



Spring, 2004

The Covenant Connection

A Newsletter of the Covenant Network of Presbyterians
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Covenant Network Is Preparing for General Assembly

The 216th Meeting of PC(USA) General Assembly will convene on Saturday, June 26th, in Richmond, Virginia, and the Covenant Network will be there with educational events and advocacy leadership from gavel to gavel. We especially encourage all commissioners and advocates to begin by joining us for the **Covenant Network Convocation Dinner** on Friday, June 25th, at 5:30 p.m. and then attending the **Witherspoon Society Commissioner Orientation** immediately following at 7:30 p.m. Friends are welcomed at our **Covenant Network Open House** in our hospitality suite at the Crowne Plaza on Sunday, June 27th, from 8 p.m. to 11 p.m. Brian Blount will be our Speaker at one of the most popular General Assembly events, the **Covenant Network Luncheon** on Monday, June 28th, at 12:30 p.m. We extend a special invitation to seminarians, younger pastors, TSADs and YADs to attend a **Reception for Young Adults** on Monday, June 28th, from 8:30 p.m. to 11:30 p.m. in our Crowne Plaza Hospitality Suite. While the tickets for the lunch and dinner can be purchased in Richmond, we recommend buying them early, as these events often sell out. Register online at www.pcusa.org/ga216/registration or call the GA meeting service at 888-728-7228 x2417.

Commissioners, Advisory Delegates, and others who want to learn more about the Covenant Network at G.A. are invited to contact National Organizer Tricia Dykers Koenig by phone at (216) 658-1770 or by email, triciadk@covenantnetwork.org.

Far From Home Introduces People We've Lost

Arriving shortly in church offices and presbytery resource centers is a new booklet that brings forward the names and faces of those who have been pushed out of the Presbyterian Church (USA) by our current ordination standards. The Covenant Network is pleased to make *Far from Home: Tales of Presbyterian Exiles* available to Presbyterian congregations, groups and leaders as an aid to discussion of ordination standards and our common life. Please look for your copy to arrive at your church and plan how to use it with others in your deliberations. Additional copies can be ordered for \$1/copy from the Covenant Network office.

Covenant Network Adds Resources for Advocacy

Two important videos featuring Jack Rogers, Professor of Theology Emeritus at San Francisco Theological Seminary and former Moderator of the PC(USA), are now available for congregations to expand their understanding of what it means to be Presbyterian and Reformed. *What Makes Us Distinctive as Presbyterians* discusses the roles of the Bible, the Confessions, and the Book of Order and serves well for church officer training. *How I Changed My Mind about Homosexuality* is a recording of Dr. Roger's compelling presentation given at a recent Conference. Each video is available for \$10 + \$2 shipping from the Covenant Network Office.

In addition to the videos, the Covenant Network is constantly identifying videos, booklets, and expanded web pages of use to congregations and presbyteries. More information on the items listed above and more can be found at www.covenantnetwork.org/resourcetop.

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*

Covenant Network Producing Documentary

Working with an award-winning documentary team, the Covenant Network has begun production on a video designed to support dialogue across the church on the issue of full inclusion of gay and lesbian Presbyterians.

The documentary chronicles how individuals and their congregations struggle with our church's exclusionary policies based on sexual orientation.

The hour-long video will have four segments that can be shown and then discussed in adult education classes and study groups. A leader's guide will be made available.

"It is real people, real stories and the power of the Gospel that change people's minds," the Rev. Mark Smutny, Covenant Network Director and Communications chair said. "This documentary will combine those stories with biblical, theological and pastoral insights from some of our best and most respected theologians."

The video will be available by early summer. We hope to make the video widely available. We are inviting special contributions for this purpose. Please contact our office.

Jesus Interprets the Scriptures

(excerpt)

Rev. L. William Countryman

Mark 10:2-9

Jesus, in this morning's Gospel, is caught up in a religious conflict about sexuality with some people who quote Scripture at him. Does this sound familiar?

What Jesus is really doing in this story is turning the whole use of Scripture on its head. The Scriptures, he says, are not a book of statute law to protect the powerful.

They are a book of astonishing insights into God's extraordinary generosity. The purpose of God all through Scripture is the well-being of God's beloved human

creatures. If you find things in the Scriptures that seem to speak otherwise, consider who benefits from that. Whose hardness of heart caused that blemish in the sacred text? Whose hardness of heart is maintaining that interpretation even now?...

Hardness of heart is something that just keeps on cropping up... It wasn't unique to the Pharisees in Jesus' audience... It's

the property of the whole human race. You can't escape it just by being religious; but you can't escape it by ceasing to be religious, either. And if you quit reading the Scriptures, you not only lose the passages that cater to your particular kind of hard-heartedness; you also lose the ones that might wake you up and suddenly let you see how really big and

continued next page

Theological Task Force on Peace, Unity and Purity

Offers Three Affirmations

The Theological Task Force on Peace, Unity and Purity of the Church was established by the 213th G.A. in 2001 and intentionally represents the full theological breadth of the church. It is charged with helping the church consider "matters that unite and divide us," including "Christology, biblical authority and interpretation, ordination standards, and power." The Task Force will present its final report to the 217th G.A. in 2006, but has recently published a Preliminary Report on its work to date. This report also challenges and encourages the church with three affirmations. We are pleased to reprint the following excerpt and invite Presbyterians to read the entire report at <http://www.pcusa.org/peaceunitypurity>

The Presbyterian Church (USA) today longs for the spiritual blessings named in the task force's title. In the midst of strife and conflict, the church longs for peace; afflicted by quarreling and division, it longs for unity; weighed down by sin and confusion over the nature of the Gospel, it longs for purity in word and deed.

Through study, prayer, and reflection, a conviction has grown among members of the task force that these longings for peace, unity, and purity, far from being reasons for frustration or despair, can actually be seen as Spirit-filled testimony to God's promise of redemption. "We ... who have the first fruits of the Spirit," Paul tells us, "groan inwardly while we wait for adoption, the redemption of our bodies" (Rom 8:23-24). These longings, painful though they may sometimes be, are also accompanied by profound good news. They give evidence that the peace, unity, and purity we desire so fervently are already at work within us. They have already been given to us in Jesus Christ, and the task before the church is to live into the fullness of that gift. ...

A growing conviction has permeated our deliberations, namely, that our job—and the church's—is to appropriate what has already been done for us by Jesus Christ. The only way forward, as the reformers long ago insisted, is the way that leads through grace.

Although it is premature at this stage of the task force's work to present a comprehensive vision about how the peace, unity, and purity of the church might take form in our day, the task force does feel led to make three preliminary affirmations that we believe must guide our work over the next two years—affirmations rooted in our convictions about the church's perennial need for grace. These three affirmations are a prologue to the hard work ahead of us. **We members of the task force make these affirmations together, and we urge the whole church to make them with us.**

- 1. Jesus Christ Himself Is the Church's Peace**
- 2. Jesus Christ Himself Is the Church's Unity**
- 3. Jesus Christ Himself Is the Church's Purity**

Each of these three affirmations is developed at length in the report.

(Countryman)

generous God's love is.

The people in our own world who like to wield the Bible as a weapon—they like to claim that they're just reading it all literally. They're not. They pick and choose what they will take seriously, just as Jesus did in this morning's Gospel story. They just prefer not to notice what they're doing. The big difference is that Jesus knew what he was doing and said it straight out.

Jesus wasn't a biblical conservative. But he wasn't a biblical liberal, either. He expected something important from the Scriptures; he expected to be challenged and surprised by God. And he also expected that when you are challenged and surprised by God, some of the details enshrined in the sacred text will be revealed for what they are, as concessions to hardness of heart—and they will have to go.

But how do you decide which ones to discard? That's still the scary question for us, isn't it? Well, you know, this passage does one more thing for us. It actually gives us a principle for making those decisions. I'm going to conclude with that because I hope you will take it away with you.

When Scripture seems to confirm your own hardness of heart, it's wrong. Ditch it, just the way Jesus did. Conversely, when Scripture breaks your world open and makes it bigger and more loving, it is achieving its true goal.

Hang onto that principle. It may not be the whole story, but it's a great place to begin and it will take you a long way. Hardness of heart is a dead giveaway that we've got it wrong. Only generous love can open the door to God's truth.

The Rev. L. William Countryman, is Sherman E. Johnson Professor in Biblical Studies at the Church Divinity School of the Pacific. The whole sermon can be found on our website at covenantnetwork.org/sermons&papers/countryman

Honoring the Sexual Body - Stephanie Paulsell

If you read the newspapers, you know that the most fiercely fought debates over sexuality in churches these days have to do less with questions of pre-marital sex and more to do with homosexuality and whether churches ought to bless the union of homosexual partners. In recent years we've seen church trials of pastors who have blessed such relationships and the disfellowshipping of churches that have welcomed gay and lesbian Christians into their congregations. To say that the church is struggling with this issue is an understatement. At times we seem to be devouring ourselves over it.

Can the Christian practice of honoring the body help us here? It is, after all, a practice, not a set of doctrines. But can we live as if all bodies are good and then say that some bodies are worthy of condemnation? Can we cherish the discipline of fidelity and then say that it is wrong for some people to live within the bonds of faithful love? Can we insist on the unity of body and spirit and then ask some people to deny their sexuality, to divide an integral part of their identity from their very selves?

The covenant of marriage is one of the finest gifts Christian faith has to offer to those who wish to care for one another, make families with one another, and live in sexual intimacy with one another. Marriage can be an important dimension of the practice of honoring the body, and the practice of honoring the body is indispensable to the flourishing of a marriage. What is crucial is not whether the partners are heterosexual or homosexual. What is crucial is whether there is trust and fidelity, whether vulnerability is shared, and whether a new family formed by covenant is an agent of blessing in the world.

Making a lifetime covenant, speaking a promise one intends to keep in good times and in bad, is a risk for anybody, straight or gay... The daily pressures and responsibilities of life lived in covenant will on occasion threaten to overwhelm. Can the marriage remain a harbor, even in times of stress?...

One of the most famous wedding stories of all is the story of Jesus' first miracle at the wedding at Cana (John 2:1-10), the story in which the host runs out of wine at the wedding feast and Jesus' mother urges her reluctant son to keep the party going... The author of the Gospel of John tells us nothing about the bride and groom - they are left unnamed and undescribed. But even though they are ignorant of the miracle taking place, it is the ordinary miracle of their pledging themselves to one another until death parts them that opens a space for all the other miracles of the day. For it is precisely when two people are led by love to make such radical commitments that the boundaries between earth and heaven, between water and wine, seem so transgressable...

When we mark those commitments by sexual intimacy and sexual fidelity, when we devote ourselves to learning to meet the desires of our beloved, and when we teach our beloved to answer our body's longing, we taste one of the sweetest gifts God has bestowed.

Excerpted with permission from Honoring the Body, Meditations on a Christian Practice (New York: Jossey-Bass, 2002). Dr. Paulsell is one of several speakers at the 2004 Covenant Conference in Chicago.

MADE IN THE IMAGE OF GOD: THINKING THEOLOGICALLY ABOUT SEX

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Luke Timothy Johnson,
R.W. Woodruff Professor of New
Testament and Christian Origins,
Candler School of Theology

Stephanie Paulsell,
Associate Dean for Ministerial Studies and
Senior Lecturer on Ministry, Harvard
Divinity School

*For more information, please visit
www.covenantnetwork.org/events. Full
conference information and registration
will be available in June*



A Message from our Co-Moderators

May 2004

Dear friends,

In recent months we have seen many encouraging signs of change emerging in American society and from within the faith communities of our land. Our sister denomination, the Episcopal Church, ordained as bishop V. Gene Robinson, a person of exceptional Christian character, commitment, and ability who is openly gay. This spring, thousands of same-sex couples lined up in San Francisco to make public vows of faithfulness.

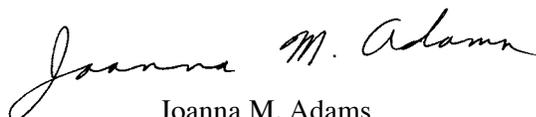
At the same time, the forces that work against full inclusion and fair treatment have not left the field. Backlash against these events has been strong. The need for people of faith to stand up and be counted on the side of human dignity and justice for all has never been greater.

Our particular focus in the Covenant Network is how our own beloved church welcomes and honors all whom God calls to community and service. Too often, our church falls sadly short. Some of the cost of our policies is visible in a new booklet being mailed this month to church offices and presbytery resource centers. *Far from Home* profiles some of the many Presbyterian ministers, elders, and deacons who have been lost to the Presbyterian Church because of our categorical exclusion of gay and lesbian people from ordained office. Watch for this important piece! We hope that you, your session, your congregation will find these stories eye-opening and thought-provoking.

You will want to mark your calendars now for the 2004 Covenant Conference, November 4 - 6 at Chicago's historic Fourth Presbyterian Church. "Made in the Image of God: Thinking Theologically about Sex" will bring together important theologians and ethicists with pastors, preachers, and hundreds of you, to consider the ethical standards that should guide not only our officers but all of us as responsible Christians. The worship, fellowship, and educational content of this gathering will be sources of rich nourishment for mind and spirit.

We consider it the greatest of privileges to share the work of justice with you, our friends and colleagues across the country. During this Eastertide, we join you in living into the hope and joy of the Resurrection.

Grace and Peace to you,


Joanna M. Adams


Eugene C. Bay



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