

“The heat of autumn is different from the heat of summer.
One ripens apples, the other turns them to cider.”

— Jane Hirshfield, *The Heat of Autumn*

News & Notes is your forum to stay connected with your colleagues and friends. Please send us your news with a photo attachment via email to communications@mmbb.org or online at www.mmbb.org/NewsandNotes. It is our pleasure to serve you.

— Norma Jean-Jacques, Editor

NNOT1021

subject line.

Please include the words *News & Notes* in the
or online at www.mmbb.org/NewsandNotes.

communications@mmbb.org

800.986.6782, or send them via email to

You may also fax submissions, toll free, to

New York, NY 10115-0049

475 Riverside Drive, Suite 1700

MmBB Financial Services

News & Notes

Communications Manager

Editor: Norma Jean-Jacques

Published three times a year by MmBB Financial Services

Spotlight on Rev. Douglas Avilesbernal

Executive Minister, the Evergreen Baptist
Association of American Baptist Churches



Rev. Douglas Avilesbernal didn't expect a call to ministry. In his youth, he didn't even want to be Christian.

He explains, "My parents were missionaries serving in Central America. If you're a missionary's kid, you're always on display, and a lot of expectations are forced on you. So, I just didn't want anything to do with Christianity." Instead, he planned to teach history and be a musician, even studying music in college.

But attending philosophy courses in college and his summer job chipped away at his aversion to ministry. Working at an American Baptist Churches USA (ABCUSA) camp showed him the richness of scripture and began his journey to the pulpit. Afterward, his stint with an ABCUSA youth mission sealed the deal for him and he decided to attend seminary.

Since receiving his Master of Divinity degree from Eastern Baptist Theological Seminary in 2005, (now known as Palmer Theological Seminary), he has been involved with intercultural and diversity work. Rev. Avilesbernal has led annual conferences for Missionary Children for American Baptist International Ministries, which explored multiculturalism.

He was lead pastor of Calvary Baptist Church in Norristown, PA, and a key participant in helping Norristown through its first immigrant wave since the late 1800s. His work with the local church led to his appointment by Montgomery County Commissioners to several local boards to oversee the allocation of resources in ways that account for the diversity of Norristown.

All that experience culminated in his appointment in 2018 as the Executive Minister of the Evergreen Baptist Association of American Baptist Churches. This association is a region of churches in Alaska, California, Colorado, Idaho, Utah, and Washington states that do ministry by consensus. Also, the Evergreen Baptist Association is organized by ethnic caucuses – a unique structure among ABCUSA regions. The region also partners with churches in Venezuela.

Rev. Avilesbernal notes, "Evergreen churches build bridges. ... Those bridges open the door for the creation of relationships. ... Those relationships result in support of one another through acceptance, understanding and sensitivity to our cultural differences."



"As a region, we realize we have a wealth of retired ministers' experience that is underutilized and could benefit the community. It is the choice of retirees if and how they want to use that knowledge base. ... We want them to know they are a part of the community and we consider them essential."

– Rev. Douglas Avilesbernal



At a time when our nation has been filled with racial unrest and reckoning, this region, formed in 2003, is more relevant than ever. The Evergreen Association's caucus model provides for Black, Euro, Asian and Hispanic/Latino caucuses, which each have equal representation in leading the association.

"We are in leadership together and cannot lead without each other," Rev. Avilesbernal intones. "If any of our caucuses are not present at our executive meetings, we can't make decisions. This requires us to work closely

with each other. Americans are very insulated from each other. Most of us spend most of our time with people like us, so the significant amount of time Evergreen Association caucus groups choose to spend together helps us be more aware of social justice.”

One of the most notable of the Evergreen Association’s responses to systemic oppression is the Anti-Racism Team (ART), the group that helps the association’s predominantly white churches empathize with diverse ethnic groups. Rev. Avilesbernal declares, “Most of our churches don’t have a whole lot of bigots in them, but people unwittingly enable racism by being unaware of its extent. ART’s training aims to unveil systemic racism and as a result, help churches unveil how non-racists may unknowingly support racism. Rev. Avilesbernal surmises, “It’s a tough journey, but it helps move our churches to see that if they do nothing to address systemic oppression, then they are, in essence, part of the problem.”

He adds, “The Evergreen Association’s system constantly strives to keep any person or caucus from wielding too much power. So rather than making sure I have the power to get things done, my job is to make sure that power is distributed as fairly as possible, so we get things done together. That’s amazing to me.”

The approach is also a testament to the benefits of compromise, collaboration and bridging gaps. An effort or program cannot be implemented if any caucus is in opposition to it. According to Rev. Avilesbernal, this consensus model is time-consuming but ensures equality among diverse groups and a sustainable decision-making process.

Even within the caucuses there is diversity. For instance, the Evergreen Association has at least 12 different countries represented in the Hispanic/Latino group. Up-and-coming is the addition to the Black caucus of a newly formed African diaspora church made up of Kenyan congregants, which will add diversity to the primarily African-American Black caucus. Each of the different ethnic groups in the Asian, Hispanic and Black caucuses bring their culture and outlook to the way they run their ministry. For instance, in the Burmese churches, one

has to be married to be a pastor. In the Japanese churches, marriage is not a requirement for pastors.

Generational diversity and intergenerational connections are also a goal. The association is creating an intentional network of American Baptist Churches’ retired ministers. Rev. Avilesbernal proclaims, “As a region, we realize we have a wealth of retired ministers’ experience that is underutilized and could benefit the community. It is the choice of retirees if and how they want to use that knowledge base. We will provide some examples of where we feel our elders would be helpful and will ask them if they think what we’ve suggested is a good fit for them or if they envision some other role. We want them to know they are a part of the community and we consider them essential.”



Rev. Douglas Avilesbernal is pictured with his wife, Anna Wiegner, and children.

Rev. Avilesbernal concludes, “I think we’re doing better than I was expecting in our journey to a second generation of Evergreen leadership because it is a very young association. It is the newest ABC region. One of our biggest tasks is to see how well Evergreen can continue past its first generation that had all the excitement and passion to fight for social justice. Can we get a second generation that inherited our model as normal to feel a similar commitment? We’re building a good core of younger leadership that looks committed to the mission and the way the mission is implemented.”

Fond Farewells



Gerianne (Geri) Blier, American Baptist Churches Information Systems (ABCIS) Coordinator and Manager of Name and Address Services (NAS), retired from the ABCUSA Office of the General Secretary on September 30, 2021, completing 42 years of

faithful and dedicated service.

Alan Musoke, Associate General Secretary of Finance/CFO/Treasurer for the ABCUSA Office of the General Secretary, noted, “Geri joined the ABCIS team in 2013. We are very grateful for her exemplary services to ABC and wish her a wonderful retirement. She is a top ABCIS Coordinator whom we will miss.”

Blier began working at the American Baptist Churches Mission Center in Valley Forge, PA, as the billings clerk and part-time office cashier, later becoming the full-time office cashier. After studying computer operations in night school, Blier became the first computer operator for the newly formed American Baptist Computer Center in 1983. She was appointed the manager for NAS in 1988.

Blier’s role as ABCIS Coordinator began in February 2014. As a member of the Professional Ministries Team, She was instrumental in designing and presenting a data matrix document used to determine how denominational data is distributed.

Blier’s passion for her work and how it expanded the ministry of ABCUSA gave her a great sense of purpose. “What I loved most about working with data systems was the satisfaction I got from turning raw data into useable information and doing what I could to make daily tasks a little easier for our many users,” she remarked. “But the very best was working with so many interesting and diverse people over these many years, for they helped shape me as a person. I will always appreciate their friendship and encouragement. To so many in ABCUSA and all of ABC, I am grateful.”

Besides spending quality time with her family and friends, she is looking forward to spending more time

on her hobbies, including her Rubik’s Cube puzzle collection, woodworking and watercolor painting. She also plans to spend more time in her role as a hospice volunteer.



Rev. Paul H. Gibson, Executive Minister of the Great Rivers Region, has announced he will retire on December 17, 2021. Rev. Gibson has served the Great Rivers Region as Executive Minister since January 2016.

Rev. Dr. C. Jeff Woods, Interim General Secretary of American Baptist Churches USA, declared, “Paul’s tag line for the region is ‘let it flow.’ Through the emphasis upon pastoral relationships and institutional partnerships, especially with Northern Seminary, many resources flowed to the churches in the Great Rivers Region. There is much to build upon as the search for the next leader begins.”

Over the years, the relationships Rev. Gibson has formed with his colleagues are among the most valuable take-aways from his tenure serving ABCUSA. “I have had the time of my life the past six years. I have worked with the best people, best pastors, best churches, and the best staff. It has also been a great honor to get to know many at ABCUSA and especially the rest of the execs from around the country,” he reflects. “I also count it priceless that I have met and become familiar with many of our global servants who serve all over the world. There are many new people in my life that I can not only call colleagues but can now call friends.

Prior to his current post, Gibson served as Senior Pastor at First Baptist Church of Bismarck, ND. He also served at pastorates in Arizona, Nevada and Missouri.

Gibson received a Master of Divinity degree from the American Baptist Seminary of the West in Berkley, CA. He graduated from Valley City State University in North Dakota and previously served as President of the American Baptist Churches of the Dakotas.

Gibson added, “I will miss this, but I know God will have things for me to do after I take a few months to rest. After that, I will be looking at interim work, or whatever God lays in front of me as always.”

Celebrations



In a groundbreaking move, **the Rev. Dr. Gina Stewart** was elected the first female president of the Lott Carey Baptist Foreign Mission Society, an ecumenical organization with Black Baptist roots dating back to 1897. This marks the first time a woman will hold the highest position in a Black Baptist organization. The mission society is named after Rev. Lott Carey, a formerly enslaved

African American man who bought his freedom and established the first Baptist mission work in Liberia in 1822.

Stewart, who is senior pastor of Christ Missionary Baptist Church in Memphis, TN, has also served in vice presidential roles at the mission society for six years. Stewart and her church have worked for two decades with Lott Carey, which partners with about 2,000 congregations, the Red Cross and other groups to fight hunger, address HIV/AIDS and seek to reduce human trafficking, among other causes, in 20 countries.

“I’m honored, first of all, for the privilege to lead and to serve,” Stewart explained. “I think it’s significant that this organization, that is Baptist by heritage but ecumenical in its practice and its commitment, is taking the step, a courageous step, to elect a woman to serve in a titular leadership position.”

In addition to her aforementioned current roles, Stewart, is the author of the book, *We’ve Got Next: HERstory in HISTory*.

Thriving in Ministry: Women’s Colloquium Shows There’s Strength in Shared Experience

MMBB’s Thriving in Ministry (TIM) program invests in the lives of pastoral leaders through education, information, and bringing together seasoned pastors who have excelled in ministry with emerging pastors and those transitioning in ministry. Through our program, Bridges: A Colloquium for Cultivating Ministry, TIM offers five colloquia, including one with Women Pastoral Leaders. The Colloquium is designed to engage participants on pastoral wellness, financial literacy, church financial management, navigating new trends and shifting paradigms in ministry, preparation for pastoral leadership transitions and the importance of deeper/personal reflection as a part of development in ministry.

The Women’s Pastor’s Colloquium is co-led by **Rev. Dr. Marie Onwubuariri**, ABCUSA Associate General Secretary for Mission Resource Development, and **Rev.**

Jamie Washam, Pastor of First Baptist Church in America in Providence, RI. According to Onwubuariri, the colloquium’s overarching goal is to address three key areas that greatly shape the experience of pastoral ministry.

- **Confidence in ministry:** Gatherings assist pastors with the challenges of church leadership and management by examining relevant case studies, sharing practical resources, and informal exchanges of current issues and ideas.
- **Support in ministry:** The colloquium nurtures opportunities for women pastoral leaders to develop a better sense of connection with the pastors in their cohort through the respectful sharing of experiences, biblical reflections, wisdom, vulnerabilities, fellowship and laughter.
- **Personal wellness:** The colloquium’s annual gathering convenes soon after Lenten and Easter church activities. Through activities intended to help physically and mentally restore, settings that aid in rest, and the provision of resources that help in personal areas of concern such as health, family, and financial wellness and literacy, the colloquium aims to model the importance of retreat, renewal and self-care.

News and Notes editors chatted with **Rev. Dr. Ella Redfield**, who has attended the Women Pastors Colloquium for more than 10 years, and **Rev. Dr. Allison Tanner**, who is new to the colloquium, about their experiences with the group.

Q: As a woman in ministry, what do you think is particularly important about a group like TIM women's colloquium coming together?



Redfield: As a woman in ministry, particularly in the region I pastor, where some congregations and male pastors do not accept female ministers, this special time with other female pastors has been a tremendous blessing to me. It provided a unique space to share my

challenges, hopes and dreams in a safe place. It was also a time for much needed respite from the bustle of pastoral work, and for learning and fun with my sisters in Christ. Each year offered me grace and nuggets of spiritual wisdom to take with me. I am so grateful for MMBB's vision and their concern and care for the welfare of clergy. The Thriving in Ministry Women Pastors Colloquium is one that I will cherish in the years ahead.

Tanner: The support, encouragement, accountability and resource sharing are very significant. I don't fit into the traditional model of a pastor since I am not a senior or solo pastor. The colloquium has been such a profound experience because there are fewer programs like this offered to ministers who are specialized ministry pastors.



Q: What would you say are the top two or three issues discussed during the colloquium?

Redfield: The top issues discussed were our health and wellbeing; challenges we experience in ministry; the church and family life; and particular issues stemming from case studies. These issues were always relevant and provided insight for each of us.

Tanner: I feel the top issues were validating different styles of leadership and communication, validating head and heart connections and the feminine spirit, and providing support and affirmation.

After I bump up against structures or systems that don't validate or hear me in ministry, attending the colloquium has helped me return to ministry with my head held high.

Q: How were other women in the group able to respond to those issues?

Tanner: They provided affirmation for the struggle to overcome those issues. The colloquium was a chance to vent and process, as well as share resources. The resources I learned about from the women in the group enhanced my toolkit.

Redfield: The format of our meeting allowed each woman to share their thoughts on issues, providing a variety of points of view, which was a "gift" to our fellowship. In addition, the group's leadership valued each woman's time and space to share, which I believe was appreciated by all.

MMBB is grateful for the success of Bridges: Colloquia for Cultivating Ministry with the generous support of Lilly Endowment Inc. MMBB is committed to offering a respite and extending support to pastoral leaders so they can make a positive and meaningful difference for the future of the church.

Change a Life with Your Gift to Heritage of Sharing



Heritage of Sharing

Heritage of Sharing is our annual appeal that provides emergency financial support to MMBB members in need—so that they can recover more quickly and return to sustaining long-term financial wholeness. Your gift affords relief to those who have dedicated their lives to God.

Give online. Go to mmbb.org/giving.