



Winter, 2003

The Covenant Connection

A Newsletter of the Covenant Network of Presbyterians

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2003 Conference Draws 600 to Washington DC

Presbyterians of all ages and regions came to New York Avenue Presbyterian Church in Washington, DC to listen to challenging and thoughtful plenary sessions, participate in workshops and small group conversations, and join in renewing worship services. The dialogue between Barbara Wheeler, President of Auburn Seminary, and Richard Mouw, President of Fuller Seminary, modeled how people of integrity and intelligence can reason together in respect and compassion. Patrick Henry's presentation was so compelling that the room was deeply and attentively silent as he spoke, even though it was one of the last events of the three day conference. Bruce Reyes-Chow talked about the complexities facing young adults in the United States today. Jana Childers, Barrie Shepherd, Ken Kovacs, and Chris Glaser preached the Word from an historic pulpit. (more information inside)

2004 Conference Dates Set!
Nov 4-6 at Fourth Presbyterian
Church in Chicago:
Speaking of Sex: Exploring the
Theology and Expression of
Human Sexuality

Covenant Network Board Reaffirms Commitment to Removal of Ordination Barriers

In a recent statement, the Covenant Network Board reaffirmed its commitment to "the full inclusion of gay and lesbian Presbyterians in the life and leadership of the Presbyterian Church (USA)" and laid out specific actions the Network is undertaking in the months ahead to further this goal.

Noting that the Theological Task Force on the Peace, Unity and Purity of the Church "has been asked to propose ways for the church to move into the future in the face of deep differences about sexuality, ordination and other issues," the Board observed, "Neither the Task Force nor any other group can hope to change the church unless Presbyterians on all sides of the issues are ready for change." The Board continued:

"We will pour our energies and our organization's resources into preparing for change. We hope that this process contributes to a successful amendment to delete G-6.0106b in 2006 at the 217th General Assembly and in the presbyteries in the year following. We recognize that the timing of change in the Church belongs to God; we commit ourselves to work with others in discerning the movement of the Spirit."

Please read the full statement at www.covenantnetwork.org/time4change.htm

A Week at Ghost Ranch

Spend a week (July 26-August 2) at Ghost Ranch this summer imagining "A Church for Our Time." Gather with Presbyterians from around the country and consider how worship, mission, theology and spiritual practices support a vision of a church that takes its traditions seriously, relies on scripture and the wisdom of the past, actively engages its current context, and looks to a future filled with possibility. Speakers include Susan Andrews, the Moderator of the 215th General Assembly, Deborah Block, Ted Wardlaw, Timothy Hart-Andersen, John Wilkinson, Cynthia Campbell, Sheila Gustafson, and Howard Rice. For more information, visit www.ghost ranch.org or contact Diane Haddon at 505 685 4333 x 152.

We seek the gift of unity among all who confess the name of Jesus Christ as Lord. Unity is Christ's prayer for those who would follow him, "So that the world might believe." We hope to maintain communion fellowship with all whose lives are guided by the Christian Creeds and by the confessions of Reformed faith. We pledge to strengthen our ties to those who are at risk of being excluded by recent legislative actions of our church. We also want to live in unity with those whose views are different from ours. *From the Call to Covenant Community. Please read the whole document at covenantnetwork.org/call2cc.html*

2003

Conference

Highlights

THE CHURCH
WE ARE CALLED
TO BE AND
TO BECOME

Covenant Conference 2003

It's impossible to give more than a taste of all of the presentations and sermons we experienced in three days in Washington D.C. At best, we can highlight a few paragraphs and urge you to see the entire text on our website at www.covenantnetwork.org/conf03sum.htm

Poirot or Corot: On Asking the Right Questions - J. Barrie Shepherd

What if Jesus really came to teach us how to see? Do you remember how that blind man first claimed that he could see people, but only like trees walking, and then gradually his sight progressed toward being crystal clear? So many times in the gospels, especially in John, from his earliest invitation to his disciples, "Come and see," to his opening the eyes of the blind, to his claim to be "The Light of the World," to those parables, so many of which were simple exercises in seeing, in perceiving the reality of the kingdom concealed in the everyday events and objects that made up people's lives - something lost, a coin, a sheep, a farmer sowing seed, a traveler needing help - in all this Jesus seems to be inviting people to a new way of seeing, a new way of recognizing God, and God's realm at the core of everything that is.

To approach this world, this life, then, no longer as a problem to be solved, but as a possibility to be

explored. To approach and appreciate our own selves, no longer as defined exclusively and eternally between those two opposing poles of sin and salvation, but as those who, being redeemed in Christ, can now seek out, and recognize, and reveal to others the living splendor of that redemption, its passion and surpassing glory, reflected in the world about us, at work in the events that make up our own time.

J. Barrie Shepherd is a poet and pastor



A Chaos of Uncalculating Love - Kenneth E. Kovacs

One of the oldest prayers of the church is *Veni, Creator Spiritus*. "Come, Creator Spirit." I'm always praying this prayer. It's a prayer, as one theologian put it, of "open surrender to the absolute creativity of God." When the

Theological Reflections on Yogi Berra's "The Future Ain't What it Used to Be" - Patrick Henry

First, the theological implication of faithfulness. God is out ahead of the church—that is, God is already at work in the world, and one of the church's responsibilities is to discover where God is acting. The Bible is not a blueprint for the world, but a set of clues suggesting where to look, and the clues can go out of date.

The church is as susceptible as is the academy to what F. M. Cornford a century ago called "The Principle of the Dangerous Precedent": "Every public action which is not customary, either is wrong, or, if it is right, is a dangerous precedent. It follows that nothing should ever be done for the first time." The church is not a fortress, from which Christians who have God all figured out take God to the world that doesn't know God. Every theology is of a particular kind: There's not some generic "theology" over against which particular theologies, for example feminist or liberation or narrative, are judged. Theology really is the search for God, not the delivery of God. The Spirit that we are promised will lead us into the truth operates within a historical indeterminacy like that of Gödel's theorem in mathematics—we can find the truth, the future that ain't what it used to be, only by exploration, by trying things out, by taking roads less traveled, by making mistakes individually and together and wisely overlooking things.

The ecclesiological and anthropological implication of faithfulness is grounded in the conviction that the communal body of Christ is real, and even primary for Christian identity. From this it follows that none of us is entirely responsible for the whole faith. The church is a place where my own ups and downs—some days my faith is hot, some days cold, and usually it's somewhere in between warm and cool—are understood to be perfectly natural *and faithful*. Dark nights of the soul are *of the soul*. The church, recognizing that we are all moving targets, has a place for Peter who denied Jesus and became the first pope, for all the disciples who forsook Jesus and fled and then turned the world upside down, for the father who cried to Jesus "I believe, help my unbelief," for those who on the mount of the Ascension, doubted what they were seeing with their own eyes.

There may be people for whom the faith once delivered to them has remained unchanged and unchanging, but I am pretty sure that such strict adherence to the principle of the dangerous precedent is not characteristic of the church we are called to be and to become.

Patrick Henry is the Executive Director of the Institute for Ecumenical and Cultural Research in Collegeville, MN.

church is trusting in the movement of the Spirit, open to where the Spirit wants to take it, then the church will be free, truly free to be as revolutionary and as radical as we here know the Gospel to be. To live this way liber-

ates the church to be as creative and imaginative as the age demands. And there is no one more creative and imaginative than the Holy Spirit who is continually creating and recreating the world and our lives

from within the generative power of God's redeeming love. Then the church will be unshackled – infinitely swift – free to move down whatever road the Spirit wishes to take us!

Ken Kovacs is a pastor at Catonsville Presbyterian Church in Baltimore





Strangers: A Dialogue About the Church

Richard J. Mouw
President, Fuller Theological Seminary

I worry much about what would happen to Presbyterian evangelicals ourselves if we were to leave the PCUSA. ...I would much rather see us continue to focus on the major issues of Reformed thought in an admittedly pluralistic denomination than to

deal with the tensions that often arise among ourselves when evangelicals get into the debates that seem inevitably to arise when we have established our own "pure" denominations.

I believe that it is a good thing for Presbyterians to engage in passionate theological debates about important theological topics. These are exciting times to be discussing together the relevance of the great themes of the Reformation for our present situation. Like other evangelicals, I find it discouraging when prominent folks in our denomination seem bent on denying these important teachings. But at least it is possible to have a good theological argument with people who take seriously their departures from Reformation distinctives. I worry much more about those in our denomination who don't seem to have strong views about these matters. They have not been convinced of the importance of theology as such, to say nothing of a theology grounded in Reformed orthodoxy. In their voting patterns on major issues, sometimes they lean one way and sometimes another way. I would hate to think that they would no longer have to listen to strong Reformed voices when mainline Presbyterians debate crucial topics.

The Church Isn't Jesus - Chris Glaser

The woman's back had been bent for eighteen years. Couldn't she wait just one more day? What difference would it make? If our brief exercise had been prolonged, we would have come to know that even one more minute in that position could have seemed intolerable. But we don't know what the woman felt. She doesn't tell us.

But then, it's not her timing. Jesus is the one to blame, not the woman. Why couldn't he wait one more day? Jesus' response is clear: what difference

does it make if you heal on the sabbath or if you lead your animals to water, as he says in our text, or if you save your child from a well, as he says when he heals a man

with dropsy in the next chapter. What better time to do good, to speak for what's right, to do what's right, than during the sabbath?

Chris Glaser is an author and speaker

Over 600 people - 3 days - 247 volunteers - 35 workshops - 8 dynamic speakers and preachers - 5 spirit-filled worship services...

And we'll do it again in Chicago at Fourth Presbyterian Church on November 4th-6th, 2004.

Mark your calenders now!



Barbara Wheeler
President, Auburn Theological Seminary

On this issue, Richard, we really are strangers, far apart and mystified about each other's outlook and convictions. Shall we stick with each other as we, and the whole church, continue to struggle about these things? You have implied that we should. You've candidly admitted that conservatives often don't speak fairly or respectfully of homosexuals, especially when they are not around. From that I conclude that you think you can make a more faithful case if you are engaged with them and their allies.

I think the reciprocal is true for us. We make a strong case: God invites GLBT persons into full membership, committed partnerships and church leadership on the same basis as everyone else. But we tend to leave it at that, to give the impression that inclusion is the end of the story.

Of course it is not. God incorporates us into Christ's body for a reason: transformation. Evangelical theology and culture place heavy emphasis on that next step. Our side doesn't have to agree with conservatives about what God is seeking to change or redirect or squelch—namely, all same-sex impulses—or about who is first in line for change. (I suspect that God's priority is the privileged and powerful, including in the present instance we self-indulgent heterosexuals who have full church and society support for the promises we make, yet still don't keep very well.)

But we can stand our ground on these points and still let the evangelicals help us balance our word to the church: inclusion and acceptance, but also metanoia and new life. Who knows? If evangelicals listen intently to the testimony of faithful GLBT persons, and if our side accepts evangelicals' prompting to admit our need and desire to be renewed, maybe we can strive together for a church as just and generous—and holy—as God's grace.

Our thanks to Conference Photographers Jim Wall and Sally Davis.

A Message from our Co-Moderators

January 2004

Dear Friends,

With the new year, we are happy to introduce a new format for the Covenant Connection. Its brief stories are intended to give you highlights and to point you to full resources on our redesigned website.

If the look has changed, however, the message has not. The Covenant Network continues to work toward a church as generous and just as God's grace. This means acknowledging that God can call into ordained service whomever God will, including gay and lesbian Presbyterians gifted for church leadership. It also means recognizing that our church needs the insights and witness of a wide, Reformed theological spectrum.

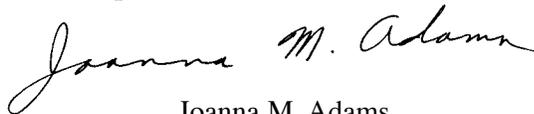
Our recent Covenant Conference, about which you'll read here, illustrated the kind of warmly respectful and collegial dialogue we seek with all our Presbyterian brothers and sisters.

Our church faces major decisions about our life together and our witness to a divided and hurting world. In a recent statement, we reiterated our commitment to help prepare the church for change – in our ordination standards, and in the ways we relate to one another. Please read the entire statement at www.covenantnetwork.org/time4change.htm. As we provide resources for responsible dialogue both locally and nationally, and help sessions struggling to interpret and apply our Constitution, we expect to support overtures at this year's G.A. to clarify that the conflicting and obsolete statements that pre-date the adoption of G-6.0106b no longer carry legal force.

We hope you'll join conversations in your own presbyteries about the kind of church you feel called to serve. Think about what will be needed in your presbytery to prepare the church for change. Please contact our office if we can help.

We have just welcomed with renewed gratitude the Prince of Peace. May we together in this new year help show the peace that only He can give, in our church, our communities, and the world.

Grace and peace,



Joanna M. Adams



Eugene C. Bay



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