

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

Vol. 24, No. 1, February 2001



Reflections on Witness Our Welcome Conference: WOW!

By Heather Rittenhouse

WOW! I can think of no better title than that for the Witness Our Welcome conference held in Dekalb, Illinois. Over one-thousand persons attended the first-ever gathering sponsored by the Welcoming church Movement. For four days people gathered to address the concerns of gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgendered people and their families.

At first glance, the event seemed a bit to me like an American Baptist biennial meeting – the schedule was filled with worship, plenary sessions, workshops, and Bible studies. However, the atmosphere was decidedly different! Having sat through the past two biennial meetings, feeling that I was warmly welcomed and accepted only if I chose *not* to reveal my sexual orientation, wear a rainbow sticker on my name tag, or too freely associate with those fringe groups (like American Baptists Concerned) in the alternate exhibit space. The openness of WOW was incredibly exhilarating and undeniably empowering. Attend a Bible study that not only affirmed my identity as a lesbian but actually encouraged me to read Scripture through that lens? WOW! Visit an exhibit area dedicated solely to GLBT issues and materials? WOW! Hear sermons during worship that touched me on a deep personal level because I could hear my own story named within them? WOW! Perhaps most freeing of all was the fact that I spent four days wandering through the events of WOW holding my partner's hand without any fear of what consequences I might suffer. WOW!

Aside from attending the conference for my own personal enjoyment and rejuvenation, I went as well on a professional level as cochairperson of the American Baptists Concerned Steering Committee to build networks, become more aware of what was going on in faith communities other than the ABC around GLBT issues. I wanted to gain ideas as to how we could better serve those in our faith tradition who wrestle with reconciling

Christianity and homosexuality, either for themselves or for their loved ones. I wanted to know if there was any hope to be found in the church today and if the Welcoming Church Movement was making a difference in both the experiences of the church and of GLBT persons. I especially wanted to gain some clarity on what our next steps should be to bridge the gap between people of faith who believe homosexuality to be a sin worthy of exclusion and GLBT persons who love God

but cannot find a place that affirms that God loves them as well. Toward those ends, I want to share two vignettes that served as revelations to me concerning where we are and where we need to go.

The first revelation came from a most unexpected source, as many revelations are apt to do. On the second day of WOW, I attended a workshop featuring Roberta
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Warm Atmosphere at 2000 ABConcerned Retreat

By Chris Boisvert

The weather was rainy but the atmosphere warm and inviting at the American Baptists Concerned retreat this past June 9-12, in Seabeck, Washington. The retreat speaker was Dr. Rembert Truluck, who spoke about his book *Steps to Recovery from Bible Abuse*, and shared his story of being outed when he was a Southern Baptist minister.

Dr. Truluck's book covers mistranslation of biblical scripture from it's original Greek and Hebrew texts. He writes about biblical history and the affirmations in scripture. Dr. Truluck believes that to worship the Bible above the teaching of Jesus is in itself a form of idolatry. Dr. Truluck also discusses the different biblical translations and how some of easiest versions to read, for example *the Living Bible*, are the most inaccurate and contain the most inaccuracies that can be misinterpreted to condemn sexual minority people. Dr. Truluck's book is available from Chi Rho Press and can be ordered from Amazon.com. You may read passages of *Steps to Recovery from Bible Abuse* at www.truluck.com.

There were four sessions at the retreat. In the

first we shared some of our individual stories and talked about what brought us to the retreat. In the second session, we discussed how the Bible has been misused as a weapon against us or those we care about. It is particularly sad when people gathered together by their Christian faith have to
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discuss how others have used the Bible to marginalize them.

In contrast to the second session, in the third we talked about the affirmation we have received from the Bible and the teachings of Jesus. Many people do not realize the great faith and belief in Jesus that sexual minority people have. With so many people within Baptist circles, and religion in general trying to exclude them, it often seems like it would be easier to walk away from the church and organized religion. That is why it can be so painful when people claim someone cannot be both Christian and lesbian, gay, bisexual or transgender.

In the fourth session, we discussed ways we can support one another and work to outreach to and affirm others. Many of us at the retreat have churches and faith communities that are welcoming and affirming, but there are many people that have no support network at all. It has been my experience from past retreats that many of us at the retreat will stay in touch with one another or will reconnect at future retreats. To support those who are isolated we talked about how to build local chapters and network with other groups to enlarge our network of support and our ability to offer referrals.

On Sunday we divided the retreat participants into two groups and headed to worship in Seattle, ninety minutes away by car and ferry. We wanted to attend and show our support for University Baptist Church and Seattle First Baptist Church, which had recently withstood and attempt to by the American Baptist Churches of the Northwest to change rules that would permit them to be expelled from the region because their membership in the Association of Welcoming & Affirming Baptists.

The ferry ride across Puget Sound was quite scenic, with a few rays of sun amid misty rain. At University Baptist Church it was "Youth and Welcoming & Affirming Sunday." Most of the service was led by a group of very talented and creative young people. As part of worship, Seattle First was conducting an ordination ceremony for a member who the region would not ordain because she is lesbian. It was also nice for some of us to be able to attend worship there because Dr. Rodney

Romney, a long time ally of ABCConcerned, was scheduled to retire shortly thereafter.

Although the rain kept us from being able to enjoy the nature trails and other outdoor activities Seabeck Christian Conference Center had to offer, we still had time for recreational fun. After the sessions and worship each evening, we gathered to play Pictionary, the Rainbow Game or just relax and socialize.

The retreat also marked a time of transition, as

Lynne Kelley left the position as co-chairperson and was succeeded by Heather Rittenhouse. We extended our deepest thanks for the leadership Lynne has given us over the last five years. We hope she will continue to play an active role in the future. Heather has served on the Steering Committee as our Secretary for the last year. She shared some of her story with readers in the June 2000 issue of *Voice of the Turtle*. We hope you will bring Heather a word of two of greeting as she assumes this new position ▼

Volunteers and Support Sought for Biennial Convention

As June approaches, so does the biennial meeting of the American Baptist Churches, USA. This year the biennial will be held June 22-25, 2001 in beautiful Providence, Rhode Island. American Baptists Concerned will be present in the alternative exhibit space, sponsored by Roger Williams Fellowship. We also intend to participate in the sponsorship of workshops on individual and church issues for sexual minority Baptists and their families.

We will again take up leadership of the "Rainbow Choir," inviting other groups and people to join us in singing traditional Baptist hymns and some new ones. The choir sings to remind people that not everyone who is part of God's wonderful, inclusive tapestry is fully welcomed as part of the ABC family at the convention. We will also be presenting the third Randle R. Mixon Award for Christian Service during the biennial.

In order to make our presence and activities possible, we need your help both financially and in the giving of your time and talents. Our booth in the alternative exhibit space will need to be staffed during convention hours and your help with this would be greatly appreciated. We would also like help from people who could like to help coordinate and aid in errands and folks to help with food arrangements for meetings and gatherings. Of particular need is the use of several lap top computers for use in the alternative exhibit area and for the production of needed materials during the convention.

If you are able to make a contribution to help cover biennial expenses or offer your assistance through your time and talents, we would be very grateful. Please contact Chris at 925-439-4672; P.O. Box 3183, Walnut Creek, CA 94598; ambaptists@aol.com. Thank you ▼

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.

**Membership, Subscription and
Donation Information**

If you would like to like to subscribe to *Voice of the Turtle*, join American Baptists Concerned (\$30 per year) or make a donation, please write to the address below:

American Baptists Concerned
P.O. Box 3183 • Walnut Creek, CA 94598
(925) 439-4672 • ambaptists@aol.com
www.rainbowbaptists.org

Editor and Publisher, Chris Boisvert
(925) 439-4672 • caboisvert@aol.com

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Showalter Kreider and Mary Lou Wallner two women who had experienced dramatic change in their own views about homosexuality as a result of family members coming out to them and subsequently dying shortly thereafter. Although Mary Lou's story was powerful heart-wrenching, Roberta was the one to draw me in immediately. A short, rather frail-looking, older Mennonite woman, Roberta brought to my mind images of my late grandmother, a very proper and straight-laced person who was also a minister's wife for many years, as was Roberta. I could not imagine this woman being affirming of GLBT persons, let alone be the advocate that she is! She told the story of her beloved brother Ray, who came out to her as a gay man at the age of 55, two weeks before he died of AIDS-related illnesses. She described her refusal to accept this news of Ray's reality and her hardening opposition to the possibility that homosexuality was anything but a sin. After some years had passed and her mind had not been moved at all, her congregation came face-to-face with another church in their conference which had decided to become welcoming to GLBT persons. Knowing that an upcoming vote would determine the destiny of that church, Roberta and her husband came to the important conclusion that if their vote was going to decide the fate of other people's lives, they needed to listen to them and hear their stories. Gradually over time, as they both read and listened and studied and prayed, she found her position changing to the point where she was awakened one night at 3:00 a.m. with the phrase "14 reasons" running through her head. Questioning God with the meaning of this phrase, she understood that she now had 14 reasons why she had changed her mind about homosexuality. This late-night revelation led to the eventual publication of her article, *Fifteen Reasons Why I Have Changed My Mind* and to her tireless work as an advocate of GLBT persons.

What impressed me so deeply about Roberta's story is the inherent hope that people can indeed change their minds about homosexuality if they remain open to the movement of God in their lives. In many instances, I find myself drawn to folks the age of my parents or grandparents who are affirming because in them I find hope for my own family, that we may someday exist differently than we do today. In Roberta's experience, I also find hope

for the church, that there are people in our churches who do not want to vote on someone else's destiny until they have heard their stories and put a face on the issue. She reminds me of Paul, someone who persecuted a specific group mercilessly but experienced a dramatic transformation to become an advocate and spokesperson for the group once persecuted. At one point in her presentation, Roberta recounted that for ten years she prayed for God to bring homosexuals to her that she might help them change who they were. Not one person came to her during that entire span. Yet after she opened herself to another way of thinking and acting, God brought gay and lesbian persons to her from every direction, many of whom are in the church and four additional persons from within her own family! Her recent project has been compiling and editing a collection of 48 stories entitled *From Wounded Hearts: Faith Stories of Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgendered People and Those Who Love Them*. Her own story is included in this work as well, the testimony of a remarkable woman who gives me and many others hope that even the most dismal situations can change and the doors of the church will swing wide open for all God's children someday.

The second revelation which came to me at WOW is a reminder of what the future of the Welcoming Church Movement needs to look like. On the third day of the event, the morning session began with an unscheduled address to the audience from a woman of color. She was not one of the slated speakers, but was someone who had experienced the hurt and pain of a racial sting on the conference's opening night and who needed to address that with all who were in attendance. I admit that I do not know much about what had actually happened that first night to cause her so much hurt and anger, as I had missed part of the opening session; yet I had noticed that easily ninety-five percent of those in the audience were white. In describing the pain and hurt that she felt, she outlined the racist that was so obviously present at this gathering, where more persons of color were on the platform than were in the audience. As I listened to her speak, I heard the pain of racism in a way that I, as a white woman had never heard before. The things she was saying, the feelings she was expressing, the anger in her voice were all elements I had heard in my own speech and in that of others who are GLBT as we railed against the discrimination that is meted out to us in all too many situations.

As she concluded her remarks and really called us all on the carpet (deservedly so!) about what had happened, the crowd of ninety-five percent white people stood and applauded fiercely the address she had just made. At that moment I thought, would that response have occurred among an audience of ninety-five percent white people who were not affected in some way by GLBT experience? We could stand and affirm that women's hurt and anger because we knew those feelings ourselves. We knew what it felt like to be slighted by a majority group, we knew the pain of being outcast because of who we were, we knew what it was like to have the door slam in our faces in an environment that billed itself as welcoming. Yet the fact remains that a crowd of white people who already knew all of these feelings and experiences allowed them to be perpetuated again someone in their midst — we were blind to all exclusion except that which directly affected us. I think many of us present reached that conclusion at the same time, and I am so grateful that young woman had the courage to stand before us all and voice her pain. For the revelation to me was that, in singularly advocating for gay rights and inclusion, I was missing the bigger picture that all aspects of discrimination are part of the struggle for civil rights for everyone. When we become so focused on one issue at the omission of all others -- racism, ageism, classism, sexism — we splinter ourselves and perpetuate the same prejudices against others unlike us that we fight in our own lives. We cannot leave behind our sisters and brothers who face these issues in their daily lives, whether they are GLBT or not. If we do, we are no better than those, who seek to oppress us because we are GLBT or we love and support those who are.

The experience of WOW for me was uplifting, inspiring, refreshing. I found hope there in a thousand different faces, God's promise that we are affirmed in our differentness and that every day will not always be like today. Yet I also left there feeling challenged to expand my thinking about what the Welcoming Church Movement is to be and what the scope of my own ministry, and that of American Baptists Concerned, is to entail. I look forward to God's continuing revelation to me about that as we press on our journey together toward a better day for of God's people.

By the way, if you are at the biennial this year in Providence and you see a woman wandering about, holding her partner's hand, that will probably be me! ▼

You're Invited to the 2001 ABC Concerned Retreat

You are invited to attend the 2001 American Baptists Concerned Retreat, June 26-29, 2001. The retreat will be held at the Meadowwood Conference Center at Camp Canonicus in Exeter, RI, south of Providence.

"Life's Journey and the Self" is the theme of the retreat that is expected to be an interactive experience where participation is encouraged. The retreat will be a time of sharing, spiritual enrichment and worship for lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender Baptists, family and friends.

The retreat speaker is Steven Pennell, Ph.D. candidate at Ohio State University in Theater Arts and a member of Meshanticut Park Baptist Church in Cranston, RI. Steven is archivist for the Rites and Reasons Theater at Brown University, director of Spry Theater and Senior Players of Rhode Island.

Canonicus provides over 300 acres of forest, meadows, and a 20 acre lake. Some of the activities at Canonicus include hiking and walks along nature trails. Recreation fields are available to enjoy outdoor games such as

volleyball and frisbee. Swimming, canoeing, rowing and fishing are also some possibilities. In addition to all this, the local area offers many wonderful attractions. Two public golf courses are within five minutes of the center. Ocean beaches, Narragansett Bay, the quaint shops of Wickford Village, scenic Newport and more are only minutes away.

The retreat begins with dinner Tuesday, June 26 and concludes with breakfast, Friday, June 29. Retreat registration is \$175 per person for those who register by May 31. Late registration, June 1-15, is \$185 per person. A \$50 deposit per person is due at time of registration. Retreat registration includes three nights lodging, eight meals, use of recreation facilities and retreat materials.

Please make plans to join us for the retreat this June. The retreat's focus is on the spiritual, faith needs of sexual minority Christians in a supportive and affirming environment. We encourage Southern Baptists, Christians from other denominations and straight family and friends to join us as well.

There may be some scholarship money available for those with limited means. If you are unable to attend the retreat but are able to help with donations for scholarships and unforeseen retreat expenses, your donations are welcomed and very appreciated.

For registration materials and more information: ABC Retreat, P.O. Box 3183, Walnut Creek, CA, 94598; phone Chris at 925-439-4672, ambaptists@aol.com, www.rainbowbaptists.org ▼

Nominations Being Accepted for the Randle R. Mixon Award for Christian Service

The purpose and hope of American Baptists Concerned for Sexual Minorities is to persuade American Baptists to face honestly, openly and forthrightly the questions and needs of lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender Christians within the church and those driven from the church by its lack of understanding.

Keeping this purpose in mind, American Baptists Concerned presents the Randle R. Mixon Award for Christian Service every two years to an individual whose work has helped to increase the inclusion and affirmation of sexual minority Baptists within the church and has served to advance the cause of justice by educating church bodies, congregations, or individuals about sexual minorities. This can be through education, ministry, advocacy or outreach.

The American Baptists Concerned

Steering Committee is taking nominations for this award until March 30, 2001. The Committee will choose among the nominations including those by Committee members. The award will be presented at a gathering to be held during the American Baptist Churches, USA biennial meeting, June 22-25, in Providence, Rhode Island.

Please submit a one or two page letter telling us about the person you are nominating and why she/he should be selected for the award. Please provide contact information for the individual and yourself so that we might contact you for further information. The person nominated should be an American Baptist or work within American Baptist circles.

Send nominations to ABC Award, P.O. Box 3183, Walnut Creek, CA, 94598 or email it to ambaptists@aol.com ▼

Building Community in Connecticut

Join with family and friends from across Connecticut in gathering as a supportive community.

**American Baptists
Concerned Connecticut**

(860) 342-2599, Pat
abc-ct@rainbowbaptists.org



A Study in Pink

This announcement may seem fatuous to some, but I have decided that I am pink. I can already hear the comments and the giggling. No, this is not a comment on my politics, though some of you have probably questioned my leftish leanings. However, with the “Cold War” being over, what I am concerned with here is actually the color of my skin.

When I have to fill out any of the variety of forms which ask for my race or color, it seems to me somehow dishonest to identify myself as “white.” Clearly I am pale of color, but it looks to me like a paler shade of red - pink. How did I get the label of “white” in the first place? It wasn’t my choice. Someone, somewhere along the way, on my birth certificate or my first school registration form, decided on that color label. Well, I don’t want it anymore. I am tired of the label and not particular proud of it. If I have to identify myself by color, at least let me use one that approximates reality.

At dinner the other night I shared my decision with a friend who acknowledged a similar dilemma. His skin is a rich shade of chocolate brown, so, as a bright and observant child, it was very confusing to have people tell him that he was “black.” Still, he couldn’t be “brown” because that color/label was reserved for people of paler shades of brown – shades that look suspiciously like tan and olive and beige. He and I both wondered why it is so important that we conform to someone else’s idea of what color we are.

And if there are compelling reasons for us to be labeled by color, why are we held to such a restricted palate? Does the color/label carry some other significance than just a descriptive one? Authorities are not particularly pleased by my decision to be pink. The computer simply will not process such a response and lots of forms fail to

provide a box for “other” when listing the options for color/label. But then, why would the computer care what color I am? (It actually seems rather uncaring altogether as it randomly eats my files and shuts down in the middle of delicate operations!) While we’re pondering these mysteries, why do the authorities care about my skin color?

I suppose if you were doing an inventory of all the folk on earth (or in your city, county, state or country,) it might be useful to know how many of each color you have, kind of like sorting your Legos for a big building project of some kind. But that information can also be dangerous if it means that certain color categories get a larger or lesser share of Legos, a greater or smaller piece of the pie, better or worse service, more or less praise or abuse. I wonder what it is that would make white better than shades of brown or red or yellow?

Maybe it has something to do with how we human beings are too easily frightened by what seems unfamiliar to us. “If you don’t look like me, walk like me, talk like me, think like me, love like me, then I don’t know what to do with you, I can’t figure out how to handle you. It scares me when I am not in control of my environment; difference certainly seems like a threat to my control. If I could just get you into a convenient category, then I can keep you in a place in which I can keep track of you. And if I can actually gain some power over you so that I can enforce my categories, I may even be able to convince you that it is better to be like me than to be you.”

Of course, if we’re talking categories like skin color, there’s not much any of us can do to change that, so if you aren’t the “right” color, you’re out of luck. Recently I’ve worked with some counselees who have told me stories like: “My dad came home and found me, his “white” son, playing with a “black” boy. He was furious and forbid me to ever play with the other boy again. I was 5 years old; it was at this point that I lost my sense of security and my father’s love for me.” “In my head, I don’t believe that I am inferior because I’m darker, but I cannot forget those names the other kids called me and their vicious voices. I was an isolated child; mostly I escaped into my head. It’s pretty hard to find my feelings, let alone

express them. I don’t have many friends or much social life.”

What a shame that these lovely fellows, along with so many others, should be victimized by the color of their skin. Then again, most of us live in a land where slavery for Africans was established legally, religiously and economically more than 375 years ago. This dehumanizing practice (for slaves had to be labeled “less than human”) continued for 250 years and its distasteful residue lingers to the present day. If it took several hundred years (if not millennia) to establish this hateful vein in our collective unconscious, how long will the cleansing take?

Is there anything I can do to change this state of affairs? Well, at least I can be honest about my pinkness. I don’t know how much difference this will make to the world at large, but maybe there will be some benefit in the shift of consciousness. Maybe it will help me see the creation differently. Maybe I will be in a better position to reach out and embrace the dazzling beauty of God’s incredibly colorful creation.

Sometimes I do feel stuck in this skin. I didn’t choose pink; God did give me this color. Green is actually my favorite color, but I guess if I was green, people would think I was from Mars. Then again, would that be so bad? I wonder. For now, I’ll see what I can do with pink ▼

Help Our Ministry Continue

Share your time, talents and gifts to help us continue to provide support and outreach to sexual minority Baptists, family and friends. Please contact us if you are able to volunteer or offer other support. Your prayers and donations are always appreciated. — Thank you

American Baptists Concerned of the Rochester, NY

*Join us as we seek to embody
the Good News of God’s
acceptance and love.*

(716) 392-2998

abc-rny@rainbowbaptists.org

A Center at the Center of the Storm

A New Center for Lesbian and Gay Studies in Religion and the Ministry

By Mary A. Tolbert

One hundred and fifty years ago, many Protestant denominations in this country were embroiled in a unity-threatening controversy from which some have only recovered in the last few decades and some will never recover. The issue was slavery, the owning of one human being by another, anchored in racial differences. The Bible, which recounts the presence of slavery regularly throughout its many books—often with affirmation—was touted by many Christian congregations, clergy and denominational leaders as proof that the institution of slavery was a Christian institution. Only now, over a century later, are some Protestant denominations, like the Southern Baptists, finally apologizing for their support of slavery and, especially, for having proclaimed such blatant racism to be a Christian moral value.

Much has changed but much remains the same. Today, at the start of the 21st century, many Protestant denominations are once again embroiled in a unity-threatening controversy; this time the issue is the status of lesbians and gay men, an issue anchored in differences in sexuality. The Bible in this case provides much less material for the debate, since its clear prohibitions against homoeroticism, unlike its general support of slavery, are limited to three brief references in only two of its sixty-six books (Leviticus [twice] and Romans [once]). Nevertheless, the Bible and the assumed monolithic negativity of the Christian tradition are regarded by many Christian congregations, clergy and denominational leaders as assuring the sinfulness of all homoerotic activity and consequently the moral unworthiness of lesbians and gay men for inclusion in or the full blessings of the Christian community.

Furthermore, some Christian groups—taking their beliefs into the public sphere—have actually led recent political attempts to block access for gay men and lesbians to

many rights and protections enjoyed by other citizens in the U.S., such as the right to non-discrimination in housing or employment, the ability to adopt children or serve in the armed services, and the right to marry and have their families covered by social security, health, and other insurance programs. For these Christians, this supposed Christian moral imperative judges gay men and lesbians not only as unworthy of full membership in the Christian community but as equally unworthy of full citizenship in the political community. In fact, the inclusion or exclusion of lesbians and gay men from civic or ecclesiastical participation has become an issue of such symbolic importance that it now constitutes a touchstone for defining the political and religious identity of many people worldwide. The resulting de-humanizing of lesbians and gay men because of their sexuality bears strong resemblances to the de-humanizing of people because of race or ethnicity.

Moreover, in the media and in current public debate on the rights of gay men and lesbians, this particular Christian position has attained prominence as the Christian viewpoint, which it certainly is not. Allowing only one, mostly negative, Christian position to dominate the current political environment jeopardizes a different Christian moral imperative—the imperative of justice. Like all the children of God, lesbians and gay men deserve to have their voices heard both in the church and in the world; they deserve to be treated with respect and dignity. The case made against them by some in the church demands careful examination on historical, theological, and ethical grounds because, while recent debates are often replete with passion and drama, they have just as often been lacking in information, accuracy, or careful theological reflection. It is critical to understand that the move to exclude people from full and equal inclusion in the promises of the gospel because of sexual

orientation is a profoundly serious decision which potentially threatens not only denominational unity but the integrity of the Christian message as a whole.

Pacific School of Religion's new Center for Lesbian and Gay Studies in Religion and Ministry in Berkeley, California, was created precisely to raise these issues of justice and theology and bring to bear on this current theological, ecclesiastical and political debate the best resources that contemporary theological education can provide—to be, in other words, a Center at the center of this storm of passionate controversy. The Center proposes to contribute up-to-date information, thoughtful research, effective education for leadership, and a voice of advocacy for those who have been silenced or made invisible simply because of who God created them to be.

The idea to establish a Center grew out of a series of discussions which began in September 1996 between PSR trustees, faculty, staff, students, alums, and friends, initiated by a deeply concerned PSR trustee, Scott Hafner. These conversations explored several possibilities for responding to the present situation of lesbians and gay men in the church and world but eventually settled on the creation of a Center whose work would include both the support and promulgation of research on issues of sexual orientation and sexuality from the perspective of religion and ministry and also the leadership necessary to develop educational resources for churches and seminaries alike. As these discussions continued, it became clear, moreover, that to do its job with integrity the Center would need to serve well three distinct constituencies: the church, the academy, and the gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgendered communities.

In the Spring of 1997 the initial proposal for such a Center was adopted unanimously, first by the PSR faculty and then by the Board of Trustees. The proposal defined the work of the Center in terms of four broad goals: research, resourcing, education and leadership, and advocacy and networking. The first two goals reflect a commitment to produce and encourage careful theological, biblical, ethical, historical, and pastoral research on issues of sexual orientation and

Embracing Our Baptist Heritage

Learning Lessons from the SBC

By Rembert Truluck

Baptist Beginnings

In 1610 a small group began to meet with John Smyth in London to celebrate their belief in the priesthood of all believers, complete religious freedom for each individual, the separation of church and state, and responsibility of each individual to make his or her own decision about their faith in Jesus Christ. This led to the practice of believers' baptism. Smyth's little group was the first known church that is basically the same in beliefs as modern Baptists, until the falling away from freedom that began at about the same time as the Stonewall rebellion in 1969 in New York.

These people were called Baptists. They practiced the same basic beliefs as the Baptists who help to begin the United States of America and who led in the fight for religious freedom for all and the separation of church and state in the United States Constitution and Bill of Rights.

Smyth's group later grew into several groups and began to start churches. Their belief in the absolute autonomy of the local church developed to protect the individual

believers from abuse and oppression by a controlling central authority.

Thomas Helwys joined with John Smyth and in 1612 wrote a book, *The Mystery of Inequity*, that included the first plea in the English language for religious liberty and the separation of church and state. For this, Helwys was imprisoned and died in prison. Roger Williams in 1631 read *An Humble Supplication* by another Baptist, John Murton, who wrote while in prison. Williams was convinced by Murton's message. Later, Williams received a grant of land, which became the present state of Rhode Island. Williams founded the first Baptist church in the colonies in Providence, Rhode Island.

Roger Williams was deeply committed to religious freedom and separation of church and state. The Rhode Island colony was the first political state to allow total religious freedom to all faiths, Catholics, Protestants, Jews, Moslems, Atheists, pagans, etc. Other colonial leaders vigorously opposed total religious freedom, because they were convinced that without a state religion, anarchy and unbridled crime would lead to

a complete break down of society and government. Instead, the Rhode Island colony became a model of efficiency and peacefulness. The example of Rhode Island greatly influenced the development of religious liberty in the beginning of the United States.

My favorite quote from Roger Williams is: "If you force people to practice a religion that they don't believe, you make them into hypocrites, which is worse than no religion at all!"

When I grew up in the First Baptist of Clinton, South Carolina, and entered the ministry in 1952, Baptists still held to these basic beliefs in soul freedom, the spiritual competency of the individual, separation of church and state, and the absolute autonomy of the local church.

Local Church Autonomy

For almost 400 years, Baptists consistently celebrated the absolute autonomy of the local church. Even through the ordeals of a disastrous civil war and two world wars accompanied by great social upheavals and cultural changes, Baptists in America remained committed to their individual religious freedom, separation of church and state and the autonomy of the local church.

Suddenly, in 1992, the Southern Baptist Convention made a radical turn in a new

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sexuality and then to make that research readily available to churches, theological schools, and the general public. The third goal underscores the need for support of lesbian and gay seminarians in their struggle for respect and voice within their own denominations, and also for curriculum development in these areas for all students, so that future pastors will be much better equipped to deal with issues of sexuality. The fourth goal recognizes the need to coordinate efforts with other organizations already working on these issues. It also acknowledges the fact that all research and education is rooted in a particular perspective of interest or advocacy, and that the forms of research and education with the

most integrity admit this perspective upfront rather than cloaking their work in a disguise of fake neutrality. The PSR Center passionately affirms the full humanity of all of God's children, including those who happen to be lesbian, gay, bisexual, or transgendered.

In the Spring of 1998, the E. Rhodes and Leona B. Carpenter Foundation agreed to consider a proposal to fund the establishment of a Center for Lesbian and Gay Studies at PSR. Then, as a wonderful advent gift, the Carpenter Foundation informed PSR three days before Christmas, 1999, that they would underwrite the operating expenses of the Center for five years to allow time to

raise a permanent endowment. The hopes and labors of so many at PSR—trustees, faculty, students, staff, and alums alike—were brought to fruition. Now, of course, the real work begins ▼

Mary A. Tolbert, is Executive Director of the Center for Lesbian and Gay Studies in Religion and the Ministry at Pacific School of Religion. For more information, visit the Center's website, www.clgs.org, contact Center staff at clgs@psr.edu or 510/849-8206.

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Our Baptist Heritage

continued from page 7

and uncharted direction. The convention reacted to the celebration of holy union for two gay men by Rev. Dr. Mahan Siler, Pastor of Pullen Memorial Baptist Church in Raleigh, North Carolina, by casting out a local church from the SBC for the first time in its history. The SBC also changed their bylaws to exclude any church from the convention that accepted openly gay and lesbian people as members.

My personal response was to see this as a call to action and a challenge to everything that I had respected and honored all my life as a Southern Baptist. My seminary friend and classmate, Mahan Siler, had sparked a whirlwind of revolution that continues to explode in all directions. Mahan and I have had many opportunities to discuss and follow up on this event. My web site and book are part of my response.

As soon as Southern Baptists defined themselves by who they left out, they ceased to be Christian. This has produced an ongoing and intensifying "horror show" that seems for now to be endless.

Selective Inerrancy

Yesterday my friend Adam DeBaugh suggested the term "selective inerrancy" to describe the current Baptist principle of biblical misuse. The abusive use of the Bible against women, people of color, homosexuals, objective scholars and others by Baptists has been based on the selective use of often dubious texts and the abysmal neglect of texts that give another view. Jesus described in Matthew 23 the mind set of hypocrisy and mean spirited religion that prevails in many religious environments today.

When I was still a student pastor, Dr. W.A. Criswell, pastor for many years of the largest Southern Baptist Church, First Baptist Church of Dallas, Texas, published a book that combined misinformation with enthusiasm in a powerful statement: *Why I Preach that the Bible is Literally True*. This book was one of the most influential ever in

Baptist history. Because of his success in building a church with thousands of members, Criswell became the great authority on everything for multitudes of Baptists, especially for the struggling local pastors who were trying hard to survive.

A Baptist Blizzard of Words

Because of the prevailing Baptist opinion that the Bible is the "word of God" and is infallible in every detail, words have become absolute and worshipped in place of God. The Bible never calls itself "the word of God." Jesus is the word of God in all of the Gospel of John and in many other places in the New Testament.

Southern Baptists continue to call themselves "people of the Book," which produces a sickening neglect of Jesus Christ and the humble, inclusive loving "spirit of truth" promised by Jesus to all believers.

I downloaded and read the entire 31-page "2000 Baptist Faith and Message" of the SBC which gives the 1963 and 1925 statements in parallel columns. It is a blizzard of words that gives copious biblical references without regard to their context, accurate translation or relevance to what they are being used to prove.

This all-inclusive attempt to say everything about all religious issues is a bold rejection of the Baptist principle of soul competency of the individual and a thinly veiled grasp at control through an official "creed," which Southern Baptists vigorously deny that they have!

Abandonment of Education

When I attended the Southern Baptist Theological Seminary in Louisville, Kentucky, 1956-68 for three degrees including a doctorate, it was the leading evangelical seminary in the world. Dr. Duke McCall was President. My professors were authors of textbooks that most major evangelical seminaries used, especially in teaching biblical Greek and Hebrew. My professors all had the same objective: to teach students to think for themselves by learning accurate information from primary sources and by developing effective personal methods of study and research.

This has changed. The present President of Southern Seminary, Albert Mohler, ended the debate at the SBC convention about the authority of the Bible when he said: "Ladies and gentlemen, this is what it all comes down to: the Bible is not merely a record; it is the revelation of God." The messengers stood and applauded.

No room is left for effective disagreement and debate in the present state of legalistic fundamentalist control of the SBC. A few days ago a retired friend of mine who was once a leader at the Southern Baptist Sunday School Board in Nashville said: "Most of us left the Southern Baptist Convention 10 years ago."

Can Jesus through the Holy Spirit bring change and hope in this prevailing attitude of Baptists that makes not just the Bible but their particular literalist interpretation of the Bible absolute and binding on everybody? So far, the Southern Baptist move into legalism and literalism continues to accelerate.

Signs of Hope

The great tragedy of Southern Baptists is that this once powerful force for truth, freedom of religion, excellence in theological education, local church autonomy, separation of church and state and progressive social change has fallen into the pit of legalism and the abusive use of the Bible against just about everybody, including themselves.

Signs of hope, however, are beginning to emerge. Mel White and Soulforce go marching on with truth, love and glorious commitment to do whatever it takes to overcome the misunderstanding and distortions that are destroying our gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender sisters and brothers around the world.

In contrast to the Southern Baptist repression in GLBT acceptance and affirmation, there is hope in the American Baptist Churches. Many other evangelical churches and denominations are openly affirming and including GLBT people at every level of church life and leadership.

See the great work of the Alliance of Baptists and the Baptist Peace Fellowship of

North America in their new workbook for churches, *Rightly Dividing the Word of Truth: A Resource for Congregations in Dialogue on Sexual Orientation*. My personal experience with the Southern Baptist Honesty retreat in Austin, Texas, in October 1999, and the American Baptists Concerned retreat in Seattle this past June greatly encouraged me!

The Universal Fellowship of Metropolitan Community Churches continues to lead the way in the United States and 19 foreign countries. MCC for over 32 years has given accurate information, encouragement, hope and the opportunity for Christian fellowship and ministry to multitudes of GLBT people, including me.

Millions of people are hearing the real truth about GLBT people for the first time and are listening, learning and changing their minds, as indicated by many recent surveys of public opinion ▼

*Rembert Truluck is author of **Steps to Recovery from Bible Abuse**. Information can be found at www.truluck.com and obtained from Chi Rho Press at www.chirhopress.com. **Rightly Dividing the Word of Truth**, can be obtained from the Baptists Peace Fellowship of North America, 4800 Wedgewood Dr., Charlotte, NC 28210, 704-521-6051, www.bpfna.org, bpfna@bpfna.org. Pullen Memorial Baptist Church in Raleigh, NC is an American Baptist church and a member of the Association of Welcoming & Affirming Baptists.*

Sharing Our Stories Project Seeks Contributors

Our stories are one of the most powerful tools we have against misunderstanding, ignorance and homophobia. It is much harder for someone to marginalize other people when they know them personally or have come to know them by hearing or reading their stories.

American Baptists Concerned is seeking people willing to share their personal stories in a booklet being assembled. It is our hope and prayer that through the sharing of these personal narratives we will help open some people's hearts and minds.

In order to make this booklet available, we need people to contribute their stories. Please consider sharing your stories of being in the closet; of coming out; of acceptance or alienation; of what it is to be a lesbian, gay, bisexual or transgender person of faith, a friend or family member.

Stories of any length are welcomed and may be submitted under a pseudonym if you wish. Electronic files sent via email or on floppy disks are encouraged but hard copies are accepted as well. You need not be a Baptist to contribute your story.

Submissions should be made to Chris Boisvert, P.O. Box 3183, Walnut Creek, CA 94598, ambaptists@aol.com. The deadline for submissions is May 1, 2001 ▼

Electronic File Submission Guidelines

Electronic files can be sent as Microsoft Word or WordPerfect email attachments. They may also be pasted into email as a text file. Floppy disks may be submitted in Windows/PC or Macintosh format, however, Windows/PC versions are preferred. - Thank you

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

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

Soulforce

Civil Disobedience for Justice

By Ed Harris

When Mel White sent out an urgent inquiry asking if there were those who could join in a civil disobedience action at the Southern Baptists Convention meeting in Orlando, Florida last June I could not 'not' go. I responded to Mel and he said "we need you with us, come." So I sent out a statement about going and a local TV station reported a brief interview before I left. It was great that some Baptists in our area heard about this event: a local person's involvement made it newsworthy.

My goal was to stand in place for the many gay Baptists and their families who cannot speak out, feeling that I understand their silence and hoping my actions and words would impact their lives. Surely the arrest would give affirmation and hope to all those who were closeted and invisible within the churches! It was frightening in many ways, and I've experienced fatigue and emotional stress since returning home. But I'm so grateful that I went.

Once in Orlando I quickly understood that our arrest was necessary in order for the media to be interested, and that the media's attention was necessary if most Baptists were to hear our statements. Breaking civil laws is a hard thing but Bonhoeffer was quoted as referring to a need sometimes to "lie in order to tell the truth." I believe there

are times we must break laws in order to live truthfully.

Landing in Orlando, I entered into a flow of events shared with Jimmy Creech, Dianna Westbrook and Patrick from Richmond, Virginia, with Mel White and Gary Nixon, Jim and Ken Lawson from the 50's and 60's civil rights movement, and many others who joined in the act of civil disobedience. It was obvious to me that I needed to be a part of this civil disobedience.

Tuesday evening was a time of celebration and of training, in a service at the Joy MCC church in Orlando. There was the same love, affirmation and unconditional support from Joy MCC that we have in the MCC of the Blue Ridge congregation in my home area of Roanoke, Virginia. The Orlando congregation and many others gave our action an unconditional support that was awesome.

We joined hands as we walked across the street and onto the convention center property Wednesday morning, June 14th, at 9:15 a.m. Our direct action didn't interfere with the denominational meeting in any way; we simply conducted a 15 minute prayer vigil and then were arrested for protesting without a permit. The Baptist messengers to the SBC Convention were

gathered in the Convention Center at that moment voting on the proposed revision to the Southern Baptist Faith and Message Statement. How ironic that at that very moment I, a life-long member of Southern Baptist churches, a Southern Baptist seminary graduate, and a retired SBC preacher, was the first to be arrested along with twenty-seven others.

Our treatment in jail was obviously a method of maintaining control. It was dehumanizing. And during the thirty-six hours we remained in the jail, we did not know until about one hour prior to our release, when we would be set free. As it remains now, the Sheriff's office would not tell us what our arrest fines and/or jail sentences may be, and we don't know yet when we will be required to return for sentencing, or have to be represented in the court.

The inconveniences we experienced in our thirty-six hours of jail, however, were so insignificant compared to the injustices being approved by the Baptist church messengers on Wednesday morning at the Convention Center, injustices that will in turn be committed on so many in the coming days.

We were able to place collect calls from our holding cell. It was exciting to hear from my partner the next day, that our story was on the front page of the Richmond, Virginia Times-Dispatch! At least in a number of places, what many Baptist pulpits would keep silent was being heard through the news media, our arrests were accomplishing what we hoped. When I returned home the following Saturday I learned that our local Roanoke Times carried our story, and the religious editor was suggesting a follow-up story. A local TV station interviewed me for a news spot on the Sunday evening's news, and I've been interviewed by Charles Kane, radio interview host in Chicago, about my experiences. I've begun to experience some recognition by a few people when I'm out in the community. Last night a man came up to me, embraced me saying, "thank you," and then walked away. That's awesome ▼

Ed Harris, from Salem, Virginia and has been active in Honesty as well as Soulforce.

NEWS Briefs

The highest court of the Presbyterian Church (USA) ruled in May 2000 that its ministers may conduct holy union ceremonies for same-gender couples but in June the 2.6 million-member General Assembly decided to forbid such ceremonies by a vote of 268 to 251.

Two synods of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America has voted approval of same-gender unions. In May 2000, the 5.2 million member denomination's Southern Michigan Synod followed the lead of the

Greater Milwaukee Synod in permitting Lutheran Pastors to bless gay and lesbian couples.

The Colorado Council of Churches has become the fourth such state group to vote admission to the predominately gay and lesbian Universal Fellowship of Metropolitan Community Churches. But none of the seven denominations in the Council was willing to tell reporters what its own vote was. The other three states are California, Hawaii and North Carolina ▼

Welcoming & Affirming

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- Providing support for sexual minorities and their parents and friends
- Advocating the full acceptance of sexual minorities in American Baptist churches

(401) 884-6478, Attn: Diane abc-ri@rainbowbaptists

Unite With Other Concerned Baptists in New England

Join with other LGBT American Baptists and supportive allies in Massachusetts for a time of socializing, support and fellowship.

American Baptists Concerned/Massachusetts
 abc-ma@rainbowbaptists.org
 (508) 681-8409, Jim Singletary

P.O. Box 368 • Newton Center, MA 021159

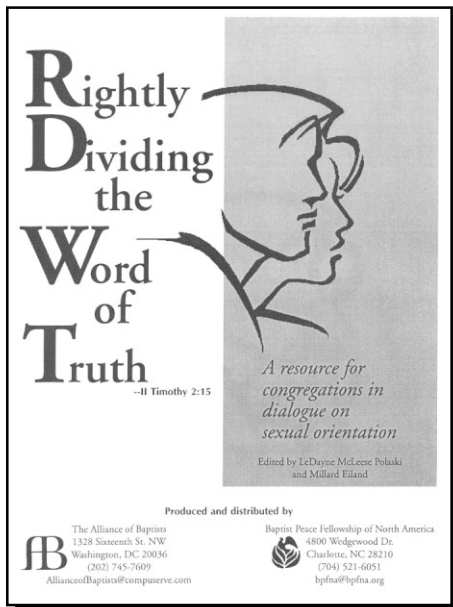
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Rightly Dividing the Word of Truth

A Resource for Congregations in Dialogue on Sexual Orientation

Rightly Dividing the Word of Truth is a resource that was developed to assist clergy and lay leader in leading a healthy and respectful congregational dialogue on the most difficult task of discernment facing the church in our time. The book, over 250 pages, features wisdom distilled from thirteen congregations which have undertaken this dialogue. Other materials include articles focused on Bible study and theological reflection as well as scientific/medical and psychological studies.

Stories from gay and lesbian Christians and their families are

included, as well as from congregations which have struggled with the questions of sexual orientation and Christian faith. An extensive annotated bibliography encourages further exploration.

The resource can be ordered for \$22.50 and \$31.00 in Canada, plus shipping.

Baptist Peace Fellowship

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