straight Education Network (GLSEN) conference in Boston and decides upon his return home to come out to his team.

**April 7, 1999:** Corey walks into Pugh's office and explains his wish to come out to the team and student body as gay. Pugh's response: "That's fine. I have no issue with that. I want to support you."

Minutes later, Corey tells then-senior right tackle Sean Stowe, captain of the wrestling team and his best friend. "His countenance and disposition changed, then he started crying," recalls Johnson. "I asked him what was wrong and he said, 'I'm sorry you couldn't share this with me.'" Today, the pair remain best friends.

**April 8, 1999:** With the support and approval of the school administration (and thanks to considerable behind-the-scenes help from GLSEN and its network following Johnson's March 25 decision), Pugh arranges for the teen to meet with fellow juniors who are also on the football team. At the head of a table for 20 in Pugh's classroom, Corey comes out.

"I think everyone thought I was going to say, 'Okay, stop drinking and smoking. Let's be a clean team,'" says Johnson. "I was trembling. I felt like I was going to vomit. I said, 'Guys, I have something very important to tell you and I hope you can be supportive. I want to let you know that I'm coming out as a gay student. I hope this won't change anything. And as for all those irrational fears that are racing through your mind — I didn't touch you last year in the locker room and I'm not going to do it this year. I didn't come on to you last year in the locker room and I'm not going to do it this year. Who says you guys are good enough anyway?' They laughed. I told them they didn't have to wage wars for me, just be my friend."

Within minutes, most of the school knew.

## focus on youth

“Football Fag” was scrawled on the back of an obscure school door and went undiscovered for some time. A community member publicly argued to have Johnson’s captaincy re-voted, insisting the teen’s revelation would “corrupt the unit” and fracture the team. Pugh blew the whistle on that nonsense.

“We simply said this is not open for discussion,” says Pugh. “We don’t need to have a workshop or a tolerance assembly. Just leave it alone. The bottom line is this school and this community are about doing what’s best for the students. The whole idea of stripping his captaincy is more divisive than Corey coming out could ever be.”

“Every athlete feeds off their coach, so whatever (the coach’s) reaction is, they’ll

follow,” says Johnson’s fellow co-captain, Dave Merrill. “I had to adapt faster (than other guys) because I was the one who walked out there with him for the coin toss. It was different at first. I wondered if people would think I’m gay. But I don’t care. They can think what they want. I am who I am and so is Corey. You can’t help but accept it.”

In the end and in almost every way, Johnson’s season was more about football than anything else. He politely said no when best-selling scholastic football author H.G. “Buzz” Bissinger, who wrote *Friday Night Lights*, asked to chronicle his season. He turned down Vanity Fair magazine’s offer to produce a 12,000-word feature. Even local newspaper beat writers didn’t know. He just played football. And he was feared for his ferocity, not his sexuality.

“I remember being a good football player was a large part of my persona,” says Johnson, who plans to spend a year interning with a gay activist organization before attending college in the fall of 2001. “Athletics will always be a large part of my life. I umpire (Little League) baseball, I referee (Recreation League) basketball. I want to coach high school when I get older. But I’ve moved on from it being my identity. Even now, I’m defined as ‘the gay football captain.’ I’m a lot more than that. It’s a platform I can use to help many, many kids that are struggling with this issue, to bring awareness, to diminish stereotypes. I now perceive the world completely differently. I could not imagine me not being gay.” ▼

*From School Sports  
April 21, 2000*

## My Gay Son’s Hell on Earth

By Sharon Underwood

**Whiteriver Junction, Vermont** - As the mother of a gay son, I’ve seen firsthand how cruel and misguided people can be. Many letters sent to newspapers about the states decision to implement “civil unions” for same-sex partners talk of the homosexual menace in Vermont. I am the mother of a gay son and I’ve taken enough from such people.

I’m tired of foolish rhetoric about the “homosexual agenda” and allegations that accepting homosexuality is the same thing as advocating sex with children. That is cruel and ignorant. Such thoughts have been robbing me of the joys of motherhood ever since my children were tiny.

My first-born son started suffering at the hands of the moral little thugs from so called moral, upright families from the time he was in the first grade. He was physically and verbally abused from first grade straight through high school because he was perceived to be gay. He never professed to be gay or had any association with anything gay, but he had the misfortune not to walk or have gestures like the other boys. He was called “fag” incessantly, starting when he was 6-years-old.

In high school, while most children were doing what kids that age should be doing, mine labored over a suicide note, drafting and redrafting it to be sure his family knew how much he loved them. My sobbing 17-year-old tore the heart out of me as he choked out that he just couldn’t bear to continue living any longer, that he didn’t want to be gay and that he couldn’t face a life without dignity.

People have the audacity to talk about protecting families and children from the homosexual menace, while they themselves tear apart families and drive children to despair. I don’t know why my son is gay, but I do know that God didn’t put him and millions like him on this Earth to give people someone to abuse. God gave everyone brains so that they could think, and it’s about time some people started doing that.

At the core of all the misguided beliefs is the belief that this could never happen to you, that there is some kind of subculture out there that people have chosen to join. The fact is that if it can happen to my family, it can happen to yours, and you won’t get to choose. Whether it is genetic or whether something occurs during

a critical time of fetal development, I don’t know.

I can only tell you with an absolute certainty that it is inborn. If someone want to tout their own morality, they’d best come up with something more substantive than their heterosexuality. They did nothing to earn it; it was given to them. If you disagree, I would be interested in hearing your story, because my own heterosexuality was a blessing I received with no effort whatsoever on my part. It is so woven into the very soul of me that nothing could ever change it. For those of you who reduce sexual orientation to a simple choice, a character issue, a bad habit or something that can be changed by a 10-step program, I’m puzzled. If you believe that, are you saying that your own sexual orientation is nothing more than something you have chosen, that you could change it at will?

If that’s not the case, then why would someone suggest that someone else can? A popular theme in the letters to the editor in papers is that Vermont has been infiltrated by outsiders. Both sides of my family have lived in Vermont for generations. I am heart and soul a Vermonter, so I’ll thank people to stop saying that they are speaking for “true Vermonters.”

I’ve heard and read people invoke the memory

continued on page 12

# Attempt Fails to Disfellowship Northwest W&A Churches

An attempt to change the bylaws to expel churches that are members of the Association of Welcoming & Affirming Baptists failed by eight votes at the Biennial Convention of the American Baptist Churches of the Northwest in Salt Lake City, May 18-21. It was the second attempt in three years to make change to force Seattle First Baptist Church and University Baptist Church in Seattle, out of the Region. The vote of 161 in favor and 92 against was short of the two thirds needed.

The proposed change in the bylaws of the Region would have added the following criteria for dismissing a church:

If the member congregation joins or maintains membership in any organization which affirms the practice of homosexuality as being consistent

with Christian teaching, (e.g. The Association of Welcoming & Affirming Baptists), thus disrupting the unity of the Region. The Region Board shall notify the congregation that it must resign from membership in such organization or resign from membership in the American Baptist Churches of the Northwest. If within six months the church has not resigned from membership in such organization, the Region Board shall notify the church that membership in the American Baptist Churches of the Northwest is terminated.

In the failed statement it is implied that UBC and SFBC are "disrupting the unity of the region," however, it is a handful of conservative churches in Idaho, eastern Washington and Montana that have sought

to be divisive. Seattle First Baptist and University Baptist are churches that have a diverse and inclusive ministry that includes people of different ages, races and backgrounds. The churches welcome and affirm lesbian and gay Christians but that is only part of the diverse ministries of the two churches. Yet, because of their membership in an organization that some conservative churches do not like, they have repeatedly sought to find ways to expel these two fine and historic American Baptist churches.

Following the failure of the proposed bylaw changes, and deciding that the Region was not able to address the issue of homosexuality, a vote was taken find a way to restructure the Region. Apparently if they can't get rid of the Welcoming & Affirming churches, there are those within the Region that are prepared to divide it, thus eliminating that which they see as undesirable. The vote to institute such a restructuring was 184 in favor and 46 against. The recommendation of a study panel for restructuring will be brought to the Region for a vote at its next biennial convention in 2002 ▼

## Who is Our Neighbor?

continued from page 4

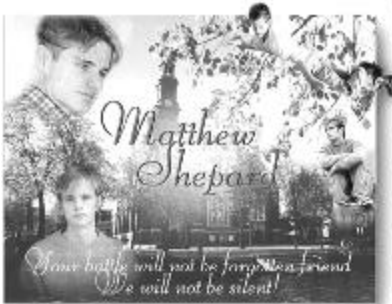
enact the love and mercy that Jesus spoke of, a love that embraces everyone and leaves no one wounded and bleeding. We need you to stand with us and to stand for us, to recognize that this is a battle that affects us

all. If one of us is disenfranchised, all of us are. If one of us is in danger, all of us are. You are the people who can create change, create a safe space. make a difference. You are the people who must do it because you are people of faith. You are the only group that understands and can enact the needed change nonviolently. You are the only group that understands the peace and hope

that Jesus offers for everyone. If you cannot offer this to GLBT persons, who will?

Jesus' parable stands as a reminder to us that what makes good neighbors is not the distance which we can put between us or the walls which we build to separate us. Rather, what makes good neighbors is the smashing and destruction of the barriers which keep us apart so that love and mercy can flow freely. Just as the Samaritan stepped out of his comfort zone and displayed the love and mercy which made him a good neighbor, I urge you also to go and do likewise ▼

## 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

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## At Issue for UMC and SBC

continued from pages 1

misdemeanor that carries a \$250 fine or 30 days in jail, said Cleveland Police Lt. Sharon MacKay. She characterized those arrested as “very cooperative.” The protesters were demonstrating against church laws that condemn homosexuality as “incompatible with Christian teaching,” bans ordination of gay men and lesbians and forbids pastors from conducting same-sex unions.

The arrests were the second of the 11-day assembly. Just a day earlier, 191 people - including Sprague - protested the church’s anti-gay policies by blocking a convention center exit. Those protesters, organized by the Soulforce coalition, were processed and released by the end of the day.

The May 11 demonstration occurred as the General Conference voted on major legislation concerning homosexuality. The protest was organized by AMAR, a coalition of United Methodist groups that support full inclusion of gay men, lesbians, bisexuals and transgendered persons.

During the morning session, after the assembly voted 628-337 to retain the “incompatible” language in the Book of Discipline (church laws), about 48 AMAR members interrupted the proceedings by lining the front and main aisles. About 150 more circled the perimeter of the floor and balcony.

Jeanne Smile, an observer, suddenly stood and shouted, teetering on the edge of the upper balcony. “I’ve been gay all my life,” she said weeping, her arms out. Fearing she might fall, two other demonstrators grabbed and pulled her to safety. Smile, who said she was not United Methodist, was later escorted from the auditorium.

After demonstrators refused to leave the aisles, presiding Bishop Dan Solomon of Louisiana called a 20-minute recess. When the session resumed in the afternoon, delegates were considering petitions concerning pastors who performed same-sex unions. After they voted to retain the ban on pastors performing such unions, a handful of

demonstrators walked onto the stage and refused to leave. Solomon tried to regain order, gently chastising the demonstrators for “breaking covenant” by disrupting the conference.

After conferring with the protesters, Solomon allowed the group to address the assembly. AMAR member Randy Miller, of Bethany United Methodist Church in San Francisco, took the microphone. “We are not strangers to this church,” he said, noting that he and other gay and lesbian United Methodist had been raised in the church, confirmed in the church and attended Sunday school. But as they came into adulthood, they were told they were not welcome, he added.

“The covenant is already broken; the tapestry is unwoven,” Miller declared. He and the others continued singing, joined by about 50 people in the visitors’ gallery and 20 to 30 delegates scattered throughout the assembly floor.

The issue of homosexuality has been at the center of tortuous debate at every United Methodist General Conference since 1972. The 2000 assembly voted to retain: the declaration that homosexuality is “incompatible with Christian teaching;” the ban against homosexual ordination and same-sex union ceremonies; and the prohibition against using official church funds for any organization or program that promotes homosexuality as acceptable.

The Southern Baptist Convention, America’s largest Protestant denomination, will bring a statement to its membership for ratification, June 13-14, that would prohibit women from serving as pastors. The proposed statement reads: “While both men and women are gifted for service in the church, the office of pastor is limited to men as qualified by Scripture.”

While the statement opposes ordination of women, the 1,600 or so current Southern Baptist clergywomen, about 100 of whom are pastors leading congregations, would not lose their credentials. The statement is not binding on individual Southern Baptists, and local congregations would remain free to ordain women. But the statement represents Southern Baptist policy and affects hiring decisions by the denomination, which has 15.9 million members in 41,000 congregations.

In 1998, the Southern Baptists declared that a wife should “submit herself graciously to the servant leadership of her husband.” That was the last straw for about dozen congregations that quit the denomination. Approval of the men-only clergy clause will probably drive out other congregations, said the Rev. Daniel Vestal of Atlanta, coordinator for a group of 2,000 theologically moderate congregations.

The Rev. Anne Thomas Neil, 80, of Wake Forest, N.C., a foreign missionary who was ordained March 19, said passage of the male-only-clergy proposal would leave the denomination “a crippled body.” She said, “Women have never had opportunity for full expression of their gifts.”

The Rev. Molly Marshall, the only clergywoman teaching at Southern Baptist Theological Seminary in Louisville, KY, until her 1994 dismissal, predicted passage. She said the proposal “signals a long, repressive period.”

The first known Southern Baptist clergywoman was the Rev. Addie Davis, ordained in 1964. Davis was able to find no position in the SBC and joined the American Baptist Churches, which has ordained women since the 19th century.

Other statements include new wording against abortion, homosexuality and mercy killing that reflects the SBC’s continued right-wing shift in theology. Also proposed is a change in church doctrine that underscore that the Bible is “totally true.” ▼

*Portions from the UM News Service and the Associated Press*

### 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

# Redemption

By Jan Wrolstad

It is always a treat to attend a concert of the choir my husband and I sang in when we were in college. Nordic Choir of Luther College takes an annual tour during early February and we always try to take it in if their tour brings them near the Kansas City area. This year was the second year in a row we were going to be able to hear them and we were very excited about attending the Sunday afternoon concert.

As we neared Village Presbyterian Church in Prairie Village, Kansas, on February 6th, it seemed that some sort of boycott or picket was happening across the street from the church. Then I caught a glimpse of one of the signs that said, "God hates fags," and I knew immediately what was happening. A local hate group from Topeka, Kansas, had chosen to protest the concert. Another sign provided the explanation, "ELCA loves fags." The Evangelical Lutheran Church of America, the denomination which supports Luther College in Decorah, Iowa, among other fine liberal arts colleges throughout the nation, has taken a clear stand of acceptance of gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgendered persons. For two blocks across from the church the picketers carried these signs and hurled hateful words toward those going into the concert. Then I caught sight of something I didn't understand right away. On the church side of the street, lined up and holding hands, were about 40 college-age people. They were silent and calm and faced the hate on the other side of the street with a surreal peacefulness.

After parking our car my husband and I approached these young persons and asked them who they were — it was clear what they were doing. A young man on the end said that they were gay and lesbian college students from Luther College and Wartburg College, another Lutheran-supported liberal arts college, here at the request of their friends in the choir who had told them this was going to happen at their concert in Kansas City. This hate group which actually masquerades as a Christian church had called newspapers in Minneapolis and Des Moines and these had carried news of the

planned picket. (Later I realized that the *Kansas City Star* did not have even a small article about the event, and for this I am so glad. They must be so tired of covering this group's hate events which have included picketing at the funeral of Matthew Shepard in Wyoming, memorial services and funerals of other gay men, and Sunday morning services at churches which are open to all persons.)

There have been other times that I have seen the hate this group brings, but the signs have gotten more hateful and the picketers younger. I see no value in repeating here what was boldly printed on the dozen or so signs that were being carried, but most startling was the age of most of the participants: 17 or so children and youth between the ages of 11 and 18 had been brought by 3 adults to carry these hateful messages.

But I want to focus on the other side of the street — where the silent youth were peacefully standing — standing and facing the signs that were addressed to them as well as to the Evangelical Lutheran Church of America. I was so moved by their sacrifice. My husband and I walked past them down the block and spoke a word of greeting and support to each one. We discovered that they had left early that morning, were going to go inside for the concert, and then were heading right back to college. Classes were waiting for them the next day.

Several of us joined hands with them and as did some passers by. As a white, heterosexual woman, I stood there reading those signs and hearing the words now being directed at me as well. I had never before felt the feelings that overwhelmed me then. What it must be like to wonder at every new door, turning each new corner what type of reception is waiting on the other side, I will never know. I was so impressed by these young people. This ugly, ugly picket was redeemed because of their sacrifice.

Redemption was to continue inside the church as well. The first four rows in the

front were tied off with red and white ribbons, matching the ones worn by the youthful women and men standing silently outside, reserving them for these courageous people. Just before the choir came down the center aisle, these 40 youth entered and were seated. Typical of a Nordic Choir concert, the 74 members of the choir barely got to their places on the risers when they began their first number.

Expecting to hear the austere notes from the Latin piece, *Ascendit Deus*, scheduled as the concert opener, we were startled to hear instead the clear and resounding reassurance of the text of Isaiah 41:10, 43:1 in a piece not scheduled until the middle of the second half, *Be Not Afraid*:

"Be not afraid, I am with thee, tremble not for I am thy God! I strengthen thee for I am thy help, I uphold thee with the right hand of my righteousness. By redemption thou art saved, you are mine! Fear not for you are called and named, You are mine!"

This ancient text, directed to the displaced and scorned Jews as they were returning from their exile, was full of hope and comfort for all of us sharing those two hours of wonderful singing. But of course, they were intended for, and given as a gift to, those 40 young people sitting in the first four rows.

My prayer as I left the concert the afternoon of Sunday, February 6, was that these words, "You are mine!" would comfort them as they loaded back into their cars and drove back the six or seven-hour trip to college classes, jobs, and their futures. "You are mine!" cries our God. Our cry cannot be anything less than, "You are ours!"



*Jan Wrolstad, her husband James, and their sons Josh and Joel are a part of Crossroads Church in Kansas City, Missouri. This new church, in the Baptist tradition, is in the formative stages. It is a community of Christians seeking to live out and celebrate the same spirit exhibited in Jan's reflection of declaring to all God's children, "You are children of God, and you are ours!" Gary Harris, co-chair of American Baptist Concerned, is the Intentional Interim of Crossroads Church.*

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## My Son's Hell on Earth

continued on page 7

of the brave people who have fought on the battlefield for this great country, saying that they didn't give their lives so that the "homosexual agenda" could tear down the principles they died defending. My 83-year-old father fought in some of the most horrific battles of World War II, was wounded and awarded the Purple Heart. He shakes his head in sadness at the life his grandson has had to live. He says he fought alongside homosexuals in those battles, that they did their part and bothered no one. One of his best friends in the service was gay, and he never knew it until the end, and when he did find out, it mattered not at all. That wasn't the measure of the man.

Some religious folk just can't bear the thought that as my son emerges from the hell that was his childhood, he might like to find a lifelong companion and have a measure of happiness. It offends their sensibilities that he should request the right to visit that companion in the hospital, to make medical decisions for him or to benefit from tax laws governing inheritance.

How dare he? they say. These outrageous requests, they say, would threaten the very existence of the family, and undermine the sanctity of marriage. They use religion to abdicate their responsibility to be thinking human beings.

There are vast numbers of religious people who find this attitudes repugnant. God is not for the privileged majority, and God knows that my son has committed no sin.

Those who lecture about homosexual sin and talk about those of us who have been blessed with the benefits of a religious upbringing, sometimes ask: "What ever happened to the idea of striving to be better human beings than we are?"

"Indeed, what ever happened to that?" ▼

*Sharon Underwood is from  
White River Junction, VT  
Her article first appeared  
in The Valley News,  
Lebanon-Hanover, NH*



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