

HISTORY OF BREAKING THE SILENCE

*A witness for full inclusion of gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgendered persons
in the Texas Annual Conference of the United Methodist Church*

History by Ed Armstrong

The history of Breaking the Silence is an evolving one. At the beginning, there was no thought of becoming the group that we are today. **In December of 1996**, Mark Bowman, then director of the Reconciling Congregation Program, requested a meeting of people who might be interested in the R.C.P. It was held at Memorial Drive UMC with an enthusiastic attendance of nearly 100 from several area United Methodist churches.

With that encouragement, the Rev. Dr. Annette Jones, Susan Spruce, and Janelle Armstrong "brainstormed" and the idea developed to present a program at the Texas Annual Conference, similar to one given at a P-Flag conference. The idea was to have a luncheon at Conference in which some sort of program on homosexuality would be presented. **In January of 1997**, an Ad Hoc Committee was formed and for the luncheon, it was unanimously agreed to present a panel consisting of a gay man, a lesbian, a mother, and a father telling their stories of the hurts they had felt in the Methodist Church because of the church's stand on homosexuality. From information gleaned in notes and calls to long time members, it is believed the original members of this first Ad Hoc Committee were Annette Jones, Susan Spruce, Janelle and Ed Armstrong, Frank Staggs, Rev. Jack Albright, Rev. Jim Bankston, Betty Duff, and Norma Graves. (It is possible that others were on this committee also.)

In February of 1997 the Texas Conference Board of Church and Society, chaired by the Rev. Milton Jordan, agreed to sponsor this program which made the luncheon an official Conference function. The Board has continued sponsoring the luncheon every year since the first one.

Before Annual Conference in **May 1997**, the committee worked feverishly planning the program and also named itself "Breaking the Silence" (BTS).

The first luncheon and program was held at Massa's Restaurant in 1997. Dr. Jim Bankston and Dr. Jack Albright agreed to introduce the panel and to moderate it. On the panel were Steve Walker, Marcia Chamberlain, Norma Graves, and Rev. Milton Jordan. Marcia Chamberlain is the daughter of Dr. Ray Chamberlain, a United Methodist Bishop. She "came out" to her father in a letter that she read to the BTS Luncheon guests. The program was well received and the committee was elated to have between 50 and 60 people present. This encouraged BTS to think of presenting another program at the next Annual Conference.

Since the first luncheon in 1997, subsequent luncheons have been held every year, each one presented by BTS and sponsored by the Texas Conference Board of Church and Society. See attached list of luncheon speakers.

Attendance grows each year and over 200 heard **Dr. Tex Sample in 2002**. The 200 count will continue in most years following this 2002 meeting. The lay members of BTS are indebted to the clergy who have "stepped out" and worked with us all these years. Many courageous people deserve our sincere gratitude: Dr. Annette Jones, who led the original Ad Hoc group and became the first chairman of the Breaking the Silence Committee, Rev. Milton Jordan, who became chairman of the group when Dr. Jones had to move to Florida, Rev. Bruce Felker who followed Rev. Milton Jordan as chairman, Dr. John Fellers, the chairman who followed Rev. Bruce Felker, Dr. Jack Albright, Dr. Jim Bankston, Rev. Marilyn Meeker-Williams, Rev. David Meeker-Williams who followed Dr. John Fellers as chairman, Rev. Glynden Bode, Rev. Donna Brown, Rev. Bob Gentry, and Rev. Troy Plummer.

In November of 2006, the Rev. Kevin and Laura Young became co-chairpersons of the Executive Committee. A database was established. Improved communication quickly took BTS to a new level. Email became the primary means of keeping the larger group informed and sharing event invitations. The 2007 Executive Committee showed great organization, leadership and vision. The participation of ordained clergy continues on the board, Dr. Jim Bankston and Dr. John Fellers continue to serve as active advisors, and gay and lesbian persons are elected to serve as board members. **In early 2007** the committee voted to join Reconciling Ministries Network as a “reconciling community” and created a new purpose statement. See Attached.

Annual Conference 2007. Holding Annual Conference at The Woodlands is difficult both spiritually and financially. Breaking the Silence is not welcome on The Woodlands church campus and is forced to hold the luncheon at the very expensive Marriott Waterway Hotel. In addition, the schedule for conference business sessions changed with little time to adjust. BTS has been accustomed to having 2 to 2.5 hours for its luncheon but this year delegates must return for an opening business session by 1:00 pm. The end results, however, are very uplifting. The BTS luncheon hosted 391 people, almost double previous attendance. A book table was added and over \$600.00 worth of books were sold. An offering was taken for the first time and attendees gave generously – helping to recover the unreasonable prices of the Marriott meals. The speaker was Rev. Dawson Taylor, a son of the Texas Annual Conference if you will. Dawson is a gay man and the son of Rev. Bill & Roxanne Taylor. Bill is a respected minister currently serving FUMC Conroe. Dawson was called to ministry and educated at SMU Perkins. Excluded from the UMC, Dawson is ordained in the United Church of Christ and serves at the Cathedral of Hope in Dallas, TX. The luncheon presentation included the introduction of Dawson by his father. This comes after a long year of FUMC Conroe pressuring Rev. Bill Taylor to public denounce homosexuality and thus his own son. Rev. Bill Taylor, a very gentle man by nature, had endured and continued to serve his congregation with love and patience. His introduction of Dawson was a form of “coming out” for Bill and the entire Taylor Family. The luncheon was a big success and a new momentum is evident.

In July of 2007 the BTS family experienced a huge loss. The email notice from Rev. Kevin and Laura Young reads:

The Rev. Dr. John E. Fellers, our beloved pastor, colleague, advocate, and friend passed away on Friday, July 13th. His life and ministry will be celebrated in a Service of Choral Evensong on Wednesday, July 25th at 4:00 pm at St. Paul 's UMC in Houston, TX.

John has been a pillar of Breaking the Silence since its birth. We are forever grateful. His huge heart, his dedication, his wisdom, his leadership, his courage, and his encouragement have been an integral part of our efforts toward loving our neighbors as we love ourselves. This loss is enormous. Our grief is deep.

We are certain that John's memory would be honored by a renewed sense of commitment and a widening of our focus and efforts. We intend to do just that.

We thank God for John and we hold Bobbie and each of their children and grandchildren in our thoughts and prayers.

God's peace to each of you.

Rev. Kevin & Laura Young
BTS Executive Committee

The 2007 Fall Plenary meeting offers a new format. This has typically been an hour long meeting with 15 to 20 people in attendance. Its purpose has been to share ideas and elect officers to serve on the Executive Committee as some roll off. In 2007, the Executive Committee felt it was important to make this a more productive event. A dinner and program were added to the business meeting. Advanced registration was organized in the same way as the Annual Conference luncheon. The business portion of the event included the announcement that a **John Fellers Lectureship had been established**. We viewed the documentary entitled “Renewal or Ruin?” an educational film about the Institute for Religion and Democracy’s attack on the United Methodist Church. Dr. George Atkinson followed the film with a short presentation on how the IRD is related to the other renewal groups, including The Confessing Movement, and their affect on the Texas Annual Conference. There were 80 people in attendance, representing 19 different congregations.

Going Solo – prior to advertising the 2008 luncheon the BTS board made the difficult decision to drop the sponsorship of Church & Society. For many years, the conference board of Church & Society has been accused of being a “one issue board” focusing on homosexuality. Of course, this is far from the truth but BTS doesn’t wish to do harm to such a vital ministry. The decision comes down to the purpose statement. While the bishop thinks our partnership is very appropriate, she requests that we do not publish our purpose statement on the invitation that goes out to every annual conference delegate. BTS has honored that request for several years, but feels the absence of the purpose statement is hurting us. Too many people have a misconception about BTS and its purpose. In order to print the purpose statement on the back of the luncheon invitation, BTS must discontinue the sponsorship of Church & Society.

General Conference 2008 – Ft. Worth, TX. Dr. Jim Bankston serves as a clergy delegate and, once again, is placed on the Church & Society II legislative committee. BTS Co-chairs, Rev. Kevin & Laura Young are invited to serve with “Common Witness” (a coalition of RMN and MFSA) as Legislative Monitors on Church & Society II and Faith Order. Several additional BTS board members are able to attend GC and participate in the work of “Common Witness” for a few days at a time.

BTS Executive Committee has submitted two important petitions to GC, one that proposes a change to 161.G and another that proposes a change to Article IV of the Constitution. Dr. George Atkinson, a BTS ally, has submitted a petition that ultimately become the Majority Report from legislative committee and sent to the plenary floor. Jim Bankston offered a compelling speech in favor of this petition during legislative committee. (Petition 80449 eventually lost to the Minority Report on the plenary floor in a parliamentary error. The Majority Report was never re-visited and never voted on.) Overall, the BTS executive board plays a significant role in GC 08.

The petition that BTS submitted to General Conference passes by the required 2/3rds vote. Adopted in plenary by a vote of 558-276, or 67% to 33%. It must now be ratified by a 2/3rd aggregate vote at the annual conference level in 2009. Petition reads as follows:

Inclusiveness (81157-GA-¶4-C)

Amend Paragraph 4, Article IV of the Constitution as follows:

Inclusiveness of the Church — The United Methodist Church is a part of the church universal, which is one Body in Christ. The United Methodist Church acknowledges that all persons are of sacred worth **and that we are in ministry to all**. All persons ~~without regard to race, color, national origin, status or economic condition~~ shall be eligible to attend its worship services, participate in its programs, receive the sacraments, **and** upon baptism be admitted as baptized members. **All persons** upon taking vows declaring the Christian faith **and relationship in Jesus Christ shall be eligible to** become professing members in any local church in the connection. In the United Methodist Church no conference or other organizational unit of the Church shall be structured so as to exclude any member or any constituent body ~~of the Church because of race, color, national origin, status or economic condition~~.

Annual Conference 2008 – Dr. Jim Bankston is the keynote speaker for the 12th annual BTS luncheon and the 1st annual John Fellers Lectureship. He provides some BTS history and summarizes the successes and disappointments of General Conference. He calls the almost 400 in attendance, representing over 80 different local congregations, to the following: “*while not violating the discipline . . .*” “live as if the majority petition had passed”. The book table sells about \$550.00 in books and DVD’s. Several new clergy persons are in attendance for the first time, including Bishop Joe Wilson. The One Family Tree logo, used in conjunction with RMN, is this year’s theme and button. Luncheon guests are given new business cards with a portion of the purpose statement as well as webpage and contact information on them. Guests are encouraged to give them away to those who might be interested in or supported by BTS. Another successful luncheon!

July 13, 2008 – On the first anniversary of John Feller’s death the board sends an email invitation to participate in the **Open Doors Project**. This is an art project in which all churches are invited to take photographs of their churches with doors open. The photos will be used for printing note cards and other material that can be sold as fund raising items and used in local churches. The 20 most artistic photos will be framed and displayed at the 2009 luncheon as silent auction items. Funds raised will be given to the John Fellers Lectureship. The Open Door Project ultimately fades and fails as churches are afraid to post photos of their church doors on the website. Still much work to be done.

History of Key Note Speakers at Annual Conference Luncheons

- 1997** Panel presenters Steve Walker, Marcia Chamberlain, Norma Graves, and Rev. Milton Jordan. Moderated by Dr. Jim Bankston and Dr. Jack Albright
- 1998** Dr. Victor Paul Furnish of Perkins School of Theology. Breaking The Silence, at that annual Conference, also presented a workshop given by Mrs. Betty Duff, a retired diaconal minister, on "The Church Studies Homosexuality".
- 1999** Dr. James Lawson, a well known retired United Methodist minister from the West Coast
- 2000** Dr. Minerva Carcano, at that time on the staff of Perkins School of Theology and now a United Methodist Bishop on the West Coast
- 2001** Dr. Victor Paul Furnish, Perkins School of Theology.
- 2002** Dr. "Tex" Sample, a retired UMC minister and professor at St. Paul's School of Theology
- 2003** Rev. Gilbert Caldwell, respected United Methodist minister from the Rocky Mountain Annual Conference
- 2004** A panel of gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgendered members from Bering Memorial UMC
- 2005** A panel consisting of Jack Cade, Dr. Jerry DeSobe, Susan Feather, Dr. Charles, Millican, and Rev. Rudy Rasmus
- 2006** Dr. John Gray, member of the Judicial Council, discussing the Council's vote on a Methodist minister's denying a gay person's right to join the Methodist Church.
- 2007** Rev. Dawson Taylor, a life long United Methodist raised in the Texas Annual Conference, son of Rev. Bill Taylor. Dawson is a gay man called to ministry, educated at SMU Perkins, but unable to serve the UMC. He is ordained in the United Church of Christ and serving at the Cathedral of Hope in Dallas, TX
- 2008** Dr. Jim Bankston, founding member of BTS and still serving in an advisor role, Senior Pastor of St. Paul's UMC Houston
- 2009** Bishop Melvin Talbert
- 2010** Film maker and United Methodist from Chicago, IL, Ky Dickens who have produced the Animated Documentary entitle, "Fish Out of Water." The film includes interviews with 5 clergy from the Texas Annual Conferece. Dr. Jim Bankston, Dr. John Fellers, Dr. Jerry DeSobe, Rev. Marilyn Meeker-Williams, and video from Rev. Ernie Turney and Bering Memorial UMC
- 2011** Annise Parker, Mayor of the City of Houston – first openly gay mayor of a major U.S. city
- 2012** Rev. Troy Plummer, Executive Director of the Reconciling Ministries Network and native of Houston and the Texas Annual Conference.

- 2013** Rev. Dr. Jim Bankston, founding member of BTS speaks on the eve of his retirement. Jim and Sandy are honored by BTS.
- 2014** Rev. Dr. Thomas E Frank, noted expert in United Methodist history and polity, and the author of Polity, Practice, and the Mission of The United Methodist Church, which is the standard textbook on United Methodist polity in many denominational seminaries.

Breaking the Silence is a group of clergy and laity in the Texas Annual Conference of The United Methodist Church. We aspire to be a healing voice within the climate of fear and misinformation surrounding sexual orientation and gender identity. Breaking the Silence (BTS) works to create a welcoming atmosphere for all in the churches of the Texas Annual Conference. We seek to follow the example of Christ, loving our neighbors as ourselves and establishing radical hospitality as the norm for all human relations. BTS pursues these goals by providing opportunities for dialogue through witness and education. BTS has identified itself as a *Community* within *Reconciling Ministries Network*, a national grassroots organization that exists to enable full participation of people of all sexual orientations and gender identities in the life of the United Methodist Church, both in policy and practice.

Breaking the Silence is committed to the following principle statements:

- We are grounded in the biblical witness of responsibility to God and love for our neighbor.
- We actively participate in a relationship with a loving God as revealed through Jesus the Christ.
- We uphold The United Methodist Book of Discipline.
- We rejoice in the knowledge that each of us is created in God's own image and is of sacred worth.
- We are convinced of God's unconditional love and acceptance of all people.
- We are committed to Christ's commandment to love our neighbors as we love ourselves.
- We are committed to following Christ's example, treating all persons as equal and equally cherished in the eyes of our creator, thus establishing radical hospitality as the norm for all human relations.
- We are committed to John Wesley's principle of "going on to perfection" and therefore value and devote appropriate time and effort to continuing education and spiritual growth.
- We are committed to our Wesleyan heritage that calls us to biblical scholarship, a historical-critical interpretation of Holy Scripture, and the Quadrilateral (scripture, tradition, reason, experience) as the established United Methodist tool for theological reflection.
- We are committed to preaching, teaching and promoting each of these beliefs and practices.

Authored by BTS Executive Committee March 15, 2007