



WELCOMING SPIRIT NEWSLETTER • MARCH 2023

Of Margie, Mountains, and Amy Grant's 'El Shaddai'

by Bert Montgomery

I learned a lot of things in seminary, like how to perform baptisms and administer Communion, why understanding cultural context is important when reading and interpreting Scripture, and the importance of sneaking Amy Grant lyrics into almost any theological conversation. These are all important things to know.

I also learned the ancient biblical Hebrew (well, barely enough to make a passing grade). Learning Hebrew gave me a renewed appreciation for Amy Grant's song, "El Shaddai." The name often refers to God as Most High, yet in the Hebrew, it carries with it more earthly imagery, such as High Mountains God, or since it is feminine, Nurturing Bosom God. Even, as one rabbi acknowledged, God of Great Breasts (I may be paraphrasing, but only a little).

One thing seminary did not prepare me for, though, was that there might one day arise a situation in which, rather than being inappropriate, creepy, or predatory, complimenting a woman's cleavage would actually be the proper pastoral thing to do.

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Margie is tall, thin, and full of joy, and she has always been a good hugger. One Sunday morning as I stood at the door welcoming people to worship, Margie walked in. Instead of putting her arms out for the usual hug, though, she put her arms up to protect herself.

No offense, she assured me. She just had surgery that week and was still very sore. None taken, I assured her. I had not been aware she was having surgery, I said, or I would have visited and prayed. Not to worry, Margie said, it was outpatient, and she didn't tell anyone.

Then, with a nervous smile, she slowly waved her hand back and forth in front of her chest. There, revealed slightly by a low neckline, were two ... *mountains* ... where there had previously been none.

"Oh!" I said nervously. Our eyes met, then my eyes glanced down again, then back up. "Well," I assured her, "they look great!"

We both laughed. The awkwardness passed. A hand shake replaced the usual hug that week. Her smile and her "thank you" indicated both appreciation and deep satisfaction as she walked on into the sanctuary.

Sanctuary. A place of refuge, safety, rest, affirmation, acceptance, healing, and hope. In a hostile world, this church had become a true sanctuary, in every sense, for Margie.

Margie had a different name for most of her life. She was assigned another gender at birth, and was named, dressed, and treated accordingly. Despite outward body parts and all the expectations of others—family, peers, schools, and churches—Margie always seemed to know inwardly who she was, and slowly, sometimes painfully, grew to accept and embrace her true self rather than ignore, deny, or fight it.

Margie always seemed to know inwardly who she was, and slowly, sometimes painfully, grew to accept and embrace her true self rather than ignore, deny or fight it.

By the time I first met Margie, she had already begun to outwardly present herself as the woman she is. A mutual friend of ours told her about our church and assured her she would be welcomed and loved. She came, and she was welcomed, and she was loved.

My friends of the Jewish faith talk about the rich complexities of our shared Hebrew Scriptures and how it is more accurate to say God made us male AND female, both/and, as if gender identity is a spectrum in which many of us fall more toward one end or the other, while others fall at many different points in between.

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My friends in scientific fields talk about the rich complexities of gender and the interconnectedness of outward organs, inner organs, hormones and chromosomes, the mind, and cultural expectations. It's as if gender identity is a spectrum in which many of us fall more toward one end or the other, while others fall at many different points in between.

My friends in Christian pastoral care and counseling talk about the richness of the theological, psychological, biological, and sociological complexities of gender, as if gender identity is a spectrum in which ... well, you know the rest.

Sadly, too many churches, preachers, and church-goers fail to appreciate such rich complexities in life and faith. We choose instead shallow, rigid dogmatic certainties. We resist the vastness of God; we miss out on the wonder-filled diversity in all God's beautiful Creation; and we deny the image of God in our transgender friends, neighbors, and family members.

We limit our ability to recognize, receive, and celebrate God's gifts. We limit our ability to recognize and know God. And, we cause devastating, even deadly, harm to countless beloved children of God.

I am blessed to pastor a welcoming and affirming church -- a church which challenges us to remain open to Holy Wonder, and a church which truly strives to be a sanctuary for all.

And, I am blessed to know Margie. For the beauty and joy she brings to our fellowship, thanks be to El Shaddai!

(This article previously appeared at Baptist News Global – baptistnews.com)



Got Swag?

NEW ITEMS FOR 2023!

If your congregation or ministry is celebrating Pride, or if you want to show your, we will send you some swag **free of charge!** Simply contact Administrative Coordinator Janet Cole at janet@awab.org and your swag will be on its way!

Celebrate 50 Years of W&A Ministry With Us!

SAVE THESE DATES:

- **April 21-23: Alliance of Baptists Annual Gathering**
Atlanta, GA • AWAB and BPFNA/Bautistas por la Paz will host a joint reception (more info to be announced).
- **June 23-25: ABC Biennial Mission Summit**
San Juan, PR • AWAB will host a breakfast program featuring Rev. Susan Sparks and Minister D.J. Boyd on Saturday, June 24. Read more on page 12. Registration: www.abc-usa.org/biennial
- **June 28-30: CBF General Assembly**
Atlanta, GA • AWAB will host a reception on Wednesday, June 28, 4-5pm. Registration: cbf.net/general-assembly
- **September 11, 6:30 p.m.: Annual AWAB Lectureship**
Wilshire Baptist Church, Dallas, TX • More info to be announced.

NATIONAL GATHERING SPONSORSHIP OPPORTUNITIES

We invite congregations, ministries, and individuals to be sponsors of AWAB's national gatherings. The following levels are available:

\$250

- Name recognition during the event
- 2 complimentary AWAB history books, once published

\$500

- Name recognition prior to and during the event
- 3 complimentary AWAB history books, once published
- Acknowledgement on AWAB's website and in the *Welcoming Spirit* newsletter

\$1,000

- Name recognition prior to and during the event
- 5 complimentary AWAB history books, once published
- Acknowledgement on AWAB's website and in the *Welcoming Spirit* newsletter

To become a sponsor, please email
Administrative Coordinator, Janet Cole at: janet@awab.org.

In A Time Such As This



Bob Sittig

The manuscript for a book tracing the fifty-year history of American Baptists Concerned and the Association of Welcoming and Affirming Baptists will soon be completed. We are excited to have it available sometime in 2023, the year of our combined fiftieth anniversary. I am a member of Seattle First Baptist Church, a founding church at AWAB's conception, and have followed this organization's progress steadily since that time. Our mission "to create and support a community of churches, organizations and individuals committed to the inclusion of LGBTQ+ persons in the full life and mission of Baptist churches" has not changed over all these years. However, the needs of the church communities that we serve have changed a great deal. Twenty-five years ago, it was not so difficult for a church to believe and practice the concept of an incompatibility between the LGBTQ+ community and the church community. It was easy to make black and white rules and turn a blind eye to the reality of the congregational makeup. This is not so easy to do in a more enlightened society in these times. The fact is, there are God loving, productive members of the LGBTQ+ community at all levels of Baptist life today. AWAB exists to help make what might seem incompatible, compatible.

I mentioned in our last *Welcoming Spirit* newsletter that we had engaged a consulting firm to help us envision and implement a growth plan. The final 21-page report includes plans for programing, staffing, development, communications, communities served, and administration, with details for expanding each of those areas in a controlled realistic manner. Board expansion was one of the areas required for implementation of this plan and you can see from the listing of our new board members in this issue that we are well on our way to fulfilling that task. I'm especially excited about the diversity of talent we now have on our board. Please join me in welcoming any of these members who you might know.

In the early days of AWAB, we worked primarily with American Baptist Churches/USA congregations, however our mission extends to all Baptist churches that desire inclusivity in their congregations. We currently serve churches from ABCUSA, the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship and the Alliance of Baptists. Our growth plan calls for expanding our membership in each of these denominational groups and beyond. Please take a look at the member church list on our website, it is happily growing every month: awab.org/find-a-church

Every human soul walking the face of this planet was created in God's image. We have an obligation to see that each of them is treated as God would, with no

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circles of exclusion. Our organization is pleased to be in the position to expand our efforts in fulfilling that task. We appreciate your support of AWAB as we continue this important work. Every soul must feel loved and accepted, in a time such as this.

RAINBOW CIRCLE BY KURT KAUFMAN, COMMUNICATIONS COORDINATOR

Hide It Under a Bushel? No!

This week, the church I serve hosted an outside educational group for children that very obviously holds different biblical and theological values than we do. Yet, we strive to be a place where all are welcome, including and perhaps even especially those who differ in theology. We, as many of our AWAB churches do, have a handful of flags and other such indications that we are a welcoming and affirming congregation. As the group entered the building and began setting up, I noticed that they carefully hid one of our rainbow flags so that nobody noticed it as those attending entered.

I have heard similar stories from several of our AWAB churches. As we embody a true sense of welcome in our churches, many of the groups we welcome are surprised and perhaps shocked that our spaces are not just welcoming, but also affirming, of the LGBTQ+ community. At times, these groups have attempted to make our spaces less welcoming by hiding these symbols of inclusion and acceptance, trying to conform the space to their beliefs.

As I was reflecting on this, I had a sense of anger at this group that tried to change our identity to something it was not. I was afraid that this group would find out who we truly were and would never come back, damaging a relationship that I had worked so hard to build. As this feeling passed, though, I thought back to the reason that we try so hard to welcome these groups in the first place.

As each child that was a part of this group filtered into our building, I thought about how many of these children are hiding who they truly were, too. As each child, escorted closely by their parent who homeschools them regularly, walked past our signs of radical inclusion and acceptance, I wondered how many of them have yet to hear any word from God other than hatred and rejection in the midst of their sexuality. I began to wonder if perhaps our humble building was the first place that any of them had encountered a sense of the Divine that was nothing but love and acceptance for who they were made to be.

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And so, I took the flag out from under the bushel and let it shine, just as it was supposed to, in the hope that one of these children sees such a light and lets their own shine.

Your financial support of our association is what makes this possible. Each church that is a part of our association has the ability to know that they do not stand alone in the fight for radical inclusion and acceptance, and our sheer existence enables the ministries we serve to reach the eyes and ears of those who desperately need to hear it most. Joining the Rainbow Circle is one way that you can ensure that your financial support is distributed when it is most needed for our organization and for the ministries we serve. Consider joining today to ensure that the people that enter a church for the first time, or even for the thousandth time, see inclusion rather than rejection.

JOIN AWAB'S RAINBOW CIRCLE TODAY!



By signing up for a regular monthly donation from your credit card or bank/credit union (for as little as \$8 per month), you can help ensure AWAB is better able to **make the welcoming and affirming vision a reality.**

As part of the Rainbow Circle, you will receive:

- **Quarterly communications specifically for Rainbow Circle Members**
- **Free or deeply discounted access to all AWAB events**
- **Special recognition in AWAB's newsletter and website (unless you prefer to remain anonymous).**

Most importantly, you will receive the blessed assurance that you are turning some of your "green" into a colorful rainbow that welcomes and affirms all of God's children.

Please join the Rainbow Circle:

www.awab.org/rainbow-circle

Thank you for your partnership!

New Board Members

As Board Chair Bob Sittig indicated in his article, AWAB is pleased to have an expanded Board. The AWAB Board currently is made of 12 individuals. Our newest members are:



Jordan Conley



Aubin Petersen



Erica Sauders



Lauren Ng



Laura Levens



Victor Crentsil



Baugh Foundation Grant

AWAB is pleased to receive its first grant from the Eula Mae & John Baugh Foundation. This generous grant will be used to underwrite the Annual AWAB Lectureship. This year's lecture will take place at Wilshire Baptist Church, Dallas, TX, on Monday, September 11. (More information to come.)

AWAB Welcomes More Congregations

Our AWAB family is reaching nearly 150 congregations and ministries. Will yours be next? For now, as of the February Board meeting, we welcome:

- Shell Ridge Community Church, Walnut Cree, CA
- First Baptist Church of Pitman, Pittman, NJ
- Northside Drive Baptist Church, Atlanta, GA



Shell Ridge Community Church



First Baptist Church of Pitman



Northside Drive Baptist Church

AWAB Award Nominations Being Accepted



AWAB presents two awards: The Randle R. Mixon Award for Christian Service and the Barbra MacNair Award for Christian Witness.

The Randle R. Mixon Award for Christian Service is given to an individual clergy person whose work has helped to increase the inclusion of sexual minorities within Baptist bodies and has served to advance the cause of justice by educating congregations and organizations about sexual minority and gender identity issues.

The Barbra MacNair Award for Christian Witness is given to an individual layperson whose life has inspired understanding and acceptance of lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender people by opening dialogue that would not otherwise be there, opening the eyes of those who might otherwise turn away, and, by example, helping to advance the affirmation of everyone, regardless of sexual orientation or gender identity.

Nominations for these awards are being accepted through April 30. Please email your nominee and a letter of recommendation to AWAB Executive Director, Brian Henderson at: brian@awab.org.

Employment Opportunity

The Board of the Association of Welcoming & Affirming Baptists is pleased to announce that it is accepting applications for a new staff position: **Director of Development**. This position will strategically assist the organization in its new growth plan. The position description below describes in detail the expectations and qualifications for which the organization is looking.

The position will remain open until filled. Priority consideration will be given to applications received by March 31. Anyone interested should submit electronically a letter of interest and resume to Brian Henderson, Executive Director, at brian@awab.org.

About AWAB

The Association of Welcoming & Affirming Baptists (AWAB) is at a critical inflection point in its trajectory as an organization. Over the last three decades, the organization has established itself as a key thought leader and the only organization devoted to building the Welcoming and Affirming movement within Baptist traditions. As such, AWAB has the unique opportunity to meet a growing need in the Baptist community: supporting LGBTQ+ constituents and strengthening welcoming, affirming, and inclusive congregations.

Position Overview

To strengthen our ministry, we are hiring an experienced Development Director to continue our organization's expansion. AWAB has begun a strategic 3-year plan of growth. The organization seeks to expand its staff, programming, and Board. In 2023, the approved annual budget is \$210k. We anticipate this growing to \$500k to meet our strategic plan goals and objectives. The Director of Development will be instrumental in making this possible.

Responsibilities

- **Individual Donor Giving:** Organize donor events, ensure that donors are recognized for their contributions, grow Rainbow Circle monthly donor program, and promote planned giving
- **Congregation Donor Giving:** Establish a solicitation calendar around key events (e.g., Pride Month, AWAB Sunday, end of the year, regional events, and national conferences), and ask congregations to grow their support for AWAB
- **Regional & National Gatherings:** As AWAB gains traction at these Baptist gatherings, organize fundraising events in conjunction with these meetings

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- **Foundation Stewardship:** In partnership with the Executive Director, identify and build relationships with current and new key funders as well as identify and submit grant proposals
- **Event Sponsors:** Procure sponsors and grant funding for annual AWAB Lectureship and other AWAB events

Requirements

- 5-7 years of non-profit development experience
- Familiarity and knowledge of national Baptist denominations/bodies
- Excellent working knowledge of Microsoft Suite, Constant Contact, and Donor CRMs
- Exceptional verbal, written, and interpersonal communication skills
- Ability to work well in a diverse group
- Experience measuring data and outcomes of events to determine fundraising effectiveness
- Positive and collaborative attitude when working with people and overseeing initiatives
- Experience managing and tracking donor contributions and organizing gathered data
- Demonstrated experience raising funds and achieving positive outcomes
- Committed to the mission and values of AWAB
- Strong attention to detail and work ethic
- Ability to meet deadlines and remain flexible in a changing environment
- Self-motivated and able to work independently and as part of a team
- Committed to diversity, equity, and inclusion
- Possess creativity, integrity, initiative, patience, enthusiasm, and professionalism
- Ability to travel to Baptist conferences and congregations, although this position may be based anywhere in the U.S.

Expectations/Compensation

- Up to \$75,000 annual salary for full-time employment, depending on experience (we are also open to applicants seeking part-time employment)
- Health and Retirement Benefits (with full-time employment)
- Two weeks paid vacation leave plus paid holidays and sick leave
- Annual performance review
- Reports to the Executive Director

Rev. Susan Sparks & Minister D.J. Boyd to lead Biennial Breakfast

AWAB is pleased to announce that the Rev. Dr. Susan Sparks will be the ABCUSA-AWAB Biennial Breakfast keynote speaker. Also, D.J. Boyd will be providing music during the program. We look forward to having Dr. Sparks and Minister Boyd with us, along with others, as we celebrate in Puerto Rico. Register now to reserve your seat: www.abc-usa.org/biennial/



As a trial lawyer turned standup comedian and Baptist minister, Susan Sparks is America's only female comedian with a pulpit. A North Carolina native, Susan received her B.A. at the University of North Carolina where she was President of her Class, and a law degree from Wake Forest University.

After ten years as a lawyer moonlighting as a standup, she left her practice and spent two years on a solo trip around the world, including working with Mother Teresa's mission in Calcutta, climbing Mt. Kilimanjaro, and driving the Alaska Highway.

Upon returning home, she entered Union Theological Seminary in New York City where she earned a Master of Divinity and wrote an honors thesis on humor and religion. In May 2007, Susan was installed as Madison Avenue Baptist Church's 15th Senior Minister and the first woman in its 175-year history. She continues in that pulpit to this day.

Susan is also a professional comedian touring nationally with a Rabbi and a Muslim Comic in the Laugh in Peace Tour created shortly after 9/11. Her work with humor, healing, and spirituality has been featured in O (The Oprah) Magazine, the New York Times, and on such networks as ABC, CNN, and CBS. A nationally known preacher and speaker, Susan is the best-selling author of five books and an award-winning nationally syndicated columnist.

In 2018, Susan was presented with the 20th John L. Haber Award for Outstanding Contribution to the Arts given by the University of North Carolina. She also received the Intersections International Award for her interfaith work to promote justice and reconciliation among diverse communities.

Most importantly, Susan and her husband Toby love to fly-fish, ride their Harleys, eat good BBQ, and root for UNC Tar Heel Basketball and the Green Bay Packers.



DeVon Jaworski Boyd, affectionately known as D.J., is a native of Whitmire, South Carolina. At the tender age of five, his journey as a musician began and he acclaims all of his success and praises to God. He is a 2003 graduate of Winthrop University with a Bachelor of Arts in Music with a minor in Art and also earned a Master's degree in Worship Music and Worship from Liberty University. D.J. has served as minister of music at the following churches: Boyd Hill Baptist Church, Rock Hill, SC, Friendship Missionary Baptist Church, Charlotte, NC, and Statesville Avenue Presbyterian Church, Charlotte, NC. He currently serves as the Director of Worship and Arts at St. Luke Missionary Baptist Church, Charlotte NC.

D.J. enjoys teaching piano through his studio DeJaBo Muzic which is operated from the VAPA Center in Charlotte. Outside of his musical career, he is the owner and operator of DeJaBo Designs which entails event planning and decorating for any event. He is also the owner of DeJaBoTies, a bowtie and accessories online boutique.