



Summer, 2007

# The Covenant Connection

A Newsletter of the Covenant Network of Presbyterians (Vol 10, #1)

2515 Fillmore St. San Francisco Ca 94115 ♦ 415 351 2196 (v) ♦ 415 351 2198 (f) ♦ [www.covenantnetwork.org](http://www.covenantnetwork.org)

## Covenant Network Polity Workshops Help Presbyterians Understand and Use New Authoritative Interpretation to Faithfully Discern Calls

Covenant Network has offered six one-day polity workshops this spring, designed to build up the church by helping presbyteries discern and affirm calls to ordination in light of the 217th General Assembly's Authoritative Interpretation of G-6.0108. This new A.I. upholds existing ordination standards but emphasizes the authority and responsibility of governing bodies to interpret and apply them individually to particular candidates. Held in New York, Greensboro, Atlanta, Austin, Kansas City, and San Francisco, the workshops attracted members of COMs and CPMs, clerks and moderators, seminarians, elders, and others concerned about our church's leadership and direction.

Another workshop is scheduled for September in Chicago. For more information or to schedule a workshop in your area, please contact Rosemary Bledsoe in the Covenant Network office.

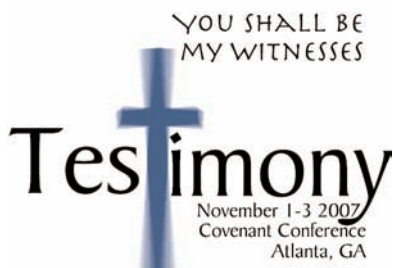
## A Church For Our Time Returns to Montreat This August

The Covenant Network summer conference, *A Church for Our Time*, returns to the Montreat Conference Center in North Carolina August 6th to the 11th. The conference is designed to be both challenging and encouraging to those who believe the future of the Presbyterian Church is in the hands of a generous and just God who is calling us to create tomorrow's church.

Each day begins with worship, flows into interactive in-depth examinations of ethics, mission, scripture and worship in morning workshops, then pauses for an afternoon of contemplation and relaxation. The day closes with evening worship that ignites hope as it calls our attention to God's activity among us.

Conference leadership includes authors, preachers and teachers **Deborah Block, Jon Walton, Agnes Winston Norfleet, Margaret Aymer Oget, and Rebecca ("Toddie") Peters**. The conference also critically builds upon the experiences of conference attendees.

For more information and to register, please visit [www.montreat.org](http://www.montreat.org) (see current conferences) or [www.covenantnetwork.org](http://www.covenantnetwork.org).



Plans are well underway for the tenth Covenant Network Conference, *Testimony: You Shall Be My Witnesses*, at the Trinity Presbyterian Church in Atlanta, November 1-3, 2007. Keynote speakers will be author and Emory Professor of Theology **Don Saliers** (with a video message from his daughter, Indigo Girl band co-leader Emily Saliers); Princeton New Testament Interpretation Professor **Beverly Gaventa**, and **Anna Carter Florence**, Associate Professor of Preaching and Worship at Columbia Seminary, and author of the newly published book, *Preaching as Testimony* which is excerpted here in the newsletter and on our website. Look for the registration brochure to arrive in your mail box by early August.

The church we seek to strengthen is built upon the hospitality of Jesus, who said, "Whoever comes to me I will not cast out." The good news of the gospel is that all -- those who are near and those who were far off -- are invited; all are members of the household and citizens of the realm of God. No one has a claim on this invitation and none of us becomes worthy, even by sincere effort to live according to God's will. Grateful for our own inclusion, we carry out the mission of the church to extend God's hospitality to a broken and fearful and lonely world. From the *Call to Covenant Community*. Please read in its entirety at [covenantnetwork.org/call2cc.html](http://covenantnetwork.org/call2cc.html).

# Understanding of Ordination and Installation of Church Officers Now Winding its Way Through Presbyterian Judicial System

The last General Assembly adopted an Authoritative Interpretation (AI) of G-6.0108 highlighting that freedom of conscience must be respected in examinations for ordained office. At the same time, General Assembly urged all parts of the church to undertake community building and joint discernment. Many presbyteries and sessions have done so. Regrettably, some others have adopted resolutions that frustrate General Assembly's actions.

The Covenant Network has devoted substantial time and resources over the past year to help promote and defend General Assembly's action. Our staff and members of our legal coordinating team have traveled the country, presenting numerous legal/polity workshops on the rules and traditions that govern our life together. Board members also have supported judicial challenges to irregular policies where presbyteries have adopted them. Recent legal developments are reviewed briefly below.

## Examinations for Ordained Office

In September 2006, the Presbytery of Sacramento adopted a policy that "all candidates for ordination, installation, and/or membership ... shall comply with all standards for ordination set forth in the Constitution" and that the presbytery "shall not receive into membership, nor recognize as a member, anyone who has been ordained or installed under a scruple that is taking exception to any of the ordination standards as set forth in the Constitution."

When five sessions challenged these policies, the PJC for the Synod of the Pacific ordered them rescinded. The SPJC noted that the first policy was unconstitutional because it was "adopted for the purpose of suggesting that the presbytery should apply the standards of the church without applying the spirit of the Authoritative Interpretation." The SPJC ruled that the second policy "is more egregious" because it was "contrary to the long established history of

The Rules of Discipline in the Book of Order lay out a path for resolving disagreements using a judicial process that looks much like a secular court but is fundamentally different in design and purpose: "The power that Jesus Christ has vested in his Church, a power manifested in the exercise of church discipline, is one for building up the body of Christ, not for destroying it, for redeeming, not for punishing. It should be exercised as a dispensation of mercy and not of wrath so that the great ends of the Church may be achieved, that all children of God may be presented faultless in the day of Christ." (D-1.0102)

There are two kinds of cases. Complaints against governing bodies are remedial, since they seek a remedy such as reversing an action of the body. Cases against individuals are known as disciplinary. The current group of complaints against various responses to the action of the 217th General Assembly have been filed as remedial cases against presbyteries, by sessions and members of the presbyteries, with the Permanent Judicial Commissions of the next highest governing bodies, the synods. Decisions of a Synod PJC can be appealed to the General Assembly Permanent Judicial Commission. The decisions of the GA PJC have the weight of Presbyterian law as Authoritative Interpretations of the PCUSA Constitution.

connectivity, church-wide standards, the conscience of individual candidates and collective discernment in the application of the standards for ordination." One of our board members, Doug Nave, acted as counsel for the complainants. At the time of this writing, it appears that this decision will not be appealed.

The Presbytery of Pittsburgh also adopted policies that "compliance with the standards of ordination ... is an essential of Reformed polity ... [and] any departure from the standards for ordination expressed in the

Book of Order will bar a candidate from ordination and/or installation." The policy stated that the relevant "standards" use the terms 'shall,' 'is/are to be,' 'requirement,' or equivalent expression." The policy stated further that the presbytery would allow "no exceptions to the requirement that all Ministers of the Word and Sacrament must 'live in fidelity within the covenant of marriage between a man and a woman or in chastity in singleness'."

When these policies were challenged, the PJC for the Synod of Trinity ruled that they were unconstitutional. It emphasized that it is "over simplification and overly broad to make a blanket determination that all mandatory standards are essentials" and that "departures from ordination standards, and departures from essential tenets, must be determined on a case by case basis." Regrettably, the SPJC then went on to opine – on a question not directly before it – that "no presbytery may grant an exception to any mandatory church wide behavioral ordination standard." Because this directly conflicts with the PUP Task Force Report, which placed belief and practice on equal footing, it appears likely that the complainants will appeal this to the GAPJC. One of our board members, Tim Cahn, is representing

the complainants in this matter.

The Presbytery of Olympia adopted a policy that “any violation of a mandate in the Book of Order (2005-2007) constitutes a failure to adhere to the essentials of reformed polity and thus presents a bar to ordination and installation.” When this policy was challenged, the presbytery argued that it was constitutional because it left open to future determination, in individual cases, what should be defined as “mandates.” The PJC for the Synod of Alaska-Northwest permitted the policy to stand because it “does not preclude Olympia Presbytery from conducting a meaningful examination to assess the fitness of individual candidates on a case by case basis.” However, the SPJC admonished the presbytery that it is “obligated to conduct such examinations in a thorough and fair manner.”

While the SPJC clearly held that Olympia Presbytery must conduct meaningful, case-by-case examinations, complainants have filed an appeal with the GAPJC, seeking to have the policy repealed because it can have inherent dampening effects on open dialogue and discernment. One of our board members, Doug Nave, has joined the complainants’ committee of counsel to support that appeal.

Roughly two dozen other presbyteries have adopted very restrictive policies, in response to the recent Authoritative Interpretation, that appear to be irregular. Some of these policies were not challenged because the synods having jurisdiction over them were already addressing the same issues in other cases. In other cases, policies have

## OGA Responds to Questions On Mandatory Standards Practice

In February of 2007, the national Presbyterian independent newsmagazine, *Presbyterian Outlook*, published a significant statement from the Office of the General Assembly in response to a question from a reader. With permission from *The Outlook*, we republish the question and the response below.

### **Presbyterian Outlook - February 12, 2007 Letters to the Editor**

LCDR Orvis N. Fitts  
USNR (ret.)  
Overland Park, Kansas  
Re: What Next? (11/13 issue)

I have read the various articles in the 13 November 2006 issue of The Presbyterian Outlook on the Theological Task Force’s Report on the Peace, Unity, and Purity of the Church approved by the 217th General Assembly in Birmingham, Alabama. In regard to G-6.0106b of the Book of Order, nowhere did I read a simple “yes” or “no” answer to the question, “Under certain circumstances, can a lesbian woman or a gay man involved in a committed sexual relationship be now ordained?” There was a lot of verbiage and what I call obfuscation, but no definitive answer.

### **Response from the Office of the General Assembly: Proposed Understanding – Mandatory Standards and G-6.0106b:**

We continue to receive questions about whether the Authoritative Interpretation adopted by the 217th General Assembly (2006) permits the ordination or installation of candidates for office who have declared that they depart from the standards for ordained service in matters of practice as well as belief. The details of what this all means are in the process of being worked out in the church’s life and in its examining bodies and judicial commissions. In the meantime, we have addressed this issue in Constitutional Musings #11, where we pointed out that a candidate may not declare a scruple on a mandatory provision.

Mandatory provisions are those that establish the functions of the office to which a candidate aspires. For example, a candidate for the ministry of Word and Sacrament may not be ordained if he or she declares that he or she will not participate in the baptism of an infant.

In other matters of both belief and practice, it is up to the ordaining or installing body to apply the standards set by the Constitution, based on the criteria in G-6.0108b, and to determine whether the examination may be sustained. None of the Constitutional standards can be ignored in this process and, as in all cases, the decisions of the ordaining or installing body are potentially subject to administrative and judicial review. — Office of the General Assembly

been addressed through settlement and ongoing dialogue. In any event, it appears clear that the issues involved in these cases will wind up on appeal before the GAPJC, where a definitive ruling will establish rules regarding such policies for the whole church.

### **Disposition of church property**

The presbyteries of Sacramento and the Mid-South both adopted policies, following the last General Assembly, designed to facilitate the dismissal of congregations with their property. The SPJC unanimously struck down the Sacramento policy, ruling that it was a violation of our theology regarding the nature of the church, as well as an abdication of the presbytery’s constitutional responsibilities to members of dissident congregations and to the

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# The First Testimony: The Tale of the Anxious Preacher

An excerpt from *Preaching as Testimony*

by Anna Carter  
Florence

Anna Carter Florence will be one of the three keynote speakers at the November 2007 Covenant Network Conferences. Florence is Associate Professor of Preaching at Colubia theological Seminary, Decatur, Georgia.

Florence's book, published by Westminster/John Knox Press, is available at [www.wjkbooks.com](http://www.wjkbooks.com)

This excerpt is reprinted with permission from the publisher.

## While We Were Sleeping

By now it is generally accepted that humanity in the late modern context has crossed some muddy and imprecise border dividing the *modern* from the *postmodern*, though how and why this has happened and what difference it makes for the pulpit, we cannot fully say. All we know is that one day we awoke to find ourselves living and preaching in different times. The old claims about power and knowledge – who has it, who defines it, and who gets to talk about it – were no longer valid. “Objectivity” had gone belly-up. “Certitude” was about as fashionable as a corset. And with these gone, of course, the houses of authority that had once sheltered preaching lay open to the elements, their original beams and trusses exposed. Whether those houses are facing major renovation or the bulldozer is endlessly debated; meanwhile, preachers have to rough it. We pitch our tents on the ruins of our former shelters and wonder if there is a wilderness metaphor at work, for surely, to quote John S. McClure's elegant phrasing, preaching in the postmodern context is “Leaving itself in order to find itself”:

This is not to say that preaching has gone away or disappeared. It is not leaving the space that is constituted by the genre of preaching and going somewhere else. Rather, I want to argue that preaching has been *exiting those things that authorize its existence* and that this exit is designed, in part, to turn preaching toward its other(s) [that is, radical awareness of the “other who is not like oneself] in such a way that *preachers may re-encounter something of the nature of proclamation at its deepest levels*.

A wilderness holds within itself the promise of Canaan, and that promise keeps many of us going. But a wilderness also entails the hard work of exiting Egypt, and *this* is where the real wandering comes in. To leave behind the powers and authorities of a former existence, an enslaved and enslaving existence, is slow and painful and impossible to accomplish in a few months of committee meetings. It takes years – maybe forty of them – to leave yourself in order to find yourself. The process is not unlike the years of therapy that might accompany a recovery from depression. And this, I suspect, is probably why there is such resistance to postmodernism in some

quarters: not all of us want to face Egypt, let alone leave it. We also do not particularly relish the exposure of our own homiletical fleshpots: if there is food in those pots, and we can count on it, so what if the price is remaining in slavery? Isn't the Egypt we know better than the liberation we don't?

The tricky thing about leaving and finding ourselves is coming to terms with our own peculiar and enslaved logic. Deconstruction, the most common postmodern method of reading and seeing “texts” (used in the broadest sense), can be quite helpful in this regard: ready or not, like it or not, when we deconstruct a thing, we *will* see ourselves more clearly. Deconstruction, like therapy, permits us to uncover the masked priorities and power dynamics of a text that may warp its authority structures and so create ingrown systems that lead to oppression and suffering. Or, to put it another way: when we deconstruct something such as preaching, we allow it to *show itself more clearly* so that we can see the things that make it what it is. This may include exposing ways in which preaching, for example, appeals to its authority structures (the Scriptures, tradition, experience, and reason) in order to end discussion, suppress difference, and silence debate – and many of those revelations may be difficult and discouraging for us to swallow.

When something we hold dear, like preaching, is in the process of leaving and finding itself, it is hard on everyone. Critical appraisals take forever. Each new insight requires adjustment. Some days the insights take the form of accusations – or at least, it feels that way. We may get angry and defensive: Why is everything *our* fault? Why are *we* the ones who have to make so many changes? And why do we have to take responsibility for sins we never knew we were committing in the first place?

It helps, I think, to get a little perspective: reformations do not happen overnight. It also helps to laugh at ourselves: being paranoid and grumpy are part of the process, when change is happening, and some of us will turn in performances that are truly camera worthy. The thing is to get through this phase and move on. No one is “out to get us,” or “out to get preaching” (certainly not in this book). Postmodern practices are not for the purpose of demolition. They are for the purpose of encounter; and with encounter, insight; and with insight, the chance to make right. In truth, such practices offer us a gift by opening up ethical space for us to make new decisions on behalf of

the other. One could even say that the deconstruction of preaching is a kind of repentance, of turning around and looking again at our beloved practices of proclamation and seeing them as if for the first time. And awareness, of course, opens space for confession and, with God's grace, the time to amend (*re-form*) our lives.

In this book, I will be examining some of our long-held assumptions about preaching, and offering new ways to look at this practice to which many of us – myself included – have committed our lives. The examination process is not without pain, and it is pain I share. But I also firmly believe that the time to wake up and see *what we probably already know ...* is now. To deny, retrench, roll over, and go back to sleep will only be at the expense of preaching itself, and with it, the One we proclaim.

## The Authority Question: “Can I Really Say That?”

One of the most compelling signs of our transition into a postmodern era, in my experience, is the sheer number of preachers who report that they are no longer sure what the homiletical “rules” are. When church and society face challenges to orthodoxy, tradition, and leadership, preachers are continually forced to ask themselves by what authority they stand in the pulpit as interpreters of Scripture, and whether that authority “allows” them to speak openly. That is the crux of what I hear most frequently from pastors and students as they wrestle with biblical texts, listen to their people, and try to prepare sermons with integrity. They are always asking, *Can I really say that?*

Can I really say that... if the commentary on my shelf says something different?

Can I really say that...if it sounds totally illogical?

Can I really say that... if no one will believe a word I say?

Can I really say that ...if I believe it, but can't prove it?

Can I really say that...If I'm only the seminary intern/a high school dropout/pulpit supply/a woman/a teenager/a layperson/a preacher?

*Can I really say that?* This is not a question we ask when the authoritative structures beneath us are set and strong, and we know where the boundaries of orthodoxy and acceptability are; when a system is closed, there is little need or even tolerance of questions. But when systems

are in flux and structures wobble, closure gives way to something else: the possibility of construing authority differently. So when churches debate theology, denominations threaten schism, cultural norms shift, and personal experience ruptures prior claims, preachers cannot rely on the old and familiar sources in the same easy way. Those sources have to be tested for what they will hold and how far they will bend: *Can I really say that ...without stepping out of bounds?* And this, of course, is the dangerous part. If the old structures give way, then new ones must be negotiated. If the old structures are rickety or rotted, yet not willing to give without a fight, then preachers will likely find themselves in the cloudy ranks of those witnesses whose words have cost them a great deal – perhaps even their lives.

## Testimony: Open-ended Logic

*Can I really say that?* There are plenty of times when preachers decide that the answer to this question is a definite “No!” Maybe the time isn't right to test the situation; maybe they cannot summon the conviction or courage it will take to make that test. A vivid metaphor for this can be found in the so-called first ending of the Gospel of Mark (16:1-8): the women go to the tomb, see that it is empty, meet the messenger, hear his news, receive his instruction to tell the disciples...and run away in utter terror, without saying a word to anyone. It isn't hard to imagine why. *How could we really say that?! – when it sounds completely crazy...when we have no proof beyond our words...when we're women for crying out loud, and no one will ever believe us!* The women are captive to old authority structures that would never permit such speech, and so the Gospel ends with an abrupt silence, a mute and terrified, “No!”

There is, however, a “second ending” of Mark (16:9-20) that goes rather differently. Scholars have suggested that this was probably added later, to smooth over the roughness of the first: in verses 9-20, at least one of the women, Mary of Magdala, goes on to change her mind and speak after all, and her witness is then followed by others. Thus the second ending makes plain what the first ending only implies: fearful first reactions are not the last word. We can look again, choose faith over fear, break silence, risk words – as indeed must have happened, since the Word is out! Some critics like the subtlety of the first ending; others appreciate the clarity of the second. But perhaps the point is not to choose which ending is best. Perhaps the point is to acknowledge that each is possible. Christian

*A wilderness holds within itself the promise of Canaan, and that promise keeps many of us going. But a wilderness also entails the hard work of exiting Egypt, and this is where the real wandering comes in*

## Complainants' Trial Brief

Davis, et al vrs. Sacramento Presbytery

*The following is an excerpt from the brief filed by the complainants against Sacramento Presbytery. The entire brief is online at [www.covenantnetwork.org/pjc/sac-ctb.htm](http://www.covenantnetwork.org/pjc/sac-ctb.htm) together with the Synod of the Pacific PJC decision.*

### Scruples may relate to both belief and practice.

It is a matter of general agreement that the Presbyterian Church has always respected conscientious differences in “non-essential” matters of doctrine. If the last General Assembly had merely affirmed this, its action would be relatively non-controversial. However, the AI also clarified, for the whole church, that sessions and presbyteries have an obligation to respect conscientious differences in “non-essential” matters of practice.

There is a sound theological basis for this. Jesus taught that the connection between faith and practice is so close that we can discern one from the other: “By their fruits you will know them” (Matt. 7:15-20, Luke 6:43-45). Likewise, our Historic Principles of Church Order (G-1.0304) declare that “there is an inseparable connection between faith and practice, truth and duty.” In the words of John Calvin, we have “a doctrine not of the tongue but of life.” Our beliefs permeate who we are and how we act, or they are scarcely worth calling “beliefs” at all....

The Task Force emphasized this in its Report: “Section G-6.0108 puts “faith and polity” – belief and behavior – on an equal footing, as they were in 1729, when scruples were permitted in matters of “doctrine, discipline and government.” In apparent recognition of recent efforts to bar ordained service by all sexually active gay and lesbian persons, the Task Force went on to observe that, “Over time, an imbalance has developed, with flexibility afforded in matters of doctrine and strict compliance required on all points of conduct and polity. By implication, this confers greater authority on the *Form of Government* than on the confessions and the Scripture they interpret. The proposed authoritative interpretation restores the balance, grounded firmly in the Reformed theological insight that faith and action are inextricably related.”

Some argue that compliance with all practice-based standards is required by two decisions, *Kenyon* (UPC 1977) and *Hambrick* (PCUS 1983), in which the GAPJC held that presbyteries could not ordain men who said that they would not ordain women. However, in two other decisions – *Huie* (PCUS 1977) and *Simmons* (PCUSA 1985) – the GAPJC held that presbyteries could admit a minister who said that he opposed women’s ordination (and that he would continue his practice of preaching against it) but that he would participate in the ordination of women if instructed to do so by his presbytery.

[In the *Simmons* case (PCUSA 1985), the] GAPJC noted that “review of the Book of Order and recent decisions of the highest courts ... focuses our attention on statements that a minister must be willing to perform certain functions of office.”

Where a person seeks ordained office, he or she must be willing to carry out the functions of that office, or the examination cannot be sustained. However, practice-based departures from our standards in other areas are permitted. In such cases, the AI makes clear that presbyteries must consider each particular candidate’s entire statement of faith and manner of life, in light of our historic commitment to freedom of conscience, in discerning whether that person is fit to serve. ■

## Understanding of Ordination

*continued from page 3*

larger church. Doug Nave acted as counsel at trial. The parties in Mid-South reached a settlement establishing a task force to study the constitutional process for congregations that wish to withdraw.

### Withholding of Per Capita

In connection with the other policies discussed above, the SPJC also struck down Sacramento Presbytery’s policy that it would “honor the protest” of congregations refusing to pay their capita, without making up any shortfall by other means. The SPJC found that the policy violated GAPJC rulings that withholding of per capita as a means of protest is inappropriate. It also noted that such a policy “represents obstructive behavior,” “does not reflect reasonable pastoral concern” and “is destructive of the covenant relationship among governing bodies.” Judicial challenge is pending with respect to a similar policy adopted by the Presbytery of Seattle.

### Same-Sex Marriage

Pittsburgh Presbytery recently adopted a policy that “Ministers of Word and

## Dykers Koenig on Summer Sabbatical

National Organizer Tricia Dykers Koenig is celebrating her seventh year with the Covenant Network by taking a ten week sabbatical this summer. Plans include preaching and working in New Orleans, household projects, and entire days and weeks without a to-do list.

In the meantime, please contact Lou McAlister East (loueast@covenantnetwork.org or 336-643-9424) with questions about presbytery organizing, Rosemary Bledsoe (rosemaryb@covenantnetwork.org) with requests for resources, and Pam Byers (pambyers@covenantnetwork.org) for everything else. Rosemary and Pam can be reached at 415-351-2196. Tricia will be back in the office by Labor Day.

Sacrament shall be prohibited from conducting same-sex marriages within the jurisdiction of this Presbytery.” The SPJC ruled that the policy was constitutional, but that “the resolution can not be read to prohibit ministers in the Presbytery of Pittsburgh from performing services to bless same-sex unions” (given the distinction between “marriage” and “unions” that the GAPJC held to be dispositive in the *Benton* case (2000)).

### Interpretation of G-6.0106b

Covenant Network continues to assist parties who are challenged under unduly restrictive interpretation of our current rules. Tim Cahn won an acquittal for Rev. Janie Spahr in a disciplinary case after she officiated at same-sex marriage ceremonies in Canada. We also counseled a session in Heartland Presbytery that was challenged for approving the ordination of a lesbian elder-elect. After a series of hearings and appeals, the PJC issued a final decision upholding the session’s action.

The GAPJC recently issued a disappointing decision regarding Mission Presbytery’s advancement of a lesbian inquirer to candidacy. The PJC for the Synod of the Sun

sustained the presbytery’s action by a tie vote. While an appeal was pending before the GAPJC, the candidate withdrew and the presbytery asked that the case be dismissed as moot. The GAPJC dismissed the case, but included commentary suggesting (contrary to its decision in the *Sheldon* case (2000)) that G-6.0106b may apply to candidates before they are certified for readiness to receive a call. Because this comment constitutes what lawyers call “dictum” – that is, tangential statements about matters not argued by the parties or necessary to the decision – its status is debatable. (Indeed, the PJC for the Synod of the Pacific subsequently ruled, in the Sacramento case discussed above, that *Sheldon* is still the controlling rule.) However, this now appears to be a question that will generate debate until a future case places the matter squarely before the GAPJC.

We are committed to providing requested assistance in cases like this. While this puts heavy demands on our resources, such work constitutes a critical part of the Covenant Network’s contribution at this important time in the life of the church. ■

## The First Testimony

(continued from page 5)

witness will always hinge on the question, *Can we really say that, even though we have no proof beyond what we have seen and believed?* Somewhere between the question and the answer is where Christian preaching locates itself – again and again and again.

Preachers who live in these conditions yet still decide to speak are choosing *testimony*, one of the oldest forms of Christian witness. Testimony contains both a narration of events and a confession of belief: we tell what we have seen and heard, and then confess what we believe about it. Therefore, testimony is not something that can ever be proven true or false: it can only be believed or rejected. The only proof of testimony is the engagement of the witness, and the only proof of a sermon is the engagement of the preacher: whether we are willing to seal our lives to our words.

More and more, it seems to me, preachers are relying not on outside authorities as the proof of their words, (that is, ecclesial bodies that make decisions about leadership or orthodoxy), but on the authority of testimony: preaching what they have seen and heard in the biblical text, and what they believe about it. More and more, preachers are finding that what makes their sermons authoritative for their people is not the number of footnotes but the depth of the preacher’s engagement with the Scriptures and life itself. More and more, preachers are asking themselves, “Can I really say that?” and deciding that *Yes they can*, if they are willing to go all the way to hell and back to stand with their people in this text. *Yes they can*, if they are willing to stand behind what they say and what they truly believe. It makes for an awkward and tippy pulpit, at least at first. But more and more preachers, and more and more people, are crying out for a deeper rootedness in the biblical text, a deeper embodiment—which is to say, a *living-out, in full view*—of the theological questions. And these are the preachers who are adopting testimony as a homiletical model for uncertain times—which our postmodern context certainly is. ■

The *Covenant Network Connection* is free to all who request a subscription. To have your name added to our mailing list or to change your address, please contact Rosemary Bledsoe at (415) 351 2196 or [rosemaryb@covenantnetwork.org](mailto:rosemaryb@covenantnetwork.org). You can also make changes on line at [www.covenantnetwork.org/conscribe.htm](http://www.covenantnetwork.org/conscribe.htm).

## Covenant Network Board Welcomes New Members, Renews Terms for Others

At its May meeting, the Covenant Network Board re-elected board members Deborah Block, Betsy Britton, David Colby, Tim Hart-Andersen, Doug Nave, J. Herbert Nelson, Barbara Wheeler, and John Wilkinson.

The board also elected Randy Bush, pastor of East Liberty Presbyterian Church, Pittsburg; Ilene Dunn, pastor of Madison Square Presbyterian Church, San Antonio; Heidi Hudnut-Beumler, pastor of Trinity Presbyterian Church, Nashville; Deana Reed, pastor of Covenant Presbyterian Church, Napa, CA; and Mary Lynn Tobin, pastor of Davis, CA, Community Church.




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## Toward a Church as Generous and Just as God's Grace


### A Message from our Co-Moderators

July, 2007



Does it feel like an odd summer to you? This is only the second time we've not had an annual General Assembly, and the off year does indeed feel a bit odd. The rhythm of preparation and anticipation, gathering and working together, responding and regrouping is now a longer cadence. We miss the renewal of our covenant community and the opportunity to network, advocate, and educate. We do good work at assemblies. But now we're in a new kind of ordinary time, which offers its own opportunities to do good work.

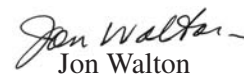
We're in a time between the times, and parts of the Presbyterian Church (USA) are at odds with the decisions of the last General Assembly regarding time-honored ways of being Presbyterians together to embody the peace, unity, and purity of the church in a new day. The Covenant Network of Presbyterians remains passionately committed to a vision of the church that is as just and generous as God's grace, and willing to work through the processes decided by the church toward that end.



Which means that this odd year is even more important. Words of the Apostle Paul are resonant: *"Do not lag in zeal, be ardent in spirit, serve the Lord. Rejoice in hope, be patient in suffering, persevere in prayer ..."* (Romans 12). There is much energy being directed to building healthy and diverse congregations through events like "A Church for Our Time" at Montreat this August. We are "equipping the saints" to use our polity with wisdom and integrity, and providing resources when needed for judicial proceedings. We are in conversation with Presbyterian brothers and sisters across the church, sharing common hopes and seeking common ground. It may be that odd years are off years for a General Assembly – but the Covenant Network is steadfastly on task. Keep reading for more information, and keep the PC(USA) in your prayers.

  
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