



Summer, 2006

# *The Covenant Connection*

A Newsletter of the Covenant Network of Presbyterians (Vol 9, #2)

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## A Time for Hope in the Church A Statement by the Board of Directors of the Covenant Network of Presbyterians

In August 2005, the Theological Task Force on Peace, Unity, and Purity of the Church released its final report. At that time, the Executive Committee of the Covenant Network of Presbyterians issued a statement committing ourselves to study the report. We have done that. We have also listened to the responses of other Presbyterians, including those with whom we disagree on matters before the Presbyterian Church (USA). We have prayed about the report with sisters and brothers in Christ, together seeking the will of our Lord.

Here are some things we have learned:

- The process of discernment in presbyteries over the last eight months has shown that the great middle of the church views this report as a source of hope.
- There is widespread gratitude and approval for the theological reflection with which the report begins.
- Good and faithful Presbyterians continue to disagree on ordination standards. We are disappointed that the Task Force has not found a means of immediately recognizing that gay and lesbian Presbyterians are called to the ordained offices of the PC (USA).
- The Task Force has reminded us what it means to be Presbyterian, with national standards applied by local governing bodies. In so doing, it has lifted up for the church traditions and practices that have been affirmed by Presbyterians countless times in addressing ordination standards, especially in periods like the present, when there is deep disagreement about significant issues.
- The Task Force recommendations have not satisfied everyone. Some are unhappy with deficiencies in our standards; others are unhappy with deficiencies in their enforcement. It appears to us that the Task Force has invited the 217th General Assembly to adopt an orthodox view of both our standards and their enforcement.
- Prompted by the unanimity of the Task Force report, there is a new spirit of mutual forbearance among many Presbyterians.
- A number of influential leaders, including almost all living former General Assembly Moderators, and all of the Presidents of our Presbyterian seminaries, have endorsed the full Task Force report.
- We are among the many who find compelling the Task Force's plea that we show the world how the gospel of Jesus Christ enables us to live with and love those with whom we deeply disagree.

In light of all we have learned in the past months, the Covenant Network's Board of Directors believes that the church stands at a remarkable moment of hope that will not come again soon. As our contribution at this critical juncture in the life of our church:

- We hold fast to our conviction that God is calling faithful gay and lesbian Presbyterians to full inclusion in the life and leadership of the church, and the deletion of G-6.0106b remains our goal. But we acknowledge that the Covenant Network has contributed to a partisan spirit in the denomination by our tendency to draw apart from those who differ with us. We repent of anything we have done to undermine respect, understanding, and love among those who disagree about important matters before the church.
- We are foregoing our usual practice of suggesting to commissioners, in advance of the General Assembly, how they might act on various items of business. We trust that the voice of the Holy Spirit may be heard more clearly if the voices of partisan advocacy are still. We believe that it is time to step back and allow commissioners to pray, to listen, and to discern for themselves what will best lead to a church that is as generous and just as God's grace. More than ever before, with the example of a unanimous Task Force before us, we are confident that commissioners will find and follow the will of God.
- We have encouraged presbyteries to send overtures seeking the deletion of G-6.0106b and related clarification of our ordination standards. As commissioners engage in the ongoing process of discernment, we will continue to support these overtures, trusting that the Spirit will lead the commissioners to a faithful response to the Task Force report and the related overtures they will consider.

We invite our fellow Presbyterians, especially those in issue-oriented groups like ours, to join in a spirit of expectation, prayer, and receptiveness to what God will do through this 217th General Assembly. We trust that God will do more, through Christ Jesus, than we have yet asked or even imagine possible. This is a time for hope in the church!

## The Covenant Network at General Assembly

Coming to the General Assembly in June? Covenant Network will host a dinner, a lunch, and three receptions during the course of the 217th General Assembly. We hope to see you at any or all of them. *All events will be at the Sheraton Hotel unless otherwise noted.*

**Moderators' Commissioners Reception**, Wednesday, June 14, 5 p.m.  
**Covenant Network Commissioners' Convocation Dinner**, Wednesday  
June 14, 6 p.m. featuring **Susan Andrews**, Moderator of the 215th  
General Assembly.

**Covenant Network Luncheon**, Friday, June  
16, 12:30 p.m. featuring McCormick  
Seminary President **Cynthia Campbell**.

**Covenant Network Open House**, Friday,  
June 16, 8:30 p.m.

**Covenant Network Young Adults Open House**, Sunday, June 18,  
8:30 p.m. - for friends under 40 (or so!).

Covenant Network Board Members will be leading **morning prayers** during  
the time the General Assembly meets as a whole. We will gather at  
8:15 am in the Medical Forum where we will be led by:

Monday 6/19 - **J. Barrie Shepherd**, poet and pastor emeritus, First  
Presbyterian Church in the City of New York

Tuesday 6/20 - **Laird Stuart**, pastor of Calvary Presbyterian Church,  
San Francisco

Wednesday 6/21 - **Joanna M. Adams**, pastor of  
Morningside Presbyterian Church, Atlanta

Plus, Covenant Network will be showing the video, *Turning  
Points: Stories of Life and Change in the Church* at the  
Medical Forum on Saturday, June 17, 11:00 a.m. and 2:30  
p.m. and Sunday, June 18, 2:30 p.m. and 4:00 p.m.

As always, **please stop by our booth (#800)** in the exhibition  
hall to collect your temporary Celtic cross tattoo, view  
the latest publications and visit with Covenant Network  
Staff and Board members.



Ghost Ranch Photo:  
Rev. Todd Freeman, Dallas

## Follow the News from General Assembly Online

The Covenant Network will be posting stories and photos from  
General Assembly as the week progresses at [www.covenantnetwork.org](http://www.covenantnetwork.org).  
On-line readers may also view news at the PC(USA) web site,  
[www.pcusa.org/ga217/news.htm](http://www.pcusa.org/ga217/news.htm) and access the news from a variety of  
progressive advocacy organizations at [www.justpresbys.org](http://www.justpresbys.org).

## Save the Date for the 2006 Covenant Conference, "Called to Serve"

The 2006 Covenant Conference will be held November 9th to the 11th in Columbus Ohio at the Broad Street Presbyterian Church. Celebrating 50 years of women's ordination as Ministers of the Word and Sacrament, 75 years as elders, and 100 years as deacons, the conference will be exploring ordination and vocation through the theme, "Called to Serve." **Deborah Mullen**, Dean of Master's Programs at McCormick Seminary and Director for the Center of African American Ministry Studies, will keynote. **Dale Morgan** of St. Andrews Presbyterian Church in Santa Barbara will perform a dramatic presentation, *Didn't Our Hearts Burn Within Us?*, which looks at three biblical women as models for the three offices of ordination. **Deborah Block**, pastor, Immanuel Presbyterian Church, Milwaukee, will be in dialogue with **Margaret Towner**, the first woman minister ordained in the Presbyterian church. Look for more information, including the registration brochure, to arrive this summer both in your mail and online at [www.covenantnetwork.org](http://www.covenantnetwork.org).

## "A Church for Our Time" at Ghost Ranch

July 31 – August 6, 2006

How do we create "A Church for Our Time"?

Our Reformed tradition gives us a deep and rich grounding. But engaging the world today, with its multiple pulls and distractions, poses new challenges. When church-going is downright eccentric in many places, how can we reconceive "church" to reach and serve people who normally frame their Sunday mornings around brunch and the Sunday paper? And, how can we strengthen our congregations to provide nurture and growth for the members who come?

Join Presbyterians from around the country to think together about how our theological heritage and rich worship tradition inform our discipleship today.

The week's schedule include five morning seminars, afternoons free to hike, explore, or just enjoy the Ranch's beauty, and nightly worship with great preaching and music. Leadership includes **Dan Anderson-Little**, Pastor, Trinity Church, University City, MO; **David Lewicki**, Associate Minister for Young Adults, Marble Collegiate Church, New York;

**Cynthia Campbell**, President, McCormick Theological Seminary; and **Fred Holper**, Professor of Preaching and Worship, McCormick Seminary.

For more information, and to register, please visit [www.ghost ranch.org/seminars/santafe.php](http://www.ghost ranch.org/seminars/santafe.php) (scroll down to item #16) or contact the Ghost Ranch at 1-877-804-4678.



Since the Bible seems only to condemn same-sex relations, how can some Christians argue that the church should affirm same-sex marriage or the ordination of openly gay and lesbian Christians? Where is there any support for this approach in the Bible?

Jeffrey S. Siker  
Professor of New Testament  
Loyola Marymount University

*Jeffrey S. Siker is Professor and Chair of the Department of Theological Studies at Loyola Marymount University, Los Angeles, CA. He has served churches in Michigan and in New Jersey, and has been Parish Associate at Covenant Presbyterian Church in Los Angeles for the last 18 years. He has also served on and chaired the Committee on Preparation for Ministry in the Presbytery of the Pacific.*

*From the book*

### **Frequently Asked Questions About Sexuality, the Bible, and the Church: Plain Talk about Tough Issues**

A collection of essays considering the appropriate participation of gay and lesbian Presbyterians in church life and leadership.

This is a crucial question that calls for a constructive response. A *constructive* response is one that helps to build and to edify the church as the body of Christ (see, e.g., 1 Cor 12-14). A *constructive* response also means that as faithful Christians we are seeking precisely to *construct* an answer that addresses competing claims that we feel must be included in any response. What does it mean for us to discern God's Spirit as we seek to construct a faithful response to the question of the status of lesbian and gay Christians in our midst?

We are not the first ones to ask comparable questions about a constructive response that seeks to discern God's Spirit in addressing controversial and divisive issues. The history of the church is full of such struggles, whether we look to the Apostle Paul, the split between Eastern Orthodoxy and the Roman Catholic tradition, the fights between the Protestants and Catholics, or the debates in the United States over slavery and the status of women in the church. In all of these debates both sides appealed to the witness of Scripture, church tradition, reason, and experience in light of God's Spirit to argue positions that were exactly the opposite of one another. As we address the current crisis regarding the recognition of openly gay and lesbian clergy and same-sex relationships, we must do so in light of the church's long history of heated debates over discerning the leading of God's Spirit. It is our challenge, our responsibility, and our opportunity to be engaged in such discernment where, to be sure, we

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do our best to see through a glass darkly as we work out our salvation in fear and trembling.

To the question at hand, then. Since the Bible seems to condemn same-sex relations, how can some Christians on the basis of Scripture argue that the church should endorse same-sex relations of any kind, whether by celebrating gay marriage or by ordaining openly gay clergy?

There are basically two responses to this question, both grounded in Scripture. First, we must be clear about what Scripture condemns and why. We must be aware that the notion of “homosexual orientation” is a modern notion (as is sexual orientation in general), and that the term “homosexual” is never found in Scripture – even though some translations anachronistically and misleadingly render the

original Hebrew and Greek words from Scripture as

“homosexual.” Such translations read our modern

understandings back into Scripture and fail to understand

Scripture on its own terms. For example, in Paul’s letters, the passing references that condemn same-sex relations (Rom 1; 1

Cor 6) are addressed to the context of Paul’s day, where same-sex

relations were typically and understandably seen as exploitive, especially given that pederasty and slave-prostitution were the primary forms of same-sex relations with which Paul would have been familiar.

To condemn all modern-day homosexual relationships on the basis of the exploitive same-sex relations of Paul’s day would be the same as condemning all modern-day heterosexual relationships on the basis of David’s adulterous relationship with Bathsheba. Just as there is no blanket condemnation of all heterosexual relations because of some inappropriate heterosexual actions (rape, incest, adultery), so also we may ask if it is correct to issue a blanket condemnation of all same-sex relations because those referred to in Scripture were exploitive and thus inappropriate relations (e.g., rape & pederasty).

Further, in Paul’s time such homoerotic expressions were viewed as being against nature (cf. Rom 1). But what counts as natural or unnatural varies from age to age and culture to culture. (Consider Paul’s comments on hair length in 1 Cor 11.) In our present age we have come to understand that individuals are born with a sexual orientation of which they become aware as they mature. Sexual orientation is as natural and unchosen as left-handedness or brown eyes. It is simply part of the rich diversity of God’s creation.

First, we must be clear about what Scripture condemns and why.

Thus, first and foremost it is important to understand Scripture on its own terms, with its own cultural assumptions and perspectives – some of which views we regard as inapplicable in our time. Perhaps the best example of this is the Presbyterian Church’s stance on the role of women in church leadership. Scripture is quite explicit in its rejection of women for such leadership positions (1 Cor 14; 1 Tim 2), and yet the modern church argues (correctly) that the Spirit of God has led us to recognize that women have been gifted by God just as men, and therefore are appropriate candidates for positions of ordination and church leadership. This current position stands in significant tension with many biblical evaluations of women as being subordinate to men and of less value than men. And yet we are confident as a church that we are being faithful to the call of God’s Spirit, even though the inclusion of women in leadership roles caused tremendous conflict in the church.

Perhaps the best example of this is the Presbyterian Church’s stance on the role of women in church leadership.

This observation leads to the second biblical response to the question posed above. It is one thing to say that the Bible’s passing references to practices significantly different from modern practices do not amount to an outright ban. But does Scripture provide any reasons to affirm same-sex relations or ordination of openly gay/lesbian Christians? I think it is important to state clearly that Scripture offers no direct evidence for such a case. But this is not the end of the story, as Scripture does not offer direct evidence for any number of concerns crucial to Christian faith and practice (e.g., various issues of modern bioethics).

Scripture did not provide Paul with all he needed to know, nor did he always have a “word from the Lord” regarding important new situations. But Paul did think he was able to discern the Spirit. For example, Paul appeals to the Galatians to reflect on their own communal experience of God’s Spirit (Gal 3:1-5) as the most important guide regarding whether or not they should observe the Jewish ritual law. Paul broke with established custom and even, arguably, with the teachings of Jesus in this regard (cf. Matthew 5:18-19). But Paul felt himself led by the Spirit and believed that the experiences of Gentile Christians confirmed their reception of the Spirit apart from the law.

The author of the Acts of the Apostles made the same kind of argument in his narrative of God’s inclusion of the Gentile Cornelius in Acts 10. Cornelius did not have to become a law-observant Jew in order to have proper faith in Christ. This went completely against early Christian tradition, as the controversy of Acts 10-11, 15, and Galatians 2 richly attests. God startled Peter with the rooftop vision and the firm

declaration, "What God has made clean, you must not call profane" (Acts 10: 15). God was doing what appeared to be a new thing. Paul and Peter were calling on the church to acknowledge what God was doing, even though it scandalized the church and seemed to go against scripture and tradition.

In short, then, while Scripture does not provide direct testimony of God's blessing of same-sex relationships or of gay clergy, Scripture does provide clear and direct testimony of God's call to pay attention to the inclusion of the faithful whom the church has often failed to see as welcomed by God. Peter paid attention to Cornelius' faithful response to God's Spirit, even though he was a Gentile. Paul paid attention to the Galatians' faithful response to the Spirit, and made a point that their experience was to guide them in matters of faith and practice even against the testimony of time-honored interpretations of Scripture and tradition.

Scripture calls upon us in the church today to pay attention to the testimony of God's Spirit as we have experienced the profound faith of gay and lesbian Christians in our midst. As Peter told the Jerusalem assembly, "If God gave [Cornelius's household] the same gift that he gave us when we believed in the Lord Jesus Christ, who was I that I could hinder God?" (Acts 11: 17). Surely we must see them first of all as brothers and sisters in Christ who are baptized in the same Spirit that all Christians share, brothers and sisters who do not cease to be gay or lesbian by virtue of their Christian faith.

So does the Bible provide positive evidence for the inclusion of gay and lesbian Christians in the church? Does the Bible give Christians reason to affirm same-sex relationships and the ordination of gay/lesbian Christians? In my view the answer is a resounding YES. We need to listen to the voices of our sisters and brothers in Christ whose sexual orientation in no way hampers their ability to form loving and committed relationships, just as it in no way hampers their capacity to serve God and the church in ordained ministry. To this Scripture, tradition, reason, and especially Christian experience bears witness as we seek to discern and to embody God's loving and healing Spirit in a broken world. Let us welcome all to the community of faith and the community of ministry in this Spirit.



The Rev. J. Herbert Nelson preaching at the conference

## Daring to Hope: Preparing for the Church of Tomorrow

by Kirsten Kingdon, Elder,  
New York Avenue Presbyterian Church,  
Washington D.C., and Board Member

Reformed and always reforming. How to balance our loyalty to tradition with the need for fresh interpretations in an ever-changing world emerged as a theme during Covenant Network's second southeastern regional conference held May 12th and 13th at

Westminster Presbyterian Church in Charlottesville, Virginia.

The keynote speaker, the Rev. Jack Rogers, moderator of the 213th General Assembly of the PC(USA), demonstrated this balance superbly. He went through a change in heart and mind as he applied the tools he used as a theologian and historian of doctrine to a new context of gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender people and their appropriate role in the church of today. His presentation, rich with examples from his experience, scholarly expertise and intensive study of church history and the Bible, drew on his recently published book,

*Jesus, the Bible and Homosexuality*. One of his thought-provoking comments was that Jesus never went on a moral crusade against those marginalized in their society, but befriended them. It is no wonder that his book is in its third printing!



Members of the Common Ground Fellowship Group share from their time meeting together.

The conference began with an overview and update on the reception of the report of the Theological Task Force on Peace, Unity and Purity of the Church by Frances Taylor Gench, Professor of New Testament at Union Seminary - PSCE, and member of the Task Force. Following her concise, comprehensive presentation, small groups discussed what excites and encourages them about the report and the questions and concerns they have about it, as well as the May 9 Covenant Network statement, *A Time for Hope in the Church*. Frances and a group of Covenant Network leaders fielded questions and comments.

The conferees appreciated the format of a mix of plenary presentations, small groups addressing specific questions, followed by a chance for questions and answers in the whole group. This format worked particularly well in the more intimate setting of a regional conference.

The worship services were comforting, strengthening, meaningful, powerful and provocative. The Rev. J. Herbert Nelson preached about blind Bartimeus, and brought his life as a marginalized person vividly to life, as he did the modern parallels to that story, in his sermon, "Who Is Really Blind?" to bring the conference to a fitting conclusion.



Photos by Terry Alexander

## Carol Davis Joins Covenant Network Staff as Director of Development



Carol L. Davis is passionate about stewardship and believes that everything we have is a gift from God. Being faithful stewards and giving generously nurtures our spiritual lives, she says.

Carol brings a wealth of experience in the church to support the work of the Covenant Network of Presbyterians. She worked for five years in the San Francisco Theological Seminary Development Office, working on the Annual Fund, major gifts, and the capital campaign before serving two years as Development Director.

For the past ten years, Carol has assisted clients in establishing financial goals and meeting those goals through prudent financial planning.

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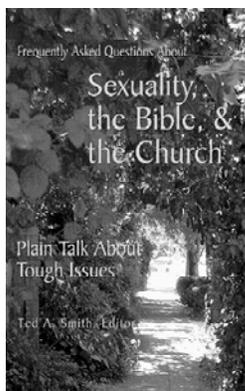
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## Toward a Church as Generous and Just as God's Grace



### New Booklet of Answers to Questions on Sexuality and Scripture is Now Available from Covenant Network of Presbyterians

*Frequently asked Questions about Sexuality, the Bible, and the Church*, is “an offering to the Church in a season of discernment,” writes editor Ted A. Smith in the first of twenty-six essays written by scholars from nineteen seminaries and colleges. The essays take on the tough questions congregations and clergy

across the country are asking as they seek discernment on ordination, sexual orientation, and what it means to be called by God.

“This booklet grows out of a realization that many of our debates about sexuality and ordination have grown thin, stale and mean,” Smith, a professor at Vanderbilt Divinity School, writes. “We need questions that help us find better ways of listening together for the Word of God. We need answers that lead us not just on to victory for one side or another, but back more deeply into the heart of the Gospel. And we need to find ways of praying, thinking, writing, talking, and listening together that are themselves a sign of the Gospel.”

Each essay is short and accessible. The questions asked range from “What do the Gospels say about sex and sexuality?” to “Is there room in the PC(USA) for those of differing orientations?” and “What does Christian baptism have

to do with the current controversy in the church about sexuality and ordination?” The answers come from academics such as Thomas G. Long, Chandler School of Theology; Su Yon Pak, Union Theological Seminary; Patrick D. Miller (emeritus) and Beverly Roberts Gaventa of Princeton Theological Seminary, and Gayraud S. Wilmore, Interdenominational Theological Center, just to name a few.

“Written from many perspectives, these brief and thought-provoking essays are excellent study materials for adult or youth classes, sessions, mission or evangelism committees,” writes Freda Gardner, moderator of the 211th General Assembly. “This book is a gift for those who will receive it.”

The entire collection is available for sale through the Covenant Network at \$5 per copy plus \$1 shipping, or \$3 per copy for orders of ten or more.

The Covenant Network is making individual essays available for reprinting and distribution to sessions, adult classes, and other interested individuals and groups through its website at [www.covenantnetwork.org/faqsbc06.htm](http://www.covenantnetwork.org/faqsbc06.htm). Enclosed in this newsletter is one essay, already formatted for copying and distribution.

To obtain copies of the book, please order through the Covenant Network e-store for individual copies; or contact the office for orders of ten copies or more.