

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

Voice of the Turtle

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The Spirit Moves In Rhode Island: W&A Baptists Worship, Work and Celebrate

By Chris Boisvert

Providence, RI - American Baptists from around the country gathered in June 2001, for the American Baptist Churches, USA biennial meeting. With official policy continuing to deny exhibit space to groups deemed “unofficial” American Baptists Concerned and the Association of Welcoming & Affirming Baptists held exhibits and events in an alternative exhibit space.

The Roger Williams Fellowship’s Freedom Space was hosted by Mathewson Street United Methodist Church a few blocks away from the main biennial at the Rhode Island Convention Center. The alternative space was host to AWAB, the Baptist Peace Fellowship and ABCConcerned where information, books, literature, videos and other items were available.

The alternative space was laid out with tables and chairs spread around the hall in a way that invited people to stay and visit a bit. Consequently, some of us were able to have conversations with folks who were seeking answers to questions about homosexuality: how to deal with lesbian, gay or bisexual members in their family, or their own orientation. For some people this was one of the few opportunities they had had to talk so someone openly in a safe space.

The alternative space also played host to American Baptists Concerned’s presentation of the Shower of Stoles project. The



Biennial attendees singing with American Baptists Concerned’s Rainbow Choir at the ABC/USA Biennial in Rhode Island

Shower of Stoles is a collection of hundreds of liturgical stoles from persons denied the ability to serve their denominations or who must serve in the closet because of their sexual orientation. The colorful and moving display lined the balcony of Mathewson Street UMC and the walls of the church’s fellowship hall where the alternative displays were. Knowing that we were displaying the stoles, a pastor brought one from a member of his congregation to add to the exhibit. I found one stole was particularly moving. It was actually two stoles sewed together at the top with the words - “Together in love, together in ministry.” It was a stole of two life partners who must serve their churches in the closet.

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With the Shower of Stoles behind them, Rick Mixon and Gary Harris present Brenda Moulton, AWAB Coordinator, with Christian Service Award.

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Changing Times: Remembering and Commemorating

This year has been a trying year for all of us. After the tragic events of September 11, 2001, we were all shaken and in disbelief that such events could happen in our country. People clustered close to home, changed travel plans, rethought relationships and priorities, and church attendance increased. A couple of days after the events the steering committee offered our prayers and support to the mayor of New York, Rudolph Giuliani, the executive minister of ABC Metro New York, James Stallings, and the four Welcoming & Affirming congregation in New York City. Peter Laarman, pastor of Judson Memorial Church said he and members of his congregation were worried about ethnic communities in New York being targeted for reprisal by people seeking to strike out in anger. Sadly the fears were warranted because within a week people were attacked and at least one man murdered because there were perceived as the "wrong" ethnicity.

On a different note, 2002 marks both the thirtieth anniversary of American Baptists Concerned and the twenty-fifth anniversary of *Voice of the Turtle*. Over the past three decades members of ABCConcerned have been present at denominational conventions, biennial meetings and have remained active in support of sexual minority rights within

the American Baptist Churches, USA and the greater church. We have provided spiritually affirming retreats from California and Washington state to New York City and West Virginia. In 1991, we gave birth to the welcoming church movement with the denomination, now the Association of Welcoming & Affirming Baptists. In 1999 we launched our online presence, Rainbow Baptists. As long as there is a need for advocacy within our denomination for lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender Baptists we will strive in one capacity or another to be there.

At times in our history the organization has been held together by a handful of people who gave of their time and money to keep ABCConcerned going. These pioneers include Rodger Harrison, Barbra MacNair, Rick Mixon, Ted Weeman and Louise Rose. For the last decade we have had a steering committee led by co-chairpersons. Peg Rivers, Irv Cummings, Lynne Kelley, Gary Harris and Heather Rittenhouse are some of the wonderful leaders we have had in the last ten years.

To commemorate our anniversary, we invite those who have been involved with American Baptists Concerned over the years to submit their recollections of the organization for publication in *Voice of the*

Turtle and our website. You may submit writing by email attachment, on floppy disk, or as hard copy. Microsoft Word or WordPerfect files in PC or Mac formats preferred. Send writings to the address below.

Like other nonprofit organizations we have seen a marked reduction in our donation since the tragic events of September 2001. We support the ongoing effort to raise funds for relief efforts on behalf of families of the victims. But we ask that you to continue to support us with your gifts, donations and prayers as well. It is only with continue support that our ministry on behalf of sexual minority Baptists is able to continue ▼

2002 Gathering Canceled

Due to financial difficulties, the 2002 Gathering planned for Columbus, Ohio, July 5-7, has been canceled. We apologize to our members and those planning to attend. Look for news soon on our 2003 retreat in Virginia.

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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

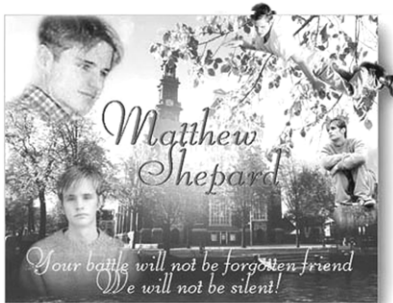
Membership, Subscription and Donation Information

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

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



Matthew Shepard
1977 - 1998

"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

The Spirit Moves in Rhode Island

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ABConcerned and AWAB co-sponsored a series of workshops dealing with issues of sexual minority people in the church. The workshops included a pastor sharing his journey to acceptance and affirmation, how to become a welcoming and affirming church, and building inclusive and diverse worships. All of the workshops were well attended.

The Massachusetts ABConcerned chapter provided food for an open house welcoming people from other chapters and welcoming and affirming churches. This was a great time for those of us from around the country to get to know each other.



American Baptists Concerned Co-chairperson Heather Rittenhouse and former Co-chairperson Gary Harris.



Pastor Jonathan Almond and Nora Almond in the Mathewson Street UMC sanctuary, the balcony lined with stoles.

The Randle R. Mixon Award for Christian Service was presented to Rev. Brenda J. Moulton by Rev. Gary Harris, co-chairperson of ABConcerned, and Dr. Rick Mixon. Rev. Moulton, coordinator of the Association of Welcoming & Affirming Baptists, has been an integral part in helping AWAB grow to an organization of more than forty churches. She is first to say that many other people have helped make AWAB the voice in the denomination it is today. However, the growth has been fostered by her leadership. Rev. Moulton was joined at the happy event by her life partner Pat Potter and friends from around the country.

The Association of Welcoming & Affirming Baptists worship service was held at the historic First Baptist Church in America. Rev. Nancy Hastings Sehested preached a powerful and uplifting message to a gathering of about 500 people who packed the historic church. Rev. Sehested spoke of her struggles as a woman within the church and how Baptists must not close the doors to those who they seek to serve. Following the worship people were encouraged to take a candle and

process back toward the convention center. It was a very moving service and evening.

At the convention center each night before the evening session Rev. Harris lead American Baptists Concerned's Rainbow Choir in singing hymns. The hymn singing was to remind people that gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender people are not fully welcomed the American Baptist table. As people arrived for the evening sessions, some stopped to listen, others joined us in support and solidarity. The number of people participating in the all volunteer choir ranged from 50 to 150 people singing over the four nights. The choir also had the pleasure of participating in the AWAB worship service during the biennial.

American Baptists Concerned wishes to thank all the ABConcerned and AWAB folks that helped in the planning and staging of all the successful events during the biennial. We want to give a special thanks to Roger Williams Fellowship for sponsoring the alternative space again at this biennial and the Mathewson Street church for welcoming us with open arms when our own denomination would not ▼



Susan Johnson and other ministers at the Association of Welcoming & Affirming Baptists Worship at First Baptist Church in America



God Is Like...

Most of this column is the text of a sermon I offered in two settings right after the September 11 attack on the World Trade Center. It was first preached at Dolores Street Baptist Church in San Francisco, where I am currently serving as interim pastor, on the Sunday immediately following the attack, and later at Grace Baptist Church in Chicago. My apologies to those who have already heard it for "inflicting" it on you again.

I realize that the disgraceful comments of Jerry Falwell, Pat Robertson, and James Dobson at that painful time have been hashed and re-hashed and I don't mean to open "old wounds," but I do believe that the contrast I am trying to draw here is theologically and pastorally significant. I am less interested in denouncing Jerry, Pat or James than I am in lifting up an image of God that I believe offers hope for a better world, if we could just capture that vision and hold on to it.

"Jerry says God is like this: 'God continues to lift the curtain and allow the enemies of America to give us probably what we deserve.' And Pat agrees. Jerry says, 'God will not be mocked' and '...we make God mad.' Therefore, he believes that 'the pagans, and the abortionists, and the feminists, and the gays and lesbians who are actively trying to make that an alternative lifestyle, the ACLU, People of the American Way - all of them who have tried to secularize America - I point the finger in their face and say, "You helped this happen."' And Pat concurs.

James Dobson, on his Focus on the Family radio show, professed that 'Yes, I believe that the attacks are God's punishment because we are in moral decay in this country, with abortion, forcing children to

be taught about homosexuality, removing God from the schools, sexual immorality on television, and in our government. And this is God's way of punishing the wicked.' And the rest of the religious right says, 'Amen.'

Jesus says God is like this: A father had two sons and, at the insistence of the younger, he divided the inheritance between them. He did not try to micromanage what either would do with the money. He allowed each the freedom to live his life and spend his inheritance in his own way.

The younger son took his share, left home and wasted it all in irresponsible living while the older son stayed home and tended to business in a highly responsible fashion. Did the father get mad and, saying, 'I will not be mocked,' send subversives after the younger son to punish him for what he had done with his father's valuable legacy? He did not.

Jesus says when the young man came to his senses and decided to return home, broke and humiliated, that father was standing by the side of the road watching and waiting for his son's return. The father rushed forward to greet his child warmly and then he literally celebrated his child's return. Wherever the boy went, whatever he did, that father loved his child and never, ever wished him harm.

We do have some responsibility for the world in which we live. It is our inheritance from the God who made us and loves us. Whenever and wherever we have harbored anger, hatred and violence in our own hearts and acted out those feelings in our own lives, we have helped to perpetuate a climate of anger, hatred and violence in the world and we must face the consequences of those, actions, thoughts and feelings.

Does that make us directly responsible for what happened on September 11? It does not. But we must choose this day which image of God we will follow. Will we commit ourselves to a God who slays his children in anger when they try live out the complexity of human nature in all its rich diversity instead of following some narrow minded path to bigotry? Will we count ourselves among those crying for vengeance and indiscriminately attacking our Arab

and Islamic sisters and brothers?

Or will we worship a God who loves us and waits with infinite patience for us to come to our senses and return home to a blessed, sweet communion in a realm where there is room at the table for any and all of God's children? Will we keep reaching out until every living soul has received her invitation to that table and knows, at the core of her being, that she is welcome?

In the end, we turn to Paul, that consummate evangelical, who certainly knew something about persecution in his time - both as a perpetrator and a victim. It is Paul, who participated in the stoning of Stephen, who was knocked off his horse on his way to ferret out those Christians in Damascus, who knew shipwreck and imprisonment, who suffered with his own 'thorn in the flesh,' who cried out at his struggle with not doing what he desired to do while getting caught up in doing precisely those things he wanted to avoid, who affirms Jesus vision this way. Paul says God is like this: 'What then are we to say about these things? If God is for us, who can be against us? He who did not withhold his own Son, but gave him up for all of us, will he not with him give everything else? Who will bring any charge against God's elect? It is God who justifies. Who is to condemn? It is Christ Jesus, who died, yes, who was raised, who is at the right hand of God, who indeed intercedes for us. Who will separate us from the love of Christ? Will hardship, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or peril, or sword? As it is written, "For your sake we are being killed all day long; we are counted as sheep to be slaughtered."'

No in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us. For I am convinced that 'neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord' (Romans 8:31-39.) Amen ▼

Voice of the Turtle
Celebrating 25 Years
of Service • 1977-2002

Providing a “Safe Space”

By Brian Cave, More Light Presbyterians Liaison for Youth & Young Adult Concerns. MLP is the counterpart of American Baptists Concerned and the Association of Welcoming & Affirming Baptists within the Presbyterian Church USA.

I just got back from a week at “Youth Triennium,” a Presbyterian event with 6,600 youth from all over the U.S. and Canada, at Purdue University. I was there as a Residence Hall Coordinator. I and a girl named Tracey from Canada were in Shreve hall and responsible for 260 youth. All of the youth we had are from small southern towns in Alabama, Mississippi and Tennessee - very conservative environments.

On my door of my room in the guy’s wing, I had a “Safe Space” poster. This poster stated that any youth - gay, lesbian or questioning - could talk to me and that I would be a safe and understanding person for them to talk to. The boys felt very uncomfortable with it and were even scared to stand near me. I could hear them making fun of me behind my back. ‘At one point, while Tracey and I were at a meal together, we saw a boy sitting by himself and asked him to sit with us. He was reluctant at first, but finally came over after some persistence. He sat at the corner of the table as far away from me as he could and obviously scared that someone might see him sitting at a table with me, so I began to ask God why am I here?

One night someone stole my poster off my door, so I put up a sign that said, “You signed a Covenant that you would not steal, so whoever took my poster please return it.” One of the adult advisors knew who stole it and said he would make an announcement in the hall asking for whomever stole it to slide it under his door. If the youth did not, then we would approach him personally. They slid it under the advisor’s door and I got it back. The next day it got stolen again. This time, I put up a sign that said, “Once again someone took my poster. I am not asking for it back, however, I am asking that

you read the following scripture...” I put some scripture from Luke 6, Matthew and Romans 14 dealing with loving your neighbor as yourself and not judging people.

That evening, after I did room checks and the boys were meeting in covenant groups, Tracey, I and two other friends were sitting in the lobby talking right before bed when an adult advisor came down and said, “The boys have been talking about your poster and want to know more about it and I told them they need to ask you. They are wondering if you would come up and talk with them?” I said “yes, but bring them down to the lounge.” He went back up and a few minutes later eighteen high school age boys came down carrying their Bibles. I got very nervous.

They wanted to know why I had the sign and they wanted to hear my story. I started off by saying, “Everything I say tonight is not a view of the Presbyterian Church, USA, but a “Brian view.” “I also am not here to have a scripture war because we could be here all night throwing scripture at each other.” “I’m here to share my story of how I am where I am today.” I began to tell my faith story of how the church taught me to accept the fact that I am gay and be the “I am” that God created me to be. I also shared how I felt a calling to the ministry while a volunteer in mission in Alaska, but the church will not let me be ordained.

I had the boys attention the whole time. When I got done, they were silent. Then one boy spoke up and told a story he had never

told any of them before. He said he has a lesbian neighbor who was kicked out of the ministry. He also said he believes all should be welcome to the church. We talked about how it is okay to feel uncomfortable when you meet a gay person for the first time. They asked me lots of questions. Then afterwards three of them came up to me and shook my hand and said, “Thank you and I have a lot of respect for you.” WOW! I was stunned and shocked when they left. This was a conversation I thought would never happen with these youth. The whole day had come glued together. Earlier in the day, the small group topic was about judgement. The sermon at the service that evening was about conversation. That evening was a conversation about judgement.

The people with me were also stunned. One said he had just witnessed a miracle. The next day, all the boys who earlier in the week were scared of me and would not even stand near me were saying, “Good Morning Brian! How are you?” A few more came up to me and thanked me again and said they had never talked to a gay person before and that from now they would not make fun of gay people. “Thank you,” I said.

While I was leaving, the associate minister from the church even thanked me for talking to the boys. The adult advisor also informed me that all week long the boys had been making fun of me and that the last night after that conversation, not a negative word was spoken in the hall about gay people.

All week long I had been asking God why I was put in one of the most conservative dorms, now I know why! Peace and love - Brian ▼

From More Light Update

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

Justin's Faith Struggle

This is the story of a teenager's struggle to reconciling his sexuality with his Christianity. It is a story not unlike that of many other teens and young adults. Many churches teach youth that they must chose between their faith and sexual orientation. This can be extremely harmful both spiritually and emotionally. Our challenge as people of faith should be to do everything we can to provide spiritual and moral guidance and unconditional love, regardless of a youth's sexual identity.

Life doesn't always turn out quite the way we expect it to. It certainly hasn't for me. I grew up a very conservative Southern Baptist, perhaps difficult to live with at times, but very sincere and very committed to what I believed. I never dreamed that, a few weeks before my 19th birthday, I would be sitting in a minister's study saying, "Mom, Dad...I'm gay." I know they never dreamed it either.

People have told me I should give up my "oppressive" faith. They do not understand what Christianity is all about. Others have asked why I don't deny my sexuality. But as you'll see in these pages, it's just not that simple.

I was born into a loving Christian family. My parents and grandparents were all very committed Christians, so from the very beginning my parents taught me about God, read me Bible stories, prayed with me, and so on. I was an exceptionally bright child, and at age 7 I prayed to receive Christ. (I have a tape of my profession of faith at my subsequent baptism, and it is clear to me that I knew exactly what I was doing at that young age.) I remember the peace that came over me when I received Christ; I knew that my life had changed and would be different forever.

I grew up mostly in a Baptist church, although my parents believed it was much more important to attend a Bible-believing church than one of a particular denomination. I enjoyed Sunday School, especially when I had teachers who encouraged me to think about old stories in new ways. I

wasn't too fond of regular school, though, because I much preferred to work independently without the restrictions my teachers placed on me. I was classified as academically gifted, and when we moved from Raleigh to Baltimore during the summer after my 3rd grade year, I was enrolled in private school where I was able to pursue more advanced math classes, which I enjoyed.

My family life was always wonderful. My parents were loving and supportive of me, and my younger brother and sisters and I got along well (despite occasional sibling rivalry). God was always number one in our house, and in my life. I considered evangelism to be an important mission of mine, so I was vocal about my faith at school. I was never a very popular kid at school, but I did have friends. Generally, I hung out with the outcasts and tried to make them feel important. I had healthy relationships with both males and females, though I never went through the "girls have cooties" phase that many of my male friends did. To me, the girls were always lots of fun to play with.

I entered puberty around the 5th grade. Suddenly, for the first time, I began having sexual feelings. I was prepared, however. Always the intellectual, I had read up on puberty before it happened to me, so these new feelings didn't throw me for a loop. My first sexual feelings were in the form of curiosity, and so it was natural (to me, anyway) that they were directed at my male friends. This is the age when a lot of kids experiment sexually with each other, but that experimentation is not an indication of lifelong sexual orientation. I never experimented with anyone, but I did some reading and found out that a bit of "sexual confusion" at my age was perfectly normal, and that many boys experienced temporary sexual feelings towards other boys during this curiosity stage, but that within a short period of time those feelings would give way to their natural heterosexual desires. That knowledge comforted me, but I also felt that my sexual feelings were sinful, so I did my

best to concentrate on God, schoolwork and other things until this stage passed.

In middle school, my friends all started to notice girls, and although we were very immature as far as relationships went, it was "the thing to do" to confide in your best friend about which girl you "liked". There was a girl in my class who had been really nice to me when I was feeling left out, so she was my immediate pick. I confided in my best friend that I "liked" this girl, but when he asked me if I thought she was pretty, I didn't know what to say. I had never thought of any of the girls in my class (or anywhere else, for that matter) as "pretty". It had just never occurred to me to think of them that way. So I responded, "No, but she's nice, and it's what's on the inside that counts." Still, it made me wonder what it was that made some guys think that certain girls were pretty. I didn't understand it, but I thought that maybe I just needed to wait until I met the "right girl". (Physically, I was an early bloomer, not a late one, but I still thought that maybe I was a little behind my friends somehow.)

Books like Judy Blume's *Then Again, Maybe I Won't* had prepared me to expect sexual dreams, but when I actually started to have them, I freaked out. My dreams weren't about girls like the books said they would be; they were about boys! I woke up terrified, feeling sick, dirty, and perverted, from dreams about gentle hugs and touches from boys my own age. I had learned how to keep my mind off the attractive guys in my class while I was awake, but what could I do about my dreams? I just had to pray and trust God to take care of it.

For someone who liked to read as much as I did, I was surprisingly sheltered and innocent. I didn't really know much of anything about "gays" at this time. What I did know (or what I thought I knew) was that it was something that involved men doing certain immoral things to each other, things which I found completely revolting. I knew that it was sinful and that the liberal media was trying to impose a worldly viewpoint towards this issue on Christians who were standing for what was right. I never even thought to compare what I was

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going through to that “gay” thing. In my mind, there was absolutely no connection.

When I was in high school, the issue of homosexuality came up once more, in a more personal way. Some anonymous students at my school had put up a poster ridiculing homosexuals and using derogatory terms. In response, another group of students circulated a pamphlet encouraging tolerance and deriding “homophobia.” During the controversy that followed, one of these students admitted that he was gay. This student was the older brother of a friend of mine. When I found out, I was shocked. I had never known a gay person before (or so I thought). I didn’t actually know the guy, but the fact that he was my friend’s brother made it seem like I knew him. I felt sorry for my friend (“how horrible it must be to have a gay brother!” I thought), but at the same time, it made me very uncomfortable. I started to wonder if my friend was gay too. After all, if his brother was, maybe it had rubbed off on him or something.

By this time, I had developed my own theory about homosexuality. I knew that I was still going through this “period of sexual confusion” which I fully expected to grow out of, so it occurred to me that other kids going through a similar phase might be misled by the liberal media into believing that homosexuality is normal and that if they were feeling attractions to people of the same sex, then they must be gay. These kids would wrongly label themselves gay, according to my theory, because they didn’t know any better. Once labeled gay, they would proceed to live out “a gay lifestyle”, ruining their own lives in the process. I was sure that this was some of Satan’s craftiest work, and I wanted to tell my friend’s brother that he was taking the wrong path. I never met him, so I never had the chance to warn him, but that didn’t stop me from being very outspoken to my friends about the sinfulness of homosexuality. “I don’t agree with what those people said on the original poster,” I told my friends, “because I think we must respect all people. But I don’t believe that we should just abandon morality in favor of just pretending everything’s okay. Some things are sinful, and being gay is one of those things.” When

they accused me of being homophobic or closed-minded, I held my ground. I wanted to be compassionate and yet stand for God’s truth.

I dated a couple of girls in high school, one of whom was a wonderful Christian girl named Liz. Liz was a gymnast, a committed Christian, and an overall fun person to be around. We actually met in a local chat room (all the high school kids in the area used to chat on a particular local online service) and met at the mall with some others our age. When we got along really well, we started hanging out together a lot. We would go to church youth events together or just hang out at the mall or at one of our houses. The more we did together, the more I realized that she was everything I wanted in a girl. She was funny, spontaneous, cheerful, honest, and above all, a Christian. We spent so much time together that our friends started to joke that we were going out “by default” since I had never asked her out. So, ever the romantic, I asked her out for the first time on Valentine’s Day. Making ourselves officially “a couple” didn’t really change our relationship at all, though. I enjoyed the innocent friendship-based relationship we had, and I was in no hurry to move on to anything physical. I did the things that a boyfriend was supposed to do — holding doors for her, paying for meals, putting my arm around her at the movies — but there was never any physical aspect to the relationship. I never thought of her as physically attractive, although I knew that she was pretty because other guys drooled over her. It felt kind of awkward to me to cuddle with her, but I did it happily because I loved her very much and I wanted to be a good boyfriend to her. Still, the romantic part of me wanted to save our first kiss for a time when I really felt the urge to kiss her. After months of dating, including the prom, I still hadn’t done any more than to kiss her on the cheek.

A major turning point came for me when Liz and I went to see Michael W. Smith and Jars of Clay in concert. It was a wonderful, emotionally charged concert, but the thing I most remember from that evening had nothing to do with the music. As Liz and I sat there, side by side, holding hands and

swaying to Smitty’s tunes, I happened to catch a glimpse of an attractive guy through the crowd. I only saw this guy’s face for an instant, but suddenly I found my thoughts and emotions rushing towards him. It wasn’t even a sexual feeling, necessarily, although I recognized that it was tied to my sexuality. Just seeing this guy’s face, though, I suddenly wanted to meet him, to talk to him, to hug him. I think I would have been content to just sit near him and stare at him for the rest of the night. He had a face that made me feel good all over, that intrigued me, that tempted me, that attracted me. He wasn’t the first guy who had made me feel that way, either. But as that instant of emotion flooded through my system, I suddenly caught myself and realized what I was doing. Here I was, holding hands with the most wonderful girl in the world, a girl whom I loved dearly and who loved me, my girlfriend whom I even would have been willing to marry someday — and yet the emotions I was feeling were for some strange guy I happened to glimpse in a crowd. What was wrong with me? Why did I feel that way? Wasn’t God hearing the urgent prayers I had prayed through tears for so long, asking to not have these horrible, perverted, unwanted feelings for other guys?

Tears trickled down my cheeks, but Liz thought I was just moved by the song. On the way home, however, she noticed that something was wrong. She pushed me to tell her what it was, but I couldn’t. How could I tell her that I was secretly attracted to guys?

The other major turning point happened one evening when I was online talking to some of my friends from school and other online buddies. One of the guys in the conversation was someone I had only talked to once or twice online, and only briefly at that. But his and my personalities just clicked, and soon we were in a private chat. We started talking about all sorts of things, and as our chat dragged on into the night, I began to feel butterflies in my stomach. There was something about this guy that I understood, something that was different from the way I related to all of my other friends. I recognized something in him that reminded me of me, and the more we talked,

YOUTH FOCUS

the more I began to have a sense of fear mixed with joy that I knew what our common bond was. He must have sensed it, too, because he stopped talking and asked if there was anything I wanted to know about him. He promised me he would answer any question, but the question that presented itself to my mind was far too horrible to ask. I told him I couldn't think of anything. So he told me anyway. "I'm not gay," he said to me, "but I'm not straight either. I'm somewhere in between; I guess you could say "I'm bisexual."

I burst into tears immediately. Emotions I had held back for years were suddenly flooding out of me. I said a silent prayer, and when I had regained my composure, I asked my newfound friend if he would keep a secret for me — the deepest, darkest secret in the world. And then I told him. Thanks to his revelation, I now had a name for this affliction of mine. I was "bisexual". But to me, that word didn't imply some lifestyle choice or even a permanent state. It was just a label for this condition I had, a condition I was sure must be temporary.

I finally got up the courage to tell Liz that I was bisexual, and she took it amazingly well. She told me that she was still willing to date me if I wanted to continue. I told her

that I did, and that I also wanted her to pray for me, that God would take away this affliction quickly. I had faith that He would.

It took me a few months before I finally was able to admit that the more accurate term for my situation was "gay" and not "bisexual". I had chosen the term bisexual because gay had all kinds of horrible implications for me. I couldn't be gay, because that would be a sin! But I finally had to admit that I had never been attracted to girls at all in a physical way. No matter how hard I tried, I couldn't be aroused by the thought of a beautiful woman. I actually found the female form quite unappealing. This revelation forced me to face another fact. I was not being fair to Liz. I was hanging onto her because I wanted to be straight and because I loved being with her, but I really couldn't fully appreciate her as a woman the way someone else could. A mutual friend of ours had been quite infatuated with her for some time, and he was always telling me how lucky I was to have her, and how beautiful and wonderful she was. I grew to realize that he felt something which I didn't. To me, she was a best friend. To him, she was something he couldn't even put into words. Liz and I talked, and we finally agreed to stop dating each other. (She later ended up dating that other guy. I

know I did the right thing.)

Even after admitting that I was gay, though, I believed for a long time that I would become straight if I kept praying faithfully and consistently for healing. I didn't abandon that notion until the Holy Spirit began to work on my heart. I had been searching for "success stories" of others who had done it, but I found none that made sense to me in light of my own experience. At that point I stopped telling God what I wanted Him to do and started asking Him to show me what to do. For the first time in my life, I had to admit that I didn't have the answers anymore. I wasn't smart enough or "Christian" enough to figure out what to do. All I could do was humble myself, get on my knees and beg.

God has shown me many things in the time since then. I still have much to learn. My beliefs on a number of issues have changed a great deal, and you may not agree with everything I believe. Some people say that I shouldn't even call myself "gay", that I should say "tempted" or "same-sex attracted" instead. I prefer gay for my own reasons. But I know one thing for sure; I am a stronger Christian now than I ever was before. That's true whether or not you call me "gay" ▼

Youth & Families Share Stories

When someone begins to realize that they are lesbian, gay, bisexual or transgender they often feel that it is something that needs to be concealed from those around them. Likewise, when someone has a family member or friend who comes out as LGBT they often want to keep the matter secret from other people. The overwhelming feeling in either case is often that they are somehow unique in the situation. However, when people have the opportunity to share stories with others they are often surprised at how similar someone else's story can be to their own. American Baptists Concerned has assembled two booklets of personal

narratives, one the stories of youth and the other of stories of families who have a child, spouse or sibling who is a sexual minority person.

The first booklet deals with the coming out experiences of youth and how it affects their life, family and friends. The stories include positive experiences of coming out to sad stories of someone being alienated by their family. Even though there is more acceptance today most youth still feel an extreme fear of coming out to their family and friends. In this the youth booklet, we hope to share what is in the minds of youth today who are dealing with issues of their sexual orientation.

The family booklet focuses on the experience of parents, spouses, siblings who find out that someone in their family is gay,

lesbian or bisexual. It is common for family members, particularly parents, to look for "blame" in something that they did that caused someone to be gay. Parents and family go through a process similar to coming out. In the booklet families share their stories in their own words.

These two booklets are helpful in understanding ourselves as gay, lesbian or bisexual people or as a family member or friend. Both of these booklet are available at a marginal cost of \$5 per booklet. The price includes shipping and handling.

To order please check the boxes on the membership/contribution form on page 11 of *Voice of the Turtle* and mail with your payment, donation or membership. Make checks payable to American Baptists Concerned ▼

Taking Off Our Masks at 2001 ABConcerned Retreat

It was sunny and warm at the American Baptists Concerned annual retreat this past June. Held at Camp Canonicus in Exciter, Rhode Island we had wonderful modern facilities, good meals and a marvelous retreat program. Thanks to our retreat leader Steven Pennel, we even had a labareth set up outside for thought, meditation and prayer.

Our retreat was led by Steven Pennell, a decedent of Roger Williams who founded the Baptist movement in America. Steven led us through some creative workshops which sought to help us better understand ourselves. In our everyday lives we put on masks for people that we what want them to see. We wear these masks for various reasons. We wear them to protect ourselves, to hide who we are, out of fear

and to keep ourselves safe. The purpose of the workshops was to help each of us at the retreat to better understand those aspects of ourselves we hide from others and ourselves.

The workshops involved making paper marche masks with a partner, decorating the masks with items that reflect our life journeys and making a foot print scroll to show where we were, where we are and where we want to be in our lives. Although some people are not fond of the idea of hands on activities, everyone came out of the retreat feeling good about it. I personally feel that it gave me a chance to reflect about many aspects of my life and that in doing so brought me closer to God.

The retreat was also a time to worship

together and celebrate the gifts of everyone. For some people the ABConcerned retreat is one of the few places where they are able to worship openly without having to conceal their sexual orientation or a significant relationship. It can be an empowering experience just to sit with your partner and not have to worry if someone will think he or she is more than just your "friend" as is the case for so many lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender people.

Beyond worship and sessions we had a few hours free each day, allowing time to explore the wonders of Rhode Island. A number of us went to historic Newport. The Victorian mansions overlooking the ocean, such as the Breakers and Rosecliff are spectacular to tour. Some folks took a boat tour of the harbor and enjoyed shopping. For those who chose not to go sightseeing during free time, there was time to swim, hike or just relax ▼

Presbyterian's Ordain Lesbian, First Openly Gay Ordination Since 1978

SAN ANSELMO, CA -- For the first time since the 1978 ban in the Presbyterian Church (USA) on the ordination of "practicing, self-affirming homosexuals," an openly lesbian candidate has been ordained as a minister in the denomination. Presbytery of the Redwoods, one of the 173 local governing bodies with jurisdiction for ordination of ministers in the 2.3-million-member denomination, voted 90-37 September 21 to approve the ordination of Katie Morrison, M.Div., a 1997 graduate of San Francisco Theological Seminary.

"Where the world closes a door, God opens a window for more light to break through. Allelujah!" said Morrison. "I am thrilled about this wonderful opportunity to live further into my call to ministry within the Presbyterian Church (USA)."

The ordination serviced was held October 21 in San Anselmo, CA. The worship service was joyful in tone, celebrating the historic moment and Morrison's gifts and call to the ministry. Bill Moss and Mitzi Henderson, Co-

Moderators of More Light Presbyterians (MLP), participated in the installation of Katie Morrison as a National Field Organizer for MLP, which works for "the full participation of lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender people in the life, ministry, and witness of the Presbyterian Church (USA)." "We live into hope that the door is open to all God's people," said MLP Co-Moderator Bill Moss. "With this act today God opened this door to Katie. Katie's job is to keep that door open and to welcome others into the church who have been excluded." Especially poignant was the acknowledgement throughout the service that there is a huge cloud of witnesses who have been denied opportunities to serve the church

in an ordained capacity. The sanctuary was adorned with a multitude of liturgical stoles from the Shower of Stoles Project, donated by individuals barred from service in the church because of their sexual orientation or gender identity.

The Rev. Dr. Jane Adams Spahr, a lesbian minister whose call to Downtown United Presbyterian Church in Rochester NY was denied by the denomination's highest judicial commission in 1992, delivered one of the reflections during the service. Lisa Larges, who was denied ordination as minister in 1993 because she came out as a lesbian, delivered the charge ▼

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