

# THE Christian Citizen

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MAKING

## Space for *g*race



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Dr. Jeffrey Haggray

**EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR**

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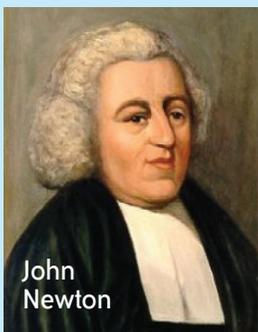
## Making Space for Grace

“Through many dangers, toils and snares  
I have already come  
‘Tis grace hath brought me safe thus far  
and grace will lead me home.”

JOHN NEWTON

**W**hen my children were much younger, one of the songs I enjoyed singing them to sleep with was “Amazing Grace.” I sang it so often I began to worry that one day they might fall asleep in church while singing this beautiful testimony of God’s ever-present grace.

Having spent years at sea prior to his conversion, first in the Royal Navy then as crewman and captain of slave ships, the hymn’s author, John Newton, understood first-hand the dangers, toils and snares of life. Some he suffered at the mercy of unforgiving seas. Some he brought to bear upon others as an active participant in and beneficiary of the slave trade. Only later, some



John  
Newton

time after his conversion, would he come to understand that it was grace that had been moving in his life to bring him safely through. Only later, as a participant in the movement to abolish slavery, would he come to understand this same grace would lead him home. God’s grace is just as near to us, and just as sufficient, even though

we, like Newton, may at first be unaware of its presence. God’s grace is yet moving in our midst, reaching out to us, even though our lives be entangled in the brokenness and injustice of the times in which we live.

American Baptist Home Mission Societies (ABHMS) traces its roots to the associational movement of the early 19th century and to the coordinated efforts of American Baptists to establish churches, preach the

gospel and minister to persons in special need. We who follow in the footsteps of such remarkable persons of courage and conviction as John Mason Peck, Joanna P. Moore, Henry Morehouse and Jitsuo Morikawa, to name just a few, give thanks for the grace that sustains us and for the opportunities yet before us to add to the long and proud history of this organization.

With this issue of *The Christian Citizen*, we share some of the wisdom and experience of the ABHMS *Space for Grace* gathering Nov. 4-7, 2015 in Los Angeles. We also mark the transition in leadership from Dr. Aidsand F. Wright-Riggins III to Dr. Jeffrey Haggray. We give thanks for the tenure and leadership of Dr. Wright-Riggins, and for his commitment to reestablishing the connection with our missional identity. We look forward with hope and expectation to the leadership Dr. Haggray will provide in the years to come.

Through it all, we will continue to listen for the sweet sound of God’s amazing grace. We will continue to look for its manifestation in our lives and in the lives of those around us. We will continue to make space for its healing presence and growth in the brokenness of our communities, nation and world.

We seek your support and your prayers that God will continue to bless these endeavors for the good of all people and for the growth of God’s kingdom.

*Curtis Ramsey-Lucas serves ABHMS as managing director, Resource Development, and director of interfaith engagement at American Association of People with Disabilities.*

## Lightening Our Living Load with Grace

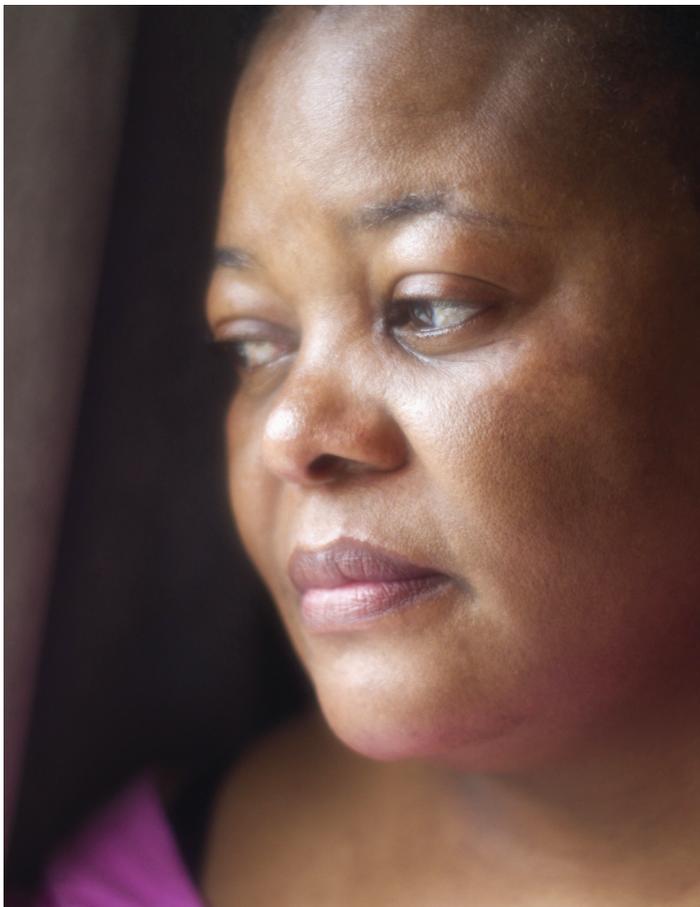
**I** once daydreamed about God having a problem. God’s problem was not the devil or sin. I imagined God having effectively addressed both those problems at Calvary. In my daydream, believe it or not, God’s problem was religion. The problem was layered. First, religion placed God far away. Second, religion often portrayed God as being accessible only to the truly holy. Finally, religion presented belief and faith in ways that felt heavy and burdensome. As I continued to let myself be taken away by these sudden and strangely compelling observations, I began to sense that of the three shortcomings, religion’s tendency to present the spiritual quest as burdensome seemed to bother God the most. When I asked why this was so, a reply fell immediately and clearly upon my spirit: “Be-

cause even if you understand that I am close and available to all, if your experience with Me feels burdensome, I may as well be far off and attainable to only a few.”

How heavy is your faith experience? Does it tend to weigh you down or lift you up? Frederick Buechner suggests that the certain sign that someone is in communion with God is that they evidence a “strange lightness of heart.” Nothing lightens the heart better than God’s grace, that divine blessing of supreme affirmation, which inspires us to live from acceptance and not for acceptance. How might we rest and revel in such glad acceptance daily?

**Make space for wondering.** Though my calling as a boy preacher was a source of great pride to my parents, they were sometimes concerned about my studying too much. My mother, in particular, offered a strangely worded warning that I never fully understood until many years later. She would say, “Let your mind rest, before your head busts open like a morning glory.” The image makes me smile. Her point was that, whatever my genuine religious calling was, I would do it and myself untold damage by not withdrawing myself from it for a while. Not only have I developed a genuine appreciation for mental rest, but for the rich dimensions of spirituality that may only be traversed through thoughtlessness of a rested state. Let your thinking at times yield to wondering: soft open-reflecting and nonreflecting, that you may be blown away by insight not accessible through rationale striving. David puts it this way in Psalm 46: 10 “Be still, and know that I am God.” The wonderful poet, Mary Oliver, experiences this holy ground as a space of “not-thinking, not-remembering, and not wanting.” In addition to the peaceful enchantment offered by the cessation of mental engagement, there is something else about it that makes it particularly compelling—wondering is weightless.

**Watch how you carry heavy loads.** I worked my way through college as a stock clerk. The training involved learning how to lift and carry heavy loads. For example, to lift safely and more easily, I learned how to use my leg muscles and not my back muscles. Also, I learned to kneel and squat to pick something up, as opposed to





Rev. Dr. Kirk Byron Jones

Anything that opens the mind or softens the heart has God's fingerprints all over it.

bending over, and the importance of keeping my back, shoulders, and neck as straight as possible. When it came to carrying a heavy load, I learned to carry objects close to my body, and when possible, to carry objects directly in front of me rather than on the sides of my body. That way, the muscles on one or the other side did not have to do all the work. In short, I learned, in the words one of my supervisors, "how to work the work, as opposed to letting the work, work me." Often, it wasn't the weight of the load that made it feel so heavy, but the way I chose to carry it. Similarly, in life, it's not just the weight of the load that makes it feel so heavy, but the way we choose to carry it. A better way to carry a heavy load in life is to focus less on the burden and more on God, Our Gracious Burden-bearer. No matter how deep our pain, God's love is deeper. Moreover, what is in us is always greater than what is against us.

**Take a dip in God's grace each day.** Once while vacationing on beautiful Lake George in upstate New York, I noticed persons out swimming at the break of day. I later found out that they were participating in the daily scheduled "Morning Dip." That morning dip prompted me to start one of my own: taking moments each day, sometimes several times a day, imagining myself wading, swimming and floating in the soothing waters of God's grace. These are moments of unspeakable ease when I don't remember God's love as much as I feel it afresh in the moment. There is nothing more blessed than a tender heart. Take care of yours by soaking it in God's grace each day.

**Grace sparks are everywhere:** Once while waiting for a plane, a young girl began playing peek-a-boo with me while seated on her mother's lap. Whenever I looked in her direction, she would playfully hide her eyes, until one time when she didn't. In that moment, I caught sight of pure love in her wondrous gaze. There God was again. Sometimes we miss the grace we think we ought to have because we are standing right smack dab in the middle of it. A doable and effective way to receive grace anew each day is to notice little messages that God sends each day directly to us, through others, via our labor and leisure, and by way of nature. Anything that opens the mind or softens the heart has God's fingerprints all over it. I call such messages and experience "Grace Sparks," and I am collecting them all the time.

I have never forgotten my daydream about God's problem. But it has been delightfully overshadowed by daily grace practices that make the load of living lighter. I am encouraged to keep on keeping on in this way by the Graced Son who says with a smile, "My yoke is easy and my burden is light."

*Excerpted from "Calling Forth New Life: Becoming Your Freshest, Finest, and Fullest Self" (Soaring Spirit Press On, 2015). The Rev. Dr. Kirk Byron Jones, adjunct faculty member in Ethics and Preaching at Andover Newton Theological Seminary and author of 12 books, was a learning experience presenter at Space for Grace. To read about his favorite "Grace Sparks," visit "Yes to Grace" on Facebook.*

## Laughing Your Way to Grace

Laughter is the  
closest thing to  
the grace of God.

KARL BARTH

**I**'m going to start out with a proposition that will make John Calvin turn over in his grave. (Let's pause to allow him a moment to get settled.)

OK, ready? We can laugh our way to grace.

I know, I know. This goes against centuries of thinking that grace is a one-way street, in which God offers mystical healing and mercy to the undeserving. But I believe when it comes to grace, we are not just passive receivers, but partners.

Grace is all around us. And each of us has been given gifts of the spirit to access that grace—one of the most powerful being laughter. Let's start with the fact that God has a sense of humor. Consider God striking the entire male population of Philistines with hemorrhoids (1 Samuel 5:9). (Harsh, but funny.) Humans are made in the image of the divine. We laugh and feel joy, therefore, a part of the divine must also laugh. God has no problem with humor in holy realms, unlike many who cringe

**When it comes to grace,  
we are not just passive  
receivers, but partners.**

at the thought. Perhaps Voltaire was right when he said, "God is a comedian playing to an audience who is afraid to laugh."

Laughter is the closest thing we have to the grace of God because it brings us forgiveness, perspective and healing. In my book, "Laugh Your Way to Grace" (Sky-Light Paths Publishing, 2010), I explain it like this: If you can laugh at yourself, you can forgive yourself. And if you can forgive yourself, you can forgive others.

Laughter changes our perspective and invites us to see things in a fresh new way. As Charlie Chaplin is quoted as saying, "Life in the close-up is a tragedy, but life in the longshot is a comedy." The ability to step back and laugh at ourselves reminds us that we are only human and that we should be more forgiving of ourselves. It's like the Serenity Prayer teaches: "God grant me the

serenity to accept the things I cannot change, courage to change the things I can, and wisdom to know the difference." Of course, there is another version that I personally like better called the "senility prayer": "God, grant me the senility to forget the people I never liked anyway, the good fortune to run into the ones that I do, and the eyesight to tell the difference." Either way, laughter helps us see ourselves in a more forgiving light.

Laughter also encourages us to be more forgiving of others. It bonds us together and reminds us of our common humanity. When we laugh with someone—whether a stranger, a friend or an enemy—our worlds overlap for a tiny but significant moment. It is then that our differences fade and our common connections gleam forth. As the poet W.H. Auden wrote, "Love your crooked neighbor with your own crooked heart." In fact, humor has been identified as a key factor in peace-building and international mediation. Dr. Craig Zelizer, associate director of the master's program in Conflict Resolution within the government department at Georgetown University, explains in *The Journal of Conflictology* (Vol. 1, No. 2, 2010) that "humour can play an important role in conflict contexts in fostering connections, helping groups cope with the effects of conflict . . . and providing a degree of safety for expressing difficult ideas or opinions."

Examples include Clowns without Borders, a non-profit organization that uses laughter to relieve the suffering of persons living in areas of crisis, including refugee camps, conflict zones and emergency situations. Another example is the Laugh in Peace Tour, a comedy show featuring a standup rabbi, a Muslim comic and me as the "Christian chick" master of ceremonies. We appear everywhere from corporations to college campuses across the country, so our audiences are highly diverse, including Jews, Christians, Muslims, Buddhists, Hindus and atheists. The goal of the show is to build bridges and reconcile differences through humor. For two short hours, the walls come down and we all laugh together.

Laughter also ushers in God's grace through physical, mental and spiritual healing. Overwhelming scientific evidence supports the health benefits of humor. For example, we know that the extra intake of air from

laughing can lower blood pressure, boost the immune system, enhance heart and lung function and increase endorphins. It can even bump up calorie burn. In fact, laughing for 15 minutes can burn 80 calories. That's enough to justify a Reese's peanut butter cup!

As a breast cancer survivor, I understand the physical as well as the mental healing power of humor. During my cancer struggle, I realized there were three choices: be mad, be sad or laugh. I soon learned that the more powerful approach was to laugh. One day, a new patient walked in to the radiation center with a T-shirt that read: "Yes they are fake, my old ones tried to kill me." The entire waiting room burst out laughing. That moment of laughter reminded us that cancer was not who we were; it was only something we were experiencing.

Humor is now being used in hospitals and treatment centers as a healing tool for cancer, Alzheimer's and autism as well as for those with mental health issues. For example, Standup for Mental Health is organization that uses standup training to reduce the stigma and discrimination around mental illness. The founder, David Granirer, explains, "The idea is that laughing at our setbacks raises us above them. It makes people go from despair to hope, and hope is crucial to anyone struggling with adversity."

Spiritual healing may be where laughter and grace are most powerfully linked. As Proverbs 17:22 teaches,

"A cheerful heart is good medicine, but a downcast spirit dries up the bones." We tend to check our joy at the doors of our houses of worship like we check our coats. To be healed, we have to bring all the pieces to the altar—anger, sadness, fear and laughter. It's all holy.

In the end, laughter relates directly to the life force itself. In the Egyptian creation myth, God laughed the world into being—a concept not so far removed from breathing life into Adam (Gen. 2:7). In fact, among the translations of the Hebrew word "ruach" are spirit and breath. When we laugh, we are inhaling and exhaling spirit. It's just as Anne Lamott proposed in "Plan B: Further Thoughts on Faith": "Laughter is carbonated holiness."

Episcopal priest Justin Holcomb describes grace as the "peace of God given to the restless" (christianity.com/theology/what-is-grace). At heart, we are all restless. We all seek to reconnect to the one who created us. And that connection is not as difficult as you may think. Make space for joy. Make room for laughter in your heart and spirit. Truly, it's the quickest way to God's healing mercy. Each of us can laugh our way to grace.

*The Rev. Susan Sparks, a trial lawyer-turned-stand-up comedian and senior pastor of the historic Madison Avenue Baptist Church in New York City, led worship at Space for Grace. Learn more at [www.SusanSparks.com](http://www.SusanSparks.com).*



Rev. Susan Sparks

## The Price of Grace

**W**hen I was a child in my father's Pentecostal church, Easter was the best day of the year because that was when all the grownups would "get happy." Uncle Ed would start singing. Brother Ralph would start marching. Brother Louie would start dancing down the aisle like he had a pain in his back. And we kids loved it. And why not? Why not praise Jesus? Jesus is alive. Jesus changed them. Jesus had made them brand new, and they would never be the same again. Why not praise him? Why not love him? Why not sing and shout the victory?

In the story of the resurrection as recorded in the Gospel of John, a somber tone seeps through the rejoicing. As the risen Jesus stood among the disciples, he showed them his hands and his side (John 20:20). In that instant, after having their highest hopes realized and experiencing the great triumph of their crucified Lord alive again, the disciples receive a reminder of what it took for that moment of joy to be realized. It must have been quite an experience with the convergence of two extreme emotions: jubilation at the presence of the risen Savior and the shock and pain of seeing his wounds.

We might wonder what Jesus' aim was in revealing this reminder of his suffering embedded in his body. Why did he do it, and why does Scripture record the moment for us? I believe Jesus showed the wounds in his body because of the human propensity to forget the high price of salvation. Children often act as though they think money grows on trees. Youth sometimes just expect their parents to give them whatever their neighbors have. And adults' actions often reveal a similar mindset. Our country has spent billions on war without seeming to realize that someone was going to have to pay for them. We have sacrificed programs and services that directly benefit the poor without appreciating that neglecting the poor has a high cost too. We tend to forget that life has costs, that blessings have a cost. And we certainly tend to forget the great sacrifice that yielded a resurrected savior.

In Dietrich Bonhoeffer's seminal work, "The Cost of Discipleship," he wrote that cheap grace is the deadly enemy of the church. We take the grace of Christ for



Rev. Ernest R. Flores

granted, as though it cost him nothing to save the world. Grace is indeed given freely to us, but if in our celebrations, festivals and dedications we forget its great cost, namely the suffering and death of Jesus of Nazareth, we risk missing the profound truth of the gospel. If we become proud and haughty and think of ourselves as better than others, if we lose an understanding of life in Christ as life of service, we become consumers of blessings instead of channels of blessings. We need the reminder the risen Jesus gave to those first disciples. We too need to consider the marks of suffering in his hands and side, the reminder of the cost of salvation.

*Excerpted and adapted from "Tempted to Leave the Cross: Renewing the Call to Discipleship" (Judson Press, 2007). The Rev. Ernest R. Flores, pastor of Second Baptist Church of Germantown, Pa., led worship at Space for Grace.*

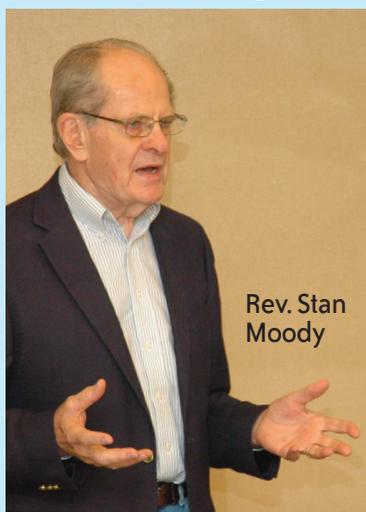
## Growing Downward in Grace

**I**n his book “Spiritual Growth” (Baker Book House, 1977), Arthur W. Pink describes growth in Christian grace as a journey downward:

*Growth in grace is a growth downward: it is the forming of a lower estimate of ourselves; it is a deepening realization of our nothingness; it is a heartfelt recognition that we are not worthy of the least of God’s mercies.*

Grace has become for too many the proud impetus for upward mobility in every aspect of our lives. The thought is that God blesses us and gives us increase, not simply because he loves us but for our presumed faithfulness.

We have lost sight of who we are as the redeemed of God. The God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, who longs to lead us through the desert, has been invited instead to become an accomplice to our five-year plans—desperately clever strategies



Rev. Stan  
Moody

for securing an increasing share in a declining market. Meanwhile, people just beyond our reach are drowning in a sea of fear, isolation, mental illness, drug dependency, brokenness and despair, while we count heads on Sunday mornings as proof of God’s presence and favor.

The perpetual search for the Kingdom of God, embedded into our DNA,

begins with the directive of Micah 6:8: “He has told you, O mortal, what is good; and what does the Lord require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God.” The search ends at the judgment scene of Matthew 25:34b, where neither the self-righteous nor the redeemed have any recollection

of meeting Jesus as hungry, thirsty, naked, sick or in prison. But only the righteous hear the words, “Come, you that are blessed of my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world.”

Instinctively, the Christian seeks Jesus wherever he may be found. In all our ways, we are to act justly and live as agents of mercy. If acting justly and loving mercy is truly to be inadvertent and instinctive, however, it can be done only by walking humbly with our God. This presupposes living in a state of repentance.

God is calling us to get out of our insular Christian ghettos and into the world of human imperfection and suffering. It is there that we will find Jesus, the “pearl of great value” (Matthew 13:46). We will find him in the homeless shelters, the jails and prisons, at soup kitch-

**Instinctively, the Christian seeks Jesus wherever he may be found.**

ens, in tattoo parlors and bars, in our divorce courts and sometimes, but rarely, behind gated communities of folks who write the news and pass the laws.

We won’t always know where we are going. We may be unable clearly to define what we are doing or why. Once committed, however, we won’t want to go back. God, you see, doesn’t have a five-year plan. He has an eternal plan. To share with us that eternal plan, God invites us to give up our plans. “For surely I know the plans I have for you, says the Lord; plans for your welfare and not for harm, to give you a future with hope” (Jeremiah 29:11). Do we dare abandon our familiar fallback positions in pursuit of the present, dynamic, victorious Kingdom of the living God?

*The Rev. Stan Moody, Ph.D., senior pastor of Columbia Street Baptist Church, Bangor, Maine, founder/director of the Columbia Street Project and member of the ABHMS National Prisoner Reentry Network, was a learning experience presenter at Space for Grace.*

## Standing in the Gap with Grace

*Grace*—a five-letter word that has the abounding capacity to demonstrate to a broken, sinful, serpent-bitten humanity the lengths God undertakes to be in relationship with us.

**I**n the Christian church, in general, and within Baptist circles, in particular, we have a working theological definition of grace as being God’s unmerited favor towards us, as Paul writes so poignantly, “so that in the ages to come he might show the immeasurable riches of his grace in kindness toward us in Christ Jesus” (Ephesians 2:7). The incarnation, birth, life, ministry, crucifixion, death, burial, resurrection, ascension and return of Christ are tangible expressions of the grace of God toward a sinful humanity and a desecrated creation.

Saint and sinner; atheist, agnostic and believer; male and female; rich, middle class and poor; educated and uneducated; straight, gay, bisexual and transgender;

Republican, Democrat, Independent, and tea partyers—grace is available to all. It is the means by which human beings can have relationship with God through Christ. Salvation is freely given by the grace of God predicated upon our faith in Jesus Christ (Ephesians 2:8). We have a relationship with the God of the universe, the Christ of creation, the Holy Spirit of eternity because God has showered us with grace when we neither deserved nor appreciated it.

I believe it was Philip Brooks who gave grace the acrostic God’s Riches At Christ’s Expense. I contend that, besides the name of Jesus Christ, *grace* is the most beautiful word in Christianity. But the problem is how easily Christians revert to trying to satisfy God with good works, money, church attendance and proper behavior. Many of us get on the proverbial “treadmill,” functioning as if we have to do something to keep God’s love rather than serving, giving, living righteously as a result of experiencing the grace of God on an ongoing basis. Such a misappropriation of grace has created a



Rev. Dr. Robert Charles Scott

church of persons who are afraid to stand in the gap for those who are oppressed, disinherited, disenfranchised, repressed and left out when it comes to societal norms.

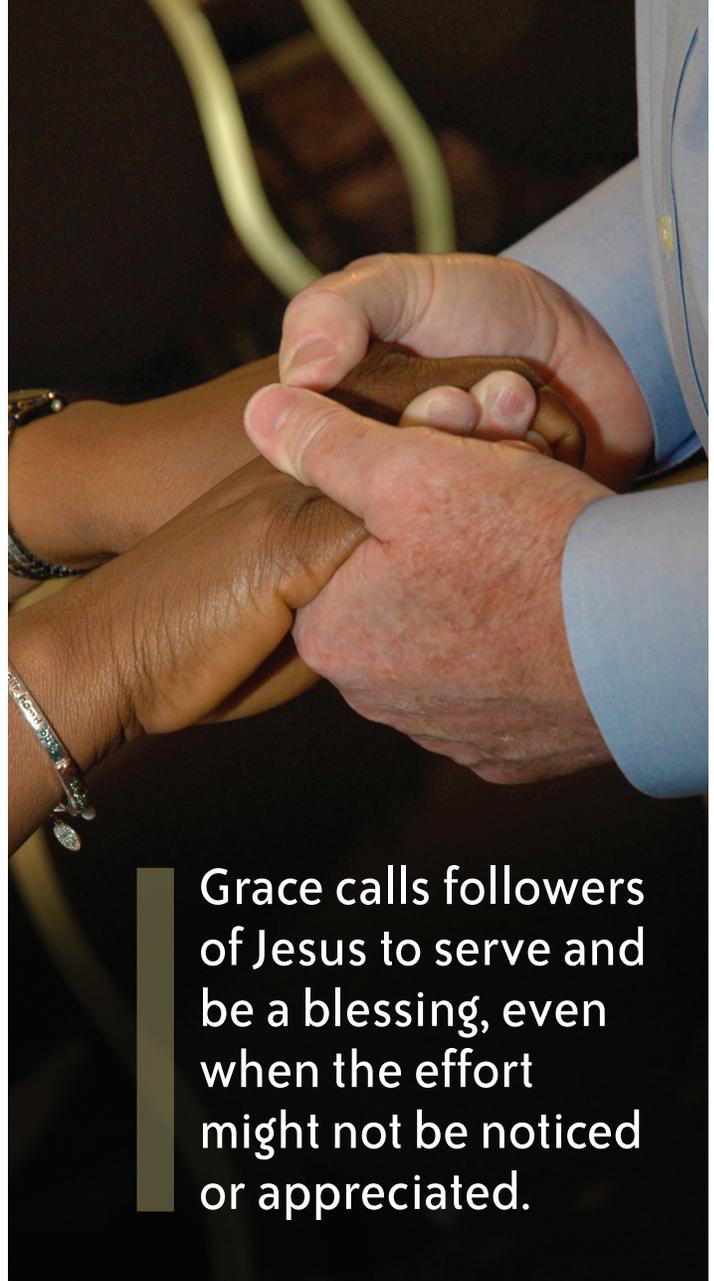
Many followers of Christ miss the opportunity to stand in the gap because we are preoccupied with titles, status and recognition. When we are performance-driven and trying to please God, we will pick and choose those existential moments when we can get the best return for our time. However, when we really appreciate God's grace, we are prompted to take risks that might not have any return on the investment—precisely what Jesus did at Calvary!

Grace is the kindness of God and the care of God over all of creation—the incarnation of Jesus, laying aside his heavenly glory and entering the ghetto of earth to identify with our brokenness. It is his willingness to lay down his life for us and not count our sins against us. Grace flows when Scripture teaches us the best way to live and please God. Grace is active in God's love and forgiveness, in divine provision and in the human capacity to enter the presence of a holy God.

The opportunity to stand in the gap with grace was presented to me personally when Michael Brown was shot to death by police officer Darren Wilson in the street near the Canfield Greens apartment complex in Ferguson, Mo., on Aug. 9, 2014. His body lay uncovered, decomposing in the hot August sun. Anger was swelling in the streets, as people from the neighborhood gathered, protesting what had taken place. The following Sunday, a prayer vigil was held at the Ferguson police department led by the Rev. Traci Blackmon and members of the St. Louis Clergy coalition. Her church, Christ the King United Church of Christ, along with St. Mark Baptist Church, became focal points for strategy meetings and prayer vigils.

From this horrific incident, a new civil rights movement emerged with such hashtags as #HANDSUPDONT-SHOOT and #BLACKLIVESMATTER. This movement, unlike that of the civil rights era of Dr. Martin Luther King, will not have its organizational and spiritual nexus in the church, but in the streets. Responding was a challenge to the church in general because we could not have respect in the streets until relationship and credibility were forged. The Rev. Dr. J. Dwight Stinnett, executive minister of the Great Rivers Region of American Baptist Churches USA, traveled from Springfield, Ill., on Sunday, Aug. 17, 2014, to visit each American Baptist church in St. Louis that was impacted by the situation. Several American Baptist churches, regional staff and pastors gave resources, presence and support to this effort in the days following. We were a catalyst for one of the largest demonstrations with nearly 1,500 persons marching in Ferguson.

I discovered something about grace during these protests and serving as a pastor of a local church. Grace



**Grace calls followers of Jesus to serve and be a blessing, even when the effort might not be noticed or appreciated.**

calls followers of Jesus to serve and be a blessing, even when the effort might not be noticed or appreciated. Ultimately, it's not about who gets the credit but about Christ being seen through our presence, our prayers and our protest.

Our presence is demonstrated in physical, spiritual and emotional awareness of the pain, suffering and evil in our midst. Our prayers become the catalyst to empower us to do the hard work ahead with a sense of purpose, passion and power. Our protest is the ability to demonstrate grace as a tool of resistance against the oppressive systems of this world so God will be glorified and Christ will be exalted. To do that, we must respond to the question, "Who will go for us?" in the same way as did the prophet of long ago, "Here am I; send me!" (Isaiah 6:8).

*The Rev. Dr. Robert Charles Scott, senior pastor of Central Baptist Church, St. Louis, Mo., and ABHMS board member, was a plenary speaker at Space for Grace.*

## Space for Advent

**F**inding space for anything is challenging during the season between Thanksgiving and Christmas. Physical space for hiding gifts, storing wrapping paper or stashing party food safely away from pets or kids. Mental space for list-making (groceries, gifts, guests, to-dos). Emotional space for remembering holidays past and hopes, both cherished and dashed. While the season may be considered liminal in the liturgical calendar, on my electronic calendars, those few weeks look more harried and hectic than holy. Yet, my heart yearns to create the space essential for meditation to live alongside anticipation. My spirit longs for the grace to experience the mixed emotions that accompany memories. My mind craves a capacity to respond to Spirit's inspiration as the liturgical year resets and the calendar year winds down. But how?

### Spacious Enough for Sanctuary

*I will make a covenant of peace with them; it shall be an everlasting covenant with them; and I will bless them and multiply them, and will set my sanctuary among them forevermore. EZEKIEL 37:26*

Advent anticipates the Incarnation—that mysterious and magnificent miracle whereby God chose to live and laugh and love among humanity, or as THE MESSAGE puts it: “The Word became flesh and blood, and moved into the neighborhood” (John 1:14). In the Greek, the text literally says that the Word pitched its tent among us, an allusion to Jewish history and the days when the presence of God was housed in the tabernacle, a mobile sanctuary that traveled with the Hebrews during their wilderness wanderings. Through the Incarnation, a human body became God's earthly sanctuary—and once incarnated into our world, even God needed space for personal sanctuary. Jesus often sought time apart for solitary prayer.

At the *Space for Grace* gathering, a unique team was tasked with spiritual hospitality. Conferences, like life, are often physically and intellectually exhausting. So, Spiritual Hospitality created open spaces, both physi-

cally and chronologically. Flexible time in the schedule coupled with quiet, contemplative spaces allowed for personal time apart. Facilitated small-group discussions and informal connections in Conversation Corners offered interactive engagement. These intentional spaces allowed participants to process their experiences and to breathe more deeply of the Spirit's presence and power.

We all need time and space for personal sanctuary in the midst of life's information inundation, sensory surges and diverse demands. For some, that means seek-



ing silence and solitude. For others, it means time with passionate and compassionate companions. And many benefit from a balance of both.

During Advent, a room decked with fragrant greenery, illumined with soft light or humming with seasonal melodies might provide sanctuary. A table-top crèche or traditional Advent wreath might become a point of focus for centering prayer or meditation. Revisiting the messianic prophecies or exploring the Gospel nativity narratives can become rich meditative experiences or fodder for lively discussions. Whatever sanctuary you create or choose, welcome Emmanuel in that space, and breathe deeply of Spirit, God's breath within us.

### Gracious Enough for Grief

*Be gracious to me, O Lord, for I am in distress; my eye wastes away from grief, my soul and body also. PSALM 31:9*

Advent is not only (and for many of us, not even primarily) a liturgical season of remembering and

anticipating Christ's appearance. The weeks between mid-November and early January are encompassed by the umbrella term "The Holidays," and with each passing year, those weeks are burdened with baggage that holds more than brightly wrapped gifts. The holidays are traditionally a time spent with family and friends—and when life doesn't look anything like the motifs celebrated in movies, marketing and even church events, the grief can be suffocating.

At the holidays, occasional loneliness becomes oppressive isolation. Depression darkens and despair deepens into desolation. Suicide rates soar. Old grief gapes into open wounds again. Empty chairs evoke a hollow hunger that no holiday feast can fill.

During Advent, we need space that offers grace for grief and liberty for lament. Our Creator has made us with the facility for healing, but hidden hurts fester. My mother always said a wound heals more quickly if left open to the air. It will sting more. Extra nurture is necessary to avoid infection. But if the pain is endured and care provided, most injuries benefit from nature taking its course.

Our Savior did not leave us without a Comforter, but how can we find consolation if we are not encouraged to call on that Spirit of succor? Especially during the holidays, let us create gracious space for our own and others' grief. The prophets were powerful proclaimers of pain, so whether our grief is over personal loss or over principled injustice, let us free ourselves to be loquacious in lament.

## Capacious Enough for Creativity

*I am about to do a new thing; now it springs forth, do you not perceive it? ISAIAH 43:19*

God created humankind in the divine image, and that image includes the capacity for creativity. Advent, Incarnation and faith evoke inspiration of every kind (writing, music, painting, architecture, sculpture, drama). Yet creative expression isn't limited to the arts. We need imagination, inspiration, ingenuity, innovation in everyday life to solve problems, to navigate changes and respond to crises. A traffic jam on the morning commute may call for creativity. Parenting requires creativity, as do other relationships. Our vocations demand creativity, whether we minister in the workaday world, in the local church or in some intersection of the two.

The challenge, of course, is that creativity requires space—mental space, emotional space and physical space. And inspiration depends upon welcoming Spirit in that space. So, part of the priority during Advent is increasing our capacity for creativity. It's a paradox—the need to create space for creativity. But the Spirit within us calls us to respond to the invitation, to exercise the

image of God in our spirits by exercising our imaginations. Perhaps a good warm-up for the exercise is to ask the questions offered in "Word and Witness," the work-week devotions provided by ABHMS:

- *How can I play my part in practicing the presence of Christ, right here, right now?* In this moment, crowded with other claims on my time and energy, how do I experience God with us, with *me*? And how do I participate in that incarnational presence?
- *How and where shall I follow Christ today?* With a renewed awareness of Emmanuel, where do I sense God leading? How can I track Spirit's movement, and in what new thing might I partner with Christ in creating?
- *How can I demonstrate Jesus' love and justice today?* When capacity for creativity is limited, what are the incidental, incremental acts of compassion, advocacy and truth-telling that I can contribute to my Creator's imaginative work in the world?

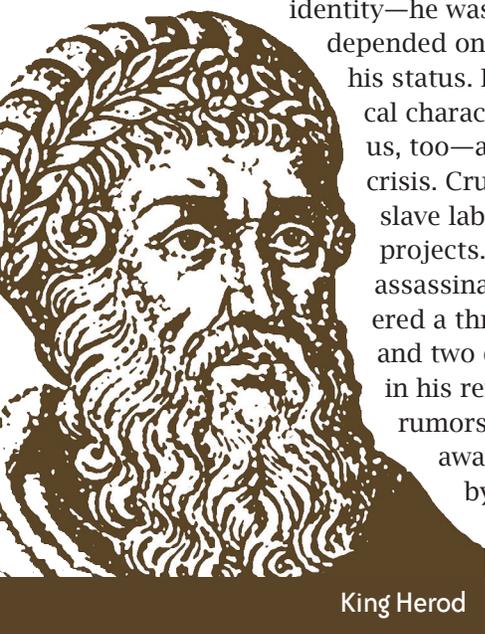
*The Rev. Rebecca Irwin-Diehl serves ABHMS as an editor for Judson Press. To subscribe to "Word and Witness," visit [www.abhms.org](http://www.abhms.org) > What's a Passionary? > Make Some Waves!*



## Keep Herod in Christmas

**R**ight in the middle of Matthew's version of the Christmas story comes a shock. It is disturbing, terrifying, and horrific. And it is essential to understanding the adventure and mission of Jesus.

King Herod, or Herod the Great, ruled over Judea in the years leading up to Jesus' birth. Although he rebuilt the Temple in the Jerusalem—a sign of his Jewish identity—he was a puppet king who also depended on the Roman Empire for his status. He was, like many biblical characters—and like many of us, too—a man with an identity crisis. Cruel and ruthless, he used slave labor for his huge building projects. He had a reputation for assassinating anyone he considered a threat—including his wife and two of his own sons. Late in his reign, he began hearing rumors...rumors that the long-awaited liberator prophesied by Isaiah and others had been born. While a pious man might have greeted this news with hope and joy, Herod



King Herod

only saw it as a threat—a threat to political stability and to his own status as king.

In recent years, there had been a lot of resistance, unrest, and revolt in Jerusalem, so Rome wasn't in a tolerant frame of mind. Any talk of rebellion, Herod knew, would bring crushing retaliation against the city. So Herod inquired of the religious scholars to find out if the holy texts gave any indication of where this long-anticipated child would be born. Their answer came from the Book of Micah: Bethlehem.

Herod did what any desperate, ruthless dictator would do. First, he tried to enlist some foreign mystics, known to us as “the wise men from the East.” He wanted them to be his spies to help him discover the child's identity and whereabouts so he could have the

child killed. But the wise men were warned of his deceit in a dream and so avoided becoming his unwitting accomplices. Realizing that his “Plan A” had failed, Herod launched “Plan B.” He sent his henchmen to find and kill any young boy living in the area of Bethlehem. But the particular boy he sought had already been removed from Bethlehem and taken elsewhere.

The result? A slaughter of innocent children in Bethlehem. As is the case with many biblical stories, some scholars doubt this mass slaughter occurred, since none is recorded in other histories of the time. Others argue that Bethlehem was a small town, so the total number of casualties may have been twenty or thirty. Dictators certainly have their ways of keeping atrocities secret—just as they have their ways of making their exploits known. Whatever the infant death count in Bethlehem, we know Herod killed some of his own children when they became a threat to his agenda. So even if the story has been fictionalized to some degree, there is a deeper truth that has much to say to us today.

In his slaughter of innocent children, King Herod has now emulated the horrible behavior of Pharaoh centuries before, in the days of Moses. A descendant of the slaves has behaved like the ancient slave master. The story of Herod tells us once again that the world can't be simply divided between the good guys—*us*—and the bad guys—*them*—because like Herod, members of *us* will behave no differently from *them*, given the power and provocation. So all people face the profound questions: *How will we manage power? How will we deal with violence?*

Herod—and Pharaoh before him—model one way: Violence is simply one tool, used in varying degrees, to gain or maintain power.

The baby whom Herod seeks to kill will model another way. His tool will be service, not violence. And his goal will not be gaining and maintaining power, but using his power to heal and empower others. He will reveal a vision of God that is reflected more in the vulnerability of children than in the violence of men, more in the caring of mothers than in the cruelty of kings.

All this can sound quite abstract and theoretical unless we go one step deeper. The next war—whoever



Brian D. McLaren

wages it—will most likely resemble every war in the past. It will be planned by powerful older men in their comfortable offices, and it will be fought on the ground by people the age of their children and grandchildren. Most of the casualties will probably be between eighteen and twenty-two years old—in some places, much younger. So the old, sad music of the ancient story of Herod and the slaughter of the children will be replayed again. And again, the tears of mothers will fall.

The sacrifice of children for the well-being and security of adults has a long history among human beings. For example, in the ancient Middle East there was a religion dedicated to an idol named Molech. Faithful adherents would sacrifice infants to Molech every year, a horrible display of twisted religiosity to appease their god's wrath and earn his favor. In contrast, beginning with the story of Abraham and Isaac, we gradually discover that the true God doesn't require appeasement at all. In fact, God exemplifies true, loving, mature parenthood... self-giving for the sake of one's children, not sacrificing children for one's own selfish interest.

This is why it matters so much for us to grapple with what we believe about God. Does God promote or demand violence? Does God favor the sacrifice of children for the well-being of adults? Is God best reflected in the image of powerful old men who send the young and vulnerable to die on their behalf? Or is God best seen in the image of a helpless baby, identifying with the victims, sharing their vulnerability, full of fragile but limitless promise?

We do not live in an ideal world. To be alive in the adventure of Jesus is to face at every turn the destruc-

tive reality of violence. To be alive in the adventure of Jesus is to side with vulnerable children in defiance of the adults who see them as expendable. To walk the road with Jesus is to withhold consent and cooperation from the powerful, and to invest it instead with the vulnerable. It is to refuse to bow to all the Herods and all their ruthless regimes—and to reserve our loyalty for a better king and a better kingdom.

Jesus has truly come, but each year during the Advent season, we acknowledge that the dream for which he gave his all has not yet fully come true. As long as elites plot violence, as long as children pay the price, and as long as mothers weep, we cannot be satisfied.

So let us light a candle for the children who suffer in our world because of greedy, power-hungry, and insecure elites. And let us light a candle for grieving mothers who weep for lost sons and daughters, throughout history and today. And let us light a candle for all people everywhere to hear their weeping. In this Advent season, we dare to believe that God feels their pain and comes near to bring comfort. If we believe that is true, then of course we must join God and come near, too. That is why we must keep Herod and the ugliness of his mass murder in the beautiful Christmas story.

*Excerpted by permission from "We Make the Road by Walking: A Year-long Quest for Spiritual Formation, Reorientation and Activation" (Jericho Books, 2014). Brian D. McLaren led Bible study at Space for Grace.*

## A Retrospective on the Ministry of Dr. Aidsand F. Wright-Riggins III

Steward of American Baptist Home Mission Societies 1991-2015

**W**hile serving as pastor of the storied Macedonia Baptist Church, Los Angeles, Dr. Aidsand F. Wright-Riggins III answered the call in 1991 to serve as the 17th executive director of what was then known as National Ministries and had previously been known as the American Baptist Home Mission Society. Only Dr. Henry L. Morehouse served longer as the organization's leader. The name "National Ministries" was adopted when American Baptist Churches USA restructured in 1972. Wright-Riggins stressed the

reviewed the publicity material for the 1992 evangelism convocation in Washington, D.C., he was astounded by the lack of organizational branding. Today the three original program departments function as an integrated whole and coordinate with communications specialists. Board committees had functioned as mini-boards for various departments but quickly transitioned to the John Carver policy governance model. Wright-Riggins inherited an analog workplace; soon after his arrival, electric typewriters, dictation equipment and phone memos were replaced with desktop computers, voice-mail and email.

When programs seemed disconnected from the local church, he pressed staff both to equip churches to do advocacy and to do advocacy on behalf of churches. When Native American Indian Ministries was stuck in an outdated missionary model, he engaged a new paradigm in which the many tribes related to ABHMS were the subject—rather than the object—of mission. Wright-Riggins invited Eric Law of the Kaleidoscope Institute to reframe cross-cultural ministries as "inter-cultural," in which ministry means that the fullness of all cultures influence each other. We all learned from Asian experiences with immigrant generations.

The Hispanic "Vision 2001" initiative laid the groundwork for "New Life 2010." He inherited a program and resource board that commissioned full-time paid missionaries who did ministry on behalf of American Baptists. Today, ABHMS challenges all American Baptists to be home missionaries, whether in their own neighborhoods supported by Missional Church Learning Experience grants, as volunteers rebuilding New Orleans' Lower 9th Ward, serving at traditional ABHMS mission sites in Alaska and with Native Americans, or working in urban communities such as Washington, D.C. He firmly believes that these home missionaries are called to be "passionaries."

Wright-Riggins made difficult decisions about draw-down on investments, right-sizing staff and balancing telecommuting and Valley Forge-based staff to ensure the future of home mission. When the stock market soared before the great recession, he responsibly allo-



Dr. Aidsand F. Wright-Riggins III

organization's American Baptist identity and clarified its missional purpose by reaffirming the name "American Baptist Home Mission Societies" (ABHMS) on April 27, 2010—the organization's 178th anniversary.

When he arrived at the organization's headquarters in Valley Forge, Pa., Wright-Riggins encountered a lengthy mission statement that was quickly distilled to "Witness-Renewal-Justice" and is today's "Discipleship, Community, Justice" focus. The organization operated in "silos" with autonomous departments and programs following separate budgets and advisory councils as well as publishing various newsletters. When Wright-Riggins



cated surpluses for new short-term ministries such as “New Life Florida” and “Rekindle,” an innovative video-conferencing model for congregational renewal. He has been generous with partners, providing support for seminary programs, regional efforts such as “FutureSearch,” the “Children in Poverty Initiative” and grant programs, Green Lake Conference Center, capital campaign feasibility studies, the “Renewed for Mission” emphasis, American Baptist Men USA and Educational Ministries, which became part of ABHMS in 2003. When the “500 More by '94” new church planting and “Renewed for Mission” emphases ended, Wright-Riggins suggested that the American Baptist Evangelism Team and New Church Planting Council jointly plan a meeting in Las Vegas that resulted in the decade-long denominational “New Life 2010” goals.

Wright-Riggins has been a pastor. He has cared deeply about the ABHMS family. He has been a minister to staff and partners during times of illness, accident, death, birth, weddings and other significant life events. Because he cares for friends and colleagues who have experienced breast cancer, he walked—mostly in the rain—60 miles in three days to raise awareness and funds.

Wright-Riggins has been a prophet. He has been indignant over institutional racism, grappled with the social issues that have divided Americans and American Baptists, and actively involved in Baptist ethics and the Baptist Joint Committee for Religious Liberty. He convened J. Alfred Smith Prophetic Justice Institutes on the East and West coasts and added a focus on Children in

Poverty as well as an emphasis on Prisoner Re-entry and Aftercare Ministry. He led the board in adopting a public witness statement on gun violence.

In our “big tent” denomination, his priorities and choices have reflected the diversity of American Baptists and the holism of our theology. Biennial luncheons have featured young adult voices as well as Bishop Claude Payne of the Episcopal Diocese of Texas speaking on evangelism and Walter Wink speaking on the myth of redemptive violence. Wright-Riggins is rightfully proud to have received honorary doctorates from historically black Benedict College in South Carolina and Alderson-Broadus College in the Appalachian mountains of West Virginia, in addition to his earned Doctor of Ministry degree from the Samuel DeWitt Proctor School of Theology, Virginia Union University, Richmond.

Wright-Riggins continuously challenged his senior team, which, under his leadership, morphed from a management council to a leadership team. Stewardship of the historic mission to reach North America for Christ meant using best practices in administration. We learned about balanced scorecards, metrics, alignment, the Rockefeller Habits, one-page business plans and development strategies.

He has been a friend for the more than two decades that I served with him. We travelled together to Washington to attend the dinner in honor of Billy Graham receiving the Congressional Gold Medal. We sat in Air Force jets at Elmendorf Air Force Base in Alaska, attended the funeral service for Emmett Johnson in Minnesota, participated in the Reconciliation Conference at Coventry, England, and were turned away at the German-Czechoslovakian border while attending a Baptist World Alliance meeting because our rental car did not have the correct *papieren*.

Until his passing in 2010, the Rev. Elliott Mason of Los Angeles prayed regularly for Wright-Riggins. Mason had counseled Wright-Riggins in 1991 to “wear the mantle of leadership loosely”—a phrase Wright-Riggins often quoted. The mantle has fit comfortably these 24 years, and we salute our servant-leader as he passes the mantle to his successor. We echo the words of the master in the Parable of the Talents, who commended the faithful servants for their stewardship: “Well done!”

*The Rev. Dr. David C. Laubach served ABHMS from 1986 until retiring in 2013. A member of the leadership team, Laubach worked closely with Wright-Riggins, beginning in 1995. Laubach is currently chairing Green Lake Conference Center's board and authoring Judson Press' “Judson Bible Journeys for Adults” spring 2016 curriculum. In addition, he is moderator at Aldenville Baptist Church and an instructor in American Baptist Churches of Pennsylvania and Delaware's Academy of Christian Training and Service.*

## Una retrospectiva en el ministerio de Aidsand F. Wright-Riggins III

Líder y siervo de las Sociedades Misioneras Nacionales Bautistas Americanas 1991-2015

**M**ientras se desempeñaba como pastor de la Iglesia Bautista Macedonia, en Los Ángeles, Aidsand F. Wright-Riggins III respondió al llamado en 1991 para servir como el decimoséptimo director ejecutivo de lo que entonces se conocía como Ministerios Nacionales y anteriormente había sido conocido como Sociedad Misionera Nacional Bautista Americana. Sólo el Dr. Henry L. Morehouse sirvió más tiempo que él como líder de la organización. El nombre de “Ministerios Nacionales” se adoptó cuando ABCUSA se reestructuró en 1972. Wright-

departamentos originales del programa funcionan como un todo integrado y coordinan con especialistas en comunicaciones. Los comités de la junta habían funcionado como mini-juntas para diferentes departamentos, pero esto ha cambiado y ahora se utiliza el modelo de gobierno de John Carver. Wright-Riggins heredó un centro de trabajo análogo; poco después de su llegada, las máquinas de escribir eléctricas, equipos de dictado y notas telefónicas fueron reemplazados por computadoras de escritorio, correo de voz y correo electrónico.

Cuando los programas parecían desconectados de la iglesia local, él desafió al personal tanto para equipar a las iglesias para hacer abogacía como para hacer abogacía en favor de las iglesias. Cuando el ministerio con los indios americanos estaba estancado en un modelo misionero anticuado, él implementó un nuevo paradigma en el que las muchas tribus relacionadas con ABHMS fueran el sujeto en lugar del objeto de la misión. Wright-Riggins invitó a Eric Law, del *Kaleidoscope Institute* para replantear ministerios transculturales y pasaron a ser “interculturales”, de manera que se entienda que la plenitud de todas las culturas se influyen unas a otras.

La iniciativa hispana “Visión 2001” sentó las bases para “Nueva Vida 2010”. Él heredó un programa que comisionaba misioneros a tiempo completo, pagados, quienes hacían ministerio en nombre de las y los Bautistas Americanos. Hoy en día, ABHMS desafía a todas y todos los Bautistas Americanos a ser misioneros y misioneras nacionales, ya sea en sus propios vecindarios con el apoyo del programa de Experiencia de Aprendizaje Misional, como voluntarios y voluntarias de reconstrucción de Nueva Orleans, sirviendo en lugares tradicionales de misiones de ABHMS en Alaska o con los indios americanos, o trabajando en las comunidades urbanas como Washington, DC. Él cree firmemente que estos misioneros y misioneras nacionales están llamados y llamadas a ser “*passionaries*”.

Wright-Riggins tomó decisiones difíciles en cuanto a usar menos fondos de las inversiones, modificar el personal al tamaño adecuado y equilibrar la cantidad de

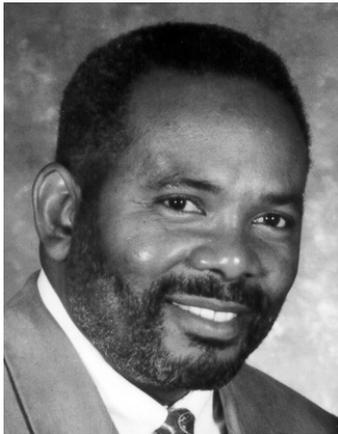


Aidsand F.  
Wright-Riggins III

Riggins hizo énfasis en la identidad Bautista Americana de la organización y clarificó su propósito misional al reclamar el nombre de “Sociedades Misioneras Nacionales Bautistas Americanas” (ABHMS) el 27 de abril de 2010, en el aniversario 178 de la organización.

Cuando llegó a la sede de la organización en Valley Forge, PA, Wright-Riggins se encontró con una declaración de misión bastante larga, que rápidamente redujo a: “Testimonio, Renovación, Justicia” y hoy tiene el enfoque de: “Discipulado, Comunidad, Justicia”. La organización operaba en “silos” con departamentos y programas autónomos, usando presupuestos y equipos de asesoría separados, así como la publicación de varios boletines. Cuando Wright-Riggins revisó el material publicitario para la convocatoria de evangelismo de 1992 en Washington, DC, fue sorprendido por la falta de marca (*branding*) de la organización. Hoy en día los tres

personal que trabaja desde Valley Forge o a distancia, para asegurar el futuro de la misión nacional. Cuando la bolsa de valores se disparó antes de la gran recesión, él asignó responsablemente algunos fondos excedentes para nuevos ministerios a corto plazo, como “Nueva



Vida Florida” y “Aviva el fuego” (*Rekindle*), un innovador modelo de videoconferencia para renovación congregacional. Él ha sido generoso con organizaciones hermanas, proveyendo apoyo a programas de seminarios, a esfuerzos regionales como “*FutureSearch*”, a la iniciativa sobre la Niñez en Pobreza y otros programas

de subsidios, al Centro de Conferencia de Green Lake, los estudios de factibilidad de la campaña capital, al énfasis “*Renewed for Mission*”, a los Hombres Bautistas, a Ministerios Educativos, que en el 2003 pasó a ser parte de ABHMS. Cuando las iniciativas de nuevas obras “500 más en ‘94” y “Renovados para la Misión” terminaron, Wright-Riggins sugirió que el equipo de evangelismo Bautista Americano y el de Nuevas Obras planificaran conjuntamente una reunión en Las Vegas, la cual dio como resultado las metas denominacionales de “Nueva Vida 2010”.

Wright-Riggins ha sido un pastor. Él se ha preocupado profundamente por la familia ABHMS. Ha sido ministro del personal y de los socios en momentos de enfermedad, accidente, muerte, nacimiento, bodas y otros eventos importantes de la vida. Porque él se interesa por amigos, amigas y colegas que han sufrido cáncer de mama, caminó 60 millas en tres días, la mayor parte bajo la lluvia, para crear conciencia y levantar fondos.

Wright-Riggins ha sido un profeta. Se ha indignado por el racismo institucional, ha lidiado con los problemas sociales que han dividido a los estadounidenses y a las y los Bautistas Americanos. Ha participado activamente en discusiones de ética bautista y en el Comité Bautista Unido para la Libertad Religiosa. Convocó institutos J. Alfred Smith, que son conferencias sobre justicia profética, tanto en la costa este como en el oeste. Añadió en enfoque de la Niñez en Pobreza, así como un énfasis en la Reintegración de Presos y Presas. También guio a la junta en la adopción de una declaración pública sobre la violencia y el uso de armas.

En nuestra denominación de ideas amplias, sus prioridades y elecciones han reflejado la diversidad de las y los Bautistas Americanos y lo integral de nuestra teología. Los almuerzos bienales han tenido voces de personas jóvenes, así como al obispo Claude Payne

de la Diócesis Episcopal de Texas, hablando sobre evangelismo; a Walter Wink, hablando sobre el mito de la violencia redentora. Con toda razón, Wright-Riggins se siente orgullosos de haber recibido doctorados honorarios del Benedict College, una institución históricamente negra en Carolina del Sur, y del Alderson-Broadus College, en las montañas Apalaches de West Virginia, además de un grado doctoral en ministerio de la Escuela de Teología Samuel DeWitt Proctor, Virginia Union University, Richmond.

Wright-Riggins desafió continuamente a su equipo de trabajo, que, bajo su liderazgo, se transformó de un concilio administrativo a un equipo de liderazgo. La mayordomía de la histórica obra misionera para alcanzar a América del Norte para Cristo significaba una práctica adecuada en la administración. Aprendimos sobre formas de medir la efectividad, sobre homologar, alinear, sobre los hábitos de Rockefeller, sobre planes de acción de una página y sobre estrategias de desarrollo.

Él ha sido un amigo por más de dos décadas que he servido con él. Viajamos juntos a Washington para asistir a la cena en honor a Billy Graham cuando recibió la Medalla de Oro del Congreso. (En algún lugar existe una foto de Wright-Riggins con Pat Robertson y Joan Brown Campbell, secretario general del Consejo Nacional de Iglesias). Nos sentamos en aviones de la Fuerza Aérea en la base de Elmendorf, Alaska; asistimos al funeral de Emmett Johnson en Minnesota, participamos en la Conferencia de Reconciliación en Coventry, Inglaterra, y fuimos rechazados en la frontera germano-checoslovaca mientras asistíamos a una reunión de la Alianza Bautista Mundial, porque nuestro auto de alquiler no tenía los “papieren” correctos.

Hasta su muerte en 2010, el Rev. Elliott Mason de Los Ángeles oraba regularmente por Wright-Riggins. Mason había aconsejado a Wright-Riggins en 1991 a “vestir el manto del liderazgo holgadamente”, una frase citada por Wright-Riggins a menudo. El manto le ha quedado muy bien en estos 24 años, y saludamos a nuestro siervo-líder en lo que él pasa el manto a su sucesor. Hacemos eco de las palabras del Maestro en la parábola de los talentos, quien elogió a sus siervos fieles por su tarea: “¡Hiciste bien!”.

*El Rev. Dr. David C. Laubach sirvió con ABHMS desde 1986 hasta su retiro en 2013. Fue miembro del equipo de liderazgo; trabajó muy cerca de Wright-Riggins, comenzando en 1995. Laubach actualmente preside la junta directiva del centro de conferencia de Green Lake y es autor del currículo para adultos “Judson Bible Journeys” que saldrá en la primavera 2016. Además, es moderador en Iglesia Bautista de Aldenville, PA, e instructor en Academia de Capacitación y Servicio Cristiano de las Iglesias Bautistas Americanas de Pennsylvania y Delaware.*

## Jesus and Outsiders

**A** theological thread runs through the Gospel narratives involving Jesus and various groups of “outsiders.” Each encounter, including the three examples in this article, provides an important lesson about how disciples of Jesus view and respond to people perceived as being outside our normal circle of care and concern.

### A Canaanite Woman: Matthew 15:21-28

Jesus is approached by a Canaanite woman from the region of Tyre and Sidon in Lebanon on behalf of her daughter, whom she believed to be demon possessed. Despite the woman’s urgent pleas, Jesus did not answer her or acknowledge her in any way. Finally, his disciples urged him to reject her: “Send her away, for she keeps crying out after us” (v. 23). In typical



Rev. Marvin A. McMickle, right

first-century Palestinian terms Jesus says, “I was sent only to the lost sheep of Israel. ...It is not right to take the children’s bread and toss it to the dogs” (v. 24, 26). Seven hundred years of distinction between Jews and Gentiles rose up as an obstacle between Jesus and this needy woman. But she was not easily denied. She did not refuse Jesus’ statement or assert herself as his equal. She took the path of humility, an approach that Jesus could not resist, saying, “Yes it is, Lord. Even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their master’s table” (v. 27). Jesus’ heart was moved, and the woman’s daughter was im-

mediately healed. When the woman dared to persist, Jesus set aside ancient prejudices and differences and responded to her need as one human being to another.

### Jesus in the Synagogue in Nazareth: Luke 4:14-30

After his baptism and trial in the wilderness, Jesus returns to Galilee. In a synagogue in his hometown of Nazareth, he reads from the scroll of Isaiah and appears to declare himself the fulfillment of Isaiah’s prophecy of the long-awaited Messiah. After that shocking declaration, the response of the community was surprisingly calm, “All spoke well of him and were amazed at the gracious words that came from his lips.” Their comments seem to carry the sense of “hometown boy makes good.” That sense of affirmation and affection quickly transforms into rage and condemnation when Jesus dares to suggest that the love of God, which all residents of Nazareth would assume as their birthright, is extended in equal measure to persons who reside outside their community. Jesus reminds them that although there were many widows in Israel during the days of the prophet Elijah, God directed Elijah to a widow in Zarephath, a region near the city of Sidon (1 Kings 17:7-24). He further points out that while there were many lepers in Israel during the time of the prophet Elisha, the healing power of God was reserved for Naaman, a Gentile and general of the Syrian army (2 Kings 5:1-15).

The very idea that “our God” could also show love, care, and concern for “those people” was more than the people of Nazareth could accept. The suggestion that the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob was also the God of the Gentiles—of foreigners, strangers and outsiders—was apparently less acceptable to the people of Nazareth than was the Messianic self-claim of one they knew as “Joseph’s son.” We might have expected that they would stone Jesus for blasphemy for such a claim, but it was his suggestion that God’s love was broad enough to include those outside their community of faith that made them want to throw Jesus off a mountain cliff. The love of God is not restricted to the members of our faith community. God’s love and care extends into the lives and needs of those persons that we might be inclined



to overlook or undervalue simply because they are not “one of us.” Elijah and Elisha came to the aid of strangers and in so doing revealed what it means to be true followers of God.

### A Roman Centurion: Matthew 8:5-13

A Roman centurion, the ultimate outsider and representative of the conqueror whose army occupied the land of Israel, was someone whose request a Jewish rabbi would certainly have ignored. Yet a centurion approached Jesus on behalf of a servant, (who could have come from any of the nations that were under Roman rule), who was sick and suffering at home. Without waiting to be asked, Jesus agreed to accompany that Roman centurion to his house and cure the servant. The centurion declined Jesus’ offer. He recognized, it seems, that Jesus also possessed authority, so all the Lord needed to do was speak the words—give the order—and the healing was assured. Jesus exclaimed surprise, “Truly I tell you, in no one in Israel have I found such faith” (v. 10). Perhaps the only thing greater than the faith of that centurion was the divide that Jesus crossed when he agreed to heal that servant—a vast ethnic, political and religious divide.

So we may still ask, how should modern churches respond to the presence of people just outside our doors? Prayerfully, the answer is that we will follow the example of our Lord who was ready without any hesitation to hear and respond to the concerns of an

outsider—a Canaanite woman, a Syrian general, Roman centurion. Most churches will never have to reach that far beyond their own walls! How can churches join with Jesus in seeking and saving the lost unless and until we move beyond the comfort zone of our own buildings and membership and intentionally move outward into the world that waits beyond our doors? We do not undertake this out of some sense of burden or unwanted duty. Rather it should be seized upon because such interventions can have redemptive and transformative outcomes for those whose lives are touched by the church. How do we want the Lord to find us? Will the Lord find us working as an externally focused church that is seeking to make a positive difference in the world? Or will the Lord find us introverted and locked away within our sanctuaries waiting to serve members in good standing who walk through our doors? If the latter option is the one we choose, then we may realize the same fate as the rich man who died and awoke in hell all because he failed to show compassion or concern for the people and problems just outside his gate (Luke 16:19-31).

*Excerpted and adapted from “Caring Pastors, Caring People: Equipping Your Church for Pastoral Care” (Judson Press, 2014). The Rev. Marvin A. McMickle, Ph.D., president and director of Black Church Studies at Colgate Rochester Crozer Divinity School, was a learning experience presenter at Space for Grace.*

# The Church Driven by the Spirit

## The Immigrant Difference

*Without the Holy Spirit, God is far away,  
Christ stays in the past,  
the Gospel is a dead letter,  
the Church is simply an organisation,  
authority is a matter of domination, mission is  
a matter of propaganda, the liturgy is no more  
than evocation, Christian living a slave morality.*

IGNATIUS IV,  
Patriarch of the Greek Orthodox Church\*

**T**hese statements represent a critique to Western Christianity, particularly in reference to how we have come to build church institutions to fit with our western societies. In the same vein, Old Testament scholar Walter Brueggemann (Fuller Forum, Fuller Theological Seminary, 2015) boldly proclaims the American church as “hopelessly tribal,” suggesting that we have developed the habit of gathering as a church around local-patriotic narratives that manage all aspects of Christian life.

These narratives are used to sustain collective convictions that help us differentiate religiously, politically, socially and internationally with such labels as “our society,” “our politics,” “our ideology,” “our country,” “our denomination,” “our ministry,” “our budget” and “our local church.” The problem is that as we live tribal, we remain unaware of the fact that our local-patriotic narratives have occupied the Christian concept we call “church.” We confuse the local with the global, the particular with the universal. And many of us, innocently (or not), have globalized our local-patriotic-religious narratives, making them look like universal items of the kingdom of God when doing ministry and missions. In this sort of spirit, we project the idea of an integrated, prosperous, humanitarian and adult “American” church in the international public imagination, while in reality, we have serious issues at home. For example, our religious leaders are diversity-blind, and Sunday morning is the most segregated day of the week.

These conditions suggest that we have serious religious disorders that arise from two mistaken pre-suppositions: (1) the idea that all church members, regardless of their background, should possess a standardized identity; and (2) the church’s expectation that any new member of any race, ethnicity, social class, political posture, gender, nationality and doctrinal tradition should conform to a racialized-Americanized identity pre-established by the church authority. We plant ethnic churches, design “multicultural” projects and build pastoral leadership, expecting minorities to adopt this pre-fabricated local-patriotic-religious identity. Consider the following from global church consultant Paul Borthwick (“Western Christians in Global Mission: What’s the Role of the North American Church?”, InterVarsity Press, 2012).

*When my international hosts ask me, “What’s the church in North America like?” I offer a similar response: “Which North American church you are referring to? The mega-churches of Atlanta? The rural churches in northern Maine? Churches in Manitoba, known as the Bible belt of Canada? Churches made up of people from European descent or Asian descent or Latino descent or African descent?”*

Back in the 1800s, with the great European migrations to the United States, we were forced to recognize our ethnic-religious differences better than we do today. Back then, immigrant European denominations were competing for settlements, but the “melting pot” myth arose, and the North American church developed a form of ecclesial amnesia. We have forgotten that every Protestant church in the United States is, in the final analysis, an immigrant church.

We must come to terms with our racial, ethnic and gender differences as a church. Diversity-blindness has us naming “other churches,” while we remain unnamed. We have black churches, Korean churches, Filipino



churches, African churches and Hispanic churches. And then we have “the church.” To illustrate: A sign outside of the building reads: “First Baptist Church” in large letters, then in small letters, barely visible to the public, are other signs: “Korean Baptist Church,” “Culto en Español” and “Armenian Christian Fellowship.”

The worship service of the main church is poorly attended by a group of European-descent people, averaging 64 years of age. The Koreans and Armenians have a bigger membership, and the Hispanics are much bigger and growing daily with loud kids occupying every available space in the facility. These “ethnic churches” must accommodate worship services, various ministries and preferences of the main church. This fairly common scenario shows that we have built a church-system based on a center and a periphery: one main body (racially-ethnically non-identified) that holds most of the political, financial, architectural and religious power with respect to the other churches—even the power to control



Rev. Oscar  
García-Johnson

their agendas, lead them and label them “as immigrant/ethnic” groups, while remaining disguised as racially/ethnically neutral.

Consequently, the U.S. church system must yet come to terms with its racial-ethnic-gender difference! Until this happens, this turbulent church will continue to manifest a defeated and dichotomist character that produces the

kind of disparities and injustices experienced in the very society to which we are trying to reach out: powerful vs. weak, affluent vs. poor, American church vs. ethnic church, our way or the highway.

We need a different church-system in the United States. We need to demonstrate to the unchurched folks that we are not a church without the Holy Spirit. By 2030, white people will be significantly outnumbered by people of color. While denominationalism will not disappear, it will look diverse, with Hispanics and Asians at the front of the row. Newer immigrant churches have much to offer to older immigrant churches in North America in this turbulent, postmodern, post-Christendom era.

- *Newer immigrant churches bring plurality.* Their transnational lifestyle mirrors the fluidity and complexity of hybrid communities, a trend that is increasingly shaping the North American society at large. So, newer immigrant churches help bridge the gap between the religious and secular society.
- *Newer immigrant churches bring spiritual vitality.* They live the gospel sacramentally in the public space. They dramatize the gospel in the worship service. They hope against hope in their struggle for life.
- *Newer immigrant churches are sources of compassion and solidarity.* Due to their marginality and experiences of various forms of oppression, they embody the very content of prophetic ministry and political intervention: to become sanctuaries for the poor, weak, and excluded of society.
- *Newer immigrant churches bring apostolic life.* They can help North American churches become missional brothers and sisters in the task of world evangelization—instead of fathers and mothers, or lords or masters, as in previous generations of missionaries. When a U.S. Latina sister and an Anglo-American sister go together to Zacapa, Guatemala, to help with missionary work among the poorest of the poor children, the face of the North American church looks different, feels different and resembles a church driven by the spirit of Pentecost.

\*Bowron, H. (2010). “Eastern Promises: Remedying the Pneumatological Deficits of Western Theology in *The Spirit of Truth: Reading Scripture and Constructing Theology with the Holy Spirit*.” Eugene, Ore.: Pickwick Publications.

*The Rev. Oscar García-Johnson, Ph.D., associate dean, Center for the Study of Hispanic Church and Community, and associate professor, Theology & Latino/a Studies, Fuller Theological Seminary, was a learning experience presenter at Space for Grace.*

## The Walk Toward Justice

**W**ith the emergence of the Black Lives Matter movement, the flames of justice have been fanned afresh and reveal a restored confidence among those engaged in justice work. In August 2015, the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People embarked on “America’s Journey for Justice,” an 860-mile walk from Selma, Ala., to Washington, D.C., to highlight the economic, social and political inequities that continue to exist between communities of color and non-communities of color. The fight for justice is not a sprint but a long, arduous walk. It is a walk we are all called to make, and that call is to restore humanity and dignity to others through compassionate action.

When Jesus desired to make this point to his disciples, he told a parable of a compassionate Samaritan. The idea that a Samaritan could be good would have been both oxymoronic and offensive to the average



Rev. Dr. Jacqueline A. Thompson

Jewish listener. Samaritans were considered unclean in every regard and incapable of doing anything significant, such as balancing the scales of justice. Perhaps it was life as a Samaritan that made compassionate, empathetic action possible. Having traveled the road to Jericho, he would have known its dangers all too well.

Poverty, crime and violence were Jericho Road realities. Some travelers saw the injustice. Others saw a man beaten, stripped and robbed. What they did not see was their own reflection. Often when faced with issues of injustice, we see the other. We cannot identify personally because it is not us. We would do well to recall the sentiment expressed by English reformer and martyr John Bradford as he watched a criminal walk to execution: “There, but for the grace of God, goes John Bradford.” It could be any of us. Walking the walk of justice requires us seeing not an “other,” but ourselves. It requires joining the journey of another, not with judgment but empathy. It is when we walk with others in their pain and trials that we come to a place of compassionate action. The Samaritan’s example provides a powerful starting point on the walk toward justice.

When the priest and the Levite saw the man, they crossed over to the other side to continue their journey. This is often what so many of us do. We hear the stories. We watch the news. We see the Jericho Road realities every day and just continue with our lives. We become so busy and self-involved that the trauma of others feels like an interruption. Walking the walk of justice calls us to stop the monotony of continuous activity long enough to address the matters that confront us. Interruptions are often divine interrogatives asking the question that came to the prophet Isaiah: “Whom shall I send, and who will go for us?” (6:8).

The Samaritan cleaned and bandaged the man’s wounds, brought him to an inn and paid for his care. This compassionate, empathetic act restored life, humanity and dignity to the Jewish traveler. Walking the walk of justice requires personal involvement and action. Grace reminds us that someone acted on our behalf when we were unable to act on our own. It is the cross of Jesus Christ, his act of love that restored our lives, humanity and dignity. How can we walk the walk of justice in our own lives? Simply go and do likewise. Walk on!

*The Rev. Dr. Jacqueline A. Thompson, assistant pastor of Allen Temple Baptist Church, Oakland, Calif., was a plenary speaker at Space for Grace.*

## Christian Education for the Living of these Days

**A** young man walks into Sunday school excited about participating in the *adult* class. He is the youngest person in the room by twenty years. The class begins with prayer and moves quickly into reading the Scripture. After a few passages, the instructor asks the first reader to interpret the verses. The instructor stops a second reader after two verses and asks, “What do those verses mean?” After a third reader, the young man noticed that the participants each had some form of the response: “This was what God/Jesus desired to happen.” Or, “This prepared the way for Jesus.” The lesson concluded with encouragement to read next week’s lesson and spend time in prayer. Sound familiar?

Eager to become more involved in spiritual growth, the young man next attended the church’s Bible study. The instructor invited persons to read the session’s Scripture and then moved to a lecture about becoming more like Jesus “in our walk and in our talk.” The young man wondered how to insert his questions about God and the upcoming election into the conversation. At no point did he sense interest in the big issues of life.

### God has something to say to us about all areas of our lives.

From what he could hear, persons were more concerned about how to avoid becoming ineligible for heaven. The conversations were similar to those in the church school classes the young man attended as a child. He wondered: Is Christianity just about who gets to go to heaven? Is the goal of our Christian beliefs and practices similar to the directions that we receive on an airplane? (Secure your oxygen mask—that is, your spot in paradise—before attempting to help the person next to you.) These questions haunted me—I mean, the young man—for several years. My answers led me to the conclusion that we can make room in our education ministries for four major

curriculum topics: politics, financial management, ecological stewardship, and sexuality awareness. Becoming more faith conscious and literate in these areas of everyday life is an opportunity for speaking to and with our communities of faith, especially young adult populations.

We can reinvent Christian education to attend to more than the otherworldly hopes of our faith. An adjustment to the way we interpret biblical texts and their



Rev. Adam Bond

shaping influence on our faith can steer us into a model of teaching and learning that addresses the concerns of the whole person. This is an adjustment, not a demolition. We have much within our Bible and Christian traditions and practices to think critically and deeply about the meaning of our faith in these areas. Avoiding them, then, might suggest that we are either too immature to

deal with them or feel ill-equipped to address them in a classroom setting. But there may be no better place for persons of faith to have these conversations. People do not come to church to memorize the names of the tribes of Israel. God has something to say to us about all areas of our lives. Reinventing our Christian education content and delivery is an important step to provide clarity in sharing such important material for faith formation. The body of believers has a call and obligation to discern God’s messages for the whole person—for the living of *these days*.

*Excerpted from “Church on Purpose: Reinventing Discipleship, Community, & Justice” (edited by Adam L. Bond and Laura Cheifetz, Judson Press, 2015), which was named the 2015 “ABC Reads” selection. The Rev. Adam Bond, Ph.D., associate professor of Historical Studies at the Samuel DeWitt Proctor School of Theology and pastor of Providence Baptist Church, Ashland, Va., was a learning experience presenter at Space for Grace.*

## Leadership for Building Consensus

**T**here is a timeless joke that with three Baptists in a room there are a minimum of four opinions! It is not so much a joke; I have seen this phenomenon in action. So why do Baptist bodies make decisions by consensus? Because we believe that God calls us to do so. Coming to consensus is a way of finding the heart of God. The rule of the majority is not the way of the Bible. Acts 11 shows the church in Jerusalem coming together to address conversion of the Gentiles. They do not take a vote, but they do end up praising God together.

While decisions can be made more quickly with a vote and majority rule, often people are left feeling like losers to the majority with their voices unheard. When used appropriately, consensus moves groups toward

agreed upon work with a sense of the Spirit's presence in the process. Ultimately everyone can feel a part of the decision-making process, and usually the lone voice can be heeded as well as heard.



Rev. Dr. Marcia Patton

The role of the leader in consensus-building requires advance work and a well-thought-out agenda that is clearly communicated to participants. Leaders must consider what issues will take extra time and effort to digest and process. Even when leading consensus with short notice, it remains important that people are clear on the issue being addressed.

Before engaging in consensus-building, the group must understand the reason that you are using consensus. Otherwise, it is not worth the time. Consensus values everyone present—the people making the decision more than the decision itself. We need to remind ourselves of this fact because it helps us do the work of consensus well. It is tempting to simply ask whether anyone has an objection or is OK with a decision and then call it consensus and move on. Such an approach rarely allows a voice for those who are not quick to speak or uncomfortable speaking to the whole group.

While decisions can be made more quickly with a vote and majority rule, often people are left feeling like losers to the majority with their voices unheard.

Numbers make a difference. In the Evergreen Association of American Baptist Churches USA, building consensus is different in the executive committee—where there are up to nine members—than during an annual meeting, where more than 100 people are present. The general rule is that groups of approximately 12 allow for everyone to be clearly understood. If groups are larger, it is wise to divide them. At the annual meeting, we first break up into caucus groups, and the larger of those divide again. It's better to have two groups of six each, rather than a larger group. The intent is for each person to be heard.

It is helpful to begin with simple guidelines about giving every one equal time to speak, respecting one another and respecting differences. Consensus really can have a sense of the Spirit of God, especially when you take the time to set the stage and welcome God's presence. Spending time in prayer and/or Bible study is a good prelude to good decision making, especially in consensus. When we start by listening to God, we can do a better job of listening to each other!

*The Rev. Dr. Marcia Patton, executive minister of Evergreen Association of American Baptist Churches USA, was a learning experience presenter at Space for Grace.*

# MEET THE New Executive Director of ABHMS



◀ **DR. JEFFREY HAGGRAY** began as executive director of ABHMS on Nov. 1. An ordained American Baptist minister, Haggray has served as executive director of the District of Columbia Baptist Convention; first African-American pastor of the historic First Baptist Church, Washington, D.C.; and interim senior pastor of Zion Missionary Baptist Church, Roswell, Ga.

The Rev. Dr. Clifford Johnson, president of ABHMS' board and search committee chair, expresses the enthusiasm felt throughout ABHMS as Haggray stepped into the position vacated by the retirement of Dr. Aidsand Wright-Riggins:

*I strongly believe that Jeff's visibility in the faith community, his work as executive director of the District of Columbia Baptist Convention and development experience, along with his knowledge of the American Baptist family, will position ABHMS for a bright future.*

Similarly, the Rev. Dr. Amy Butler, senior minister of the historic Riverside Church, New York City, and a member of the search committee, sees Haggray as one who will bring "a unique combination of theological depth and authentic prophetic voice, as well as a history of fearless leadership and vast understanding of the important role and opportunity for ABHMS and American Baptists in this moment in history."

We are excited by the leadership of Haggray in our midst. His commitment to the principles and culture of ABHMS ensures a continued emphasis on the ministries of discipleship, community and justice, which have marked this organization for the past two decades.

God has done great things for us and through us, and we celebrate this new era of ministry and mission together.



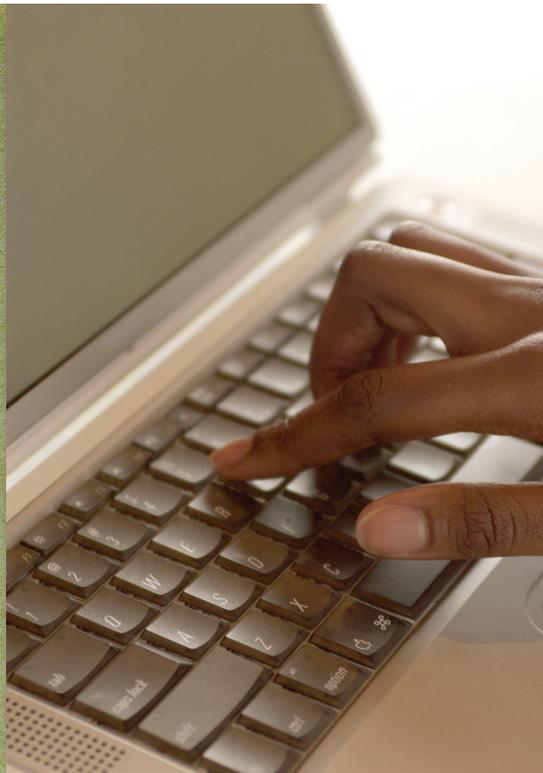
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## We value your feedback!

The goal of this issue of The Christian Citizen is to extend and expand the experience of Space for Grace. We would like to know what our readers have found helpful and in what ways this resource is being used in small group and congregational settings. Please visit <https://www.research.net/r/CCFall2015> to complete a survey that takes less than 10 minutes. Those who complete the survey are eligible to enter a drawing for a thank-you gift.

# Thank You!