

Persistent Compassion

A conversation with Judson-Rice honoree Wayne Smith

KNOXVILLE, Tenn. — An early educator, advocate and ally for those impacted by HIV/AIDS, Baptist layman Wayne Smith was honored April 25 with the Judson-Rice Award from Nurturing Faith. He is the founding director of Knoxville-based Samaritan Ministry.

The dinner event was sponsored by the board of directors of Nurturing Faith Publishing and hosted by Central Baptist Church of Bearden, where Wayne and his wife Laura are members.

Fellow church member and Samaritan Ministry volunteer Bill McConnell, who serves on the Nurturing Faith board, paid tribute to Wayne's compassionate and effective ministry.

"Wayne was an educator, professionally," said Bill. "When he retired he continued to be an educator — telling the story of how to deal with the HIV and AIDS situation."

However, there is a deeply personal touch to Wayne's ministry, Bill noted. He told of delivering food to persons served by Samaritan Ministry and hearing repeatedly comments such as, "Wayne needs to know about this" or "I need to talk to Wayne."

Bill added: "This man has a ministry. He's really the pastor for many in this town who do not have a pastor."

The roots of the ministry founded in 1997 can be traced to the impact of Baptist leader Jimmy Allen's book, *Burden of a Secret*, on then-education minister Mack Bingham. Some Central Bearden members formed an HIV/AIDS educational program for Sunday school classes.

A mission statement grew out of that experience: "Our church should be a beacon of light and hope, by the way of Christ, to anyone who suffers from or has family or friends who suffer from this disease."



Well-deserved honor — Bill McConnell (left) calls his friend and Judson-Rice Award honoree Wayne Smith "the pastor for many in [Knoxville] who have no pastor."

Wayne Smith, along with Steve Humphreys, put the statement into action by visiting someone struggling with AIDS and the ministry was born.

Following the award presentation by Nurturing Faith Director Kelly Belcher, a hospice chaplain in Asheville, N.C., editor John Pierce conducted an interview with Wayne Smith. The following conversation is adapted from that discussion.

NF: Wayne, you're the 19th recipient of the Judson-Rice Award. The first one went to our friend Jimmy Allen who died this past year. Jimmy, like you, was an early compassionate Baptist voice for those impacted by HIV/AIDS, which took the lives of some of his own family members.

How do you remember Jimmy?

WS: Laura and I got to know Jimmy Allen at a [Cooperative Baptist Fellowship] meeting several years ago. I guess the first thing is he was kind. He was a gentle, kind person. He cared about other people.

I remember that he cried a lot. He was an easy crier. When he talked about the experience he had with HIV in his own family — with his son and his other son's wife and his grandchildren — he cried.

He was touched in very, very deep ways by what happened to his family. So, that's what I remember. I also remember him saying to Laura and me that, "Sometimes we have to let our love trump our theology." Those are words of wisdom.

NF: Starting a Baptist-led ministry to those impacted by HIV/AIDS must have created two public relations concerns: Inside the church there was the stigma associated with HIV/AIDS, and outside the church there's the stigma associated with Baptists.

WS: Amen.

NF: How have you faced those dual challenges?

WS: The first word that comes to my mind is persistence. We just had to keep being out there and being present. We've gone to a lot of places where nobody expected Christians — especially Baptists — to be there. That has made an impression.

We're usually the odd man out. When we go to CBF meetings, we're the only ones talking about HIV. So, people do the thing where they'll come by and see HIV on our booth and then go over to the other side.

Whoever has the booth across from ours gets more business than they ever thought — because they get all the people who don't want to talk to us.

Then we go to a meeting like the U.S. Conference on AIDS and we're usually the only faith-based organization there. And we're certainly the only Baptist church in the room.

So, we get a lot of comments like, "Does your pastor know you're here?" That's my favorite one, and then, "What kind of Baptist are you?"

Years ago when we were getting started with this I went to a seminar at the Knox County Health Department and I was late. Some of you will not be surprised.

The woman running the meeting saw me come in the back and said, "Oh, there's Wayne Smith from Central Baptist Church of Bearden." There was a long period of sustained applause — and I didn't understand. I really wasn't sure what was going on.

So, I sat down and tried to hide. At the end of the meeting an elderly lady came up — she was probably younger than I am today — and hugged my neck and wept.

She said, "I've been waiting 20 years for the church to show up at one of these meetings."

Showing up is important. Sometimes you don't even have to say very much. You can show up and be the presence of Christ.

NF: Let's talk about Samaritan Ministry's evolution and expansion. What areas of ministry or what particular issues are being addressed today, and how are you doing that?

WS: We've certainly seen a lot of changes in the HIV world with the evolution of the disease. It's a manageable, chronic disease now for most people.

What we've seen is there's an intersection with the opioid crisis and the Hepatitis C epidemic that are in the news every day. They are all connected.

Most of the time when we're talking about HIV at a conference or some community meeting, it's linked up with those other two things. So, we've moved into those areas.

We do Hepatitis C testing. We work with the Helen Ross McNabb Center. We're trying to figure out how we keep there from being an HIV outbreak because of injection drug use. So those are areas we've moved into and tried to be proactive with.

NF: What do we need to know about HIV/AIDS today? What are the trends? What's happening now?

WS: Well, HIV has changed a lot, so people today are living long and healthy lives if they're on medication. We've learned that people who are on medication and do well with that are not going to infect anybody else.

That's something we didn't know a few years ago. So that's great news for people who are living with HIV and people they care about and love.

The other thing today is there's a medication people can take that will prevent them from becoming infected. That's something a lot of people don't know about and the word needs to get out.

It's called PrEP, and it's something people can take as a way to protect themselves from becoming infected with HIV. Those are some of the big things.

There's also a lot going on in research today about finding a cure. There's no

vaccine, and there's no cure. But there's an awful lot of work being done to try to bring some of those things about.

NF: Early on, this became known as "the gay disease." But the impact is much broader than on LGBTQ persons. What are the communities where we've seen a rise in HIV/AIDS?

WS: I always say to people that HIV can affect anybody. We see it in all ages, whether gay or straight. People who put themselves at risk, using a needle with HIV in it. It does affect all kinds of people.

You still see new HIV infections in gay and bisexual men; that's true. But in our ministry we work with a lot of women. We work with, fortunately, only a few children, but it can affect anybody.

The stigma, based on a false sort of ideas about a disease, gets in the way of education and compassion. We often use judgment when we ought to use love.

One of the things important to me is that I've gotten to know a lot of great people through this ministry — people I have worked with who walk around every day with HIV.

I've met wonderful people who — had this turn not been taken in my life — I never would have met. Many of those are gay men. And I have a burden for them — especially for those gay people who are friends of mine, who are Christians and find it hard to be part of the family of God.

NF: Did you discover by accident that you were what is called an ally?

WS: I did, I did. Laura and I were at a dinner in L.A. where I was receiving [the 2005 Ryan White Memorial HIV Education Award] from the National Education Association. We were in a room of educators, teachers from across the country.

At the end they asked all of the "allies" in the room to stand up, and Laura and I were just sitting there because we didn't know what they were talking about. The guy sitting next to me punches me and says, "That's you and your wife. You need to stand up."

In a room that was probably 75 percent gay people who are in education, teaching

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across this country, there was a smattering of straight couples like Laura and me. We were the allies.

We were the people who are willing to stand up and say what’s right and be a voice for our friends. That’s when I learned what an ally was.

NF: You collaborate really well. Where have you found good help and meaningful partners?

WS: It’s been surprising to me how much we’re able to partner with people outside the purview of the Christian community. We have great partners in government and in not-for-profits.

I mentioned the Helen Ross McNabb Center. That’s not a faith-based organization. It’s one of the large mental health organizations in our community.

We work with health departments and the government. It really does take a village to do the things that need to be done to make an impact on an epidemic like HIV

and Hepatitis C and the opioid crisis.

It’s been cool to see where those unlikely partnerships are. Now, that doesn’t mean we don’t like Christian partners, too. We have some great Christian partners like Cedar Springs Presbyterian Church and Central Baptist Church of Fountain City.

And, of course, the Tennessee Cooperative Baptist Fellowship has really been helping us for many years and continues to do that in so many ways.

It’s always been about being at the table because often people are surprised to see the faith community at the table. They’re expecting us to not be very nice. And I don’t get that. I really don’t. I hang out with a bunch of nice Christians, but that’s not how we’re known sometimes.

They expect us to want to take over and have the agenda — and that if they don’t play by our rules we will get up and leave. That’s sometimes the expectation.

So, it’s really nice to just go and sit and listen, and be a part of what’s happening in

the community. You’ll be surprised by the great friends and allies you can make just doing that.

NF: What’s next for Samaritan Ministry?

WS: Well, God hasn’t revealed that to me yet. I don’t know the answer to that question.

I know there are changes in what is needed in the fight against HIV. I find myself involved in more advocacy, more talking about the epidemic, and maybe less hands-on in some cases — although somebody gets sick and then that changes.

I think as the epidemic moves forward and we get closer and closer to ending the epidemic and bringing the rates of HIV down, that Samaritan Ministry ought to evolve with that. We don’t want to stay stuck in the same place.

HIV is not about death and dying. HIV is about living and celebrating — living a life and building family and building relationships, thinking about the future. That’s what it is. **NFJ**