



Winter, 2006

The Covenant Connection

A Newsletter of the Covenant Network of Presbyterians (Vol 9, #4)

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New Resource for Candidates, Sessions and Presbyteries

The Covenant Network is pleased to offer candidates, sessions, CPMs and COMs a new booklet, *Guidelines for Examination of Church Officers*. Filled with clear examples, it helps readers think about discerning fitness for office, determining “essentials,” and applying the 217th G.A.’s new Authoritative Interpretation in particular ordination decisions. A chapter is excerpted on page 3 of this newsletter.

Covenant Connection Shifts to Subscriptions Only

Starting in 2007, Covenant Network will send this newsletter, *Covenant Connection*, to subscription readers only. Subscriptions remain free and available to all; but it will no longer be sent automatically to all Presbyterian clergy. (Covenant Network supporters will of course continue to receive it.) Readers who wish to continue receiving the newsletter should check their mailing address on the back; addresses that are set in all capital letters are drawn from the denomination’s clergy list. Those addressees who wish to continue receiving the *Covenant Connection* should contact the office (address and phone above) or by email (rosemaryb@covenantnetwork.org). Interested readers may also subscribe on-line at www.covenantnetwork.org/conscribe.htm.

FAQ Book Now Available Through Amazon

The Covenant Network book, *Frequently Asked Questions about Sexuality, the Bible, and the Church*, is now available through both the Covenant Network e-store and Amazon.com. “We are excited we can make this book available to more people through Amazon’s popular website,” Pam Byers, Executive Director, said. “We think we have an important message and we’re looking for ways to make sure people get a chance to hear that message.” Placing *FAQ* on Amazon is part of a larger Covenant Network strategy to use powerful media in order to communicate. This summer, the Covenant Network video, *Turning Points: Stories of Life and Change in the Church*, was broadcast on more than 70 public television affiliates.

2007 Covenant Conferences Explore Covenant, “A Church for Our Time”

The **2007 Covenant Conference** will take place November 1-3rd, 2007 at Trinity Presbyterian Church in Atlanta, Georgia. “God Is Faithful Still” will focus on Covenant – God’s covenant with God’s people, and the covenants that hold together both families and the church.

Covenant Network also invites Presbyterians to consider how best to build vibrant congregations at the popular “**A Church for Our Time**” conference, August 6 - 10, 2007 at the Montreat Conference Center.

Jon Walton, Pastor of the First Presbyterian Church in the City of New York, **Agnes Winston Norfleet**, Pastor of Shandon Presbyterian Church, Columbia, SC, **Margaret Aymer**, Assistant Professor of New Testament, Interdenominational Theological Center, Atlanta and **Rebecca “Toddie” Peters**, Assistant Professor of Religious Studies, Elon University, Elon, NC, respectively, will lead seminars on Worship for Our Time, Mission for Our Time, the Bible for Our Time, and Ethics for Our Time. For more information, contact the Montreat Conference Center at 800-572-2257 or visit the website at www.montreat.org.

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.

2006 Covenant Conference Rich in Holy Moments

Anitra Kitts,
Director of
Communications,
Covenant Network

It is difficult to pick the best moment, the richest, most holy moment – the one where one knows that God is still at work and still in love with this world – it's hard to pick just one from the 2006 Covenant Conference at Broad Street Presbyterian Church in Columbus, Ohio in November.



Perhaps it was when the Columbus Gay Men's Chorus began to sing on Saturday morning. A few years ago, Broad Street was the first church in Columbus to welcome the chorus into a sanctuary, a gesture remembered still by many chorus members who continue to experience only hatred and fear from too many Christian congregations. The men arrived by ones and twos, all dressed impeccably in tuxedos, with purple bow ties. Some were coming directly from night jobs, others were still infusing their first cup of coffee. Yet, when they stood as one and blended voice together in worship and praise, a sound of great beauty and witness rose up transforming not only those who sang but also those who listened.

Perhaps the most holy moment was during J. Herbert Nelson's or Lisa Larges's intelligent, compassionate, passionate, funny and undeniably truth-telling calls to justice preached from the pulpit during worship on Thursday night and Friday morning. Crying out "amen," and "preach it," conference attendees heard how the scripture challenges power systems that dominate and exploit, and affirms that God keeps showing up in the unexpected places.

Or perhaps that supreme intersection was located on Friday night, during *Love Divine, All Loves Excelling*, where the choir lifted up four part harmony, the organist was yanking out every stop he could reach, and the three brass players were proclaiming the glory of God. Tears began to fall in the face of such beauty and grandeur.

Or was it when Margaret Towner, the first woman ordained in what is now the PC(USA), stood at the front of the sanctuary, robed, the crumbs of the sanctified loaf

still on her hands, and delivered to us the blessing that sent us back out into the darkness?

Others might want to argue that it came in the stories Margaret told while being interviewed by Covenant Network Co-Moderator Deborah Block earlier that day.

Ordained, but still held away from the pulpit and the sacraments, Margaret was sent to the overflow room in her first church, where she pantomimed the breaking of the bread and the pouring of the cup for much of her early years in ministry.



Certainly there are clear candidates in Dale Morgan's eloquent dramatic presentation on women models for ministry in the gospels, Sheila Gustafson's autobiographical sermon connecting two congregations in ministry, Deborah Mullen's further

explorations into call and justice, and the conversation between Doug Nave and Cynthia McCall Campbell on the process of examination and ordination to church office in light of the 271th General Assembly action last June. Or perhaps it was hearing Jack Rogers tell the stories he heard during his recent book tour promoting *Jesus, the Bible, and Homosexuality*.

Perhaps, like so much of how God works in this world, the holiest moment was experienced only by two or three in a conversation, over food or in a hallway, the moment where the true self was seen and named as beloved by God.

As always, we have text and recordings of the presentations. Texts are posted on our web site and will be excerpted here and in newsletters to come. Audio records in both cassette and cd form are available through the Covenant Network on-line e-store at www.covenantnetwork.org/store.htm.



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The Question of “Essentials”

When you read through everything the *Book of Order* says about instructing and examining candidates, you’ll notice something odd. It doesn’t say much about what they have to believe. We ask all officers-elect and candidates to tell us about their faith journeys, and to demonstrate their readiness for service. We require candidates for the pastorate to demonstrate mastery of their seminary coursework and essential skills. But nowhere do we have an answer sheet with the “correct” responses to specific theological questions.

That’s not to say that convictions don’t matter. They do! Take a look at what our officers must affirm when they are ordained or installed. ...

The third affirmation raises the question, “What are the ‘essential tenets’ that everyone must receive and adopt?” It’s not an easy question to answer. Together we believe that “Jesus Christ is Lord.” But having said that, over the course of many centuries, we Presbyterians have largely resisted the temptation to make a check list of critical doctrines. Rather, the Westminster Confession reminds us that, even today, “God alone is Lord of the conscience,” and that we must show each other mutual forbearance when we disagree. Having found the center of the circle, in our shared recognition that Jesus Christ is Lord and Savior, we try to live graciously around the circumference, welcoming a broad range of theological viewpoints.

Identifying “Essentials”

Some things are so fundamental that they literally define what we’re talking about. For example, a Buddhist may be a very religious person, but he’s not a Christian. Belief in Jesus Christ is “essential” to Christianity – it defines what Christianity is. Likewise, a minister who refuses to abide by decisions that our Constitution vests in the Session may be a very fine Christian, but he’s not really a Presbyterian, because he rejects the governing structure that defines the Presbyterian Church. In each case, whether it be an article of faith or a point of polity, we identify certain things as “essential” because, without them, we’ve lost the distinctives that make us Presbyterians and part of the Body of Christ.

“Essentials” obviously matter. But for most of our 300-year history in America, we Presbyterians have soundly rejected any requirement that all who aspire to ordained office affirm a particular interpretation of Scripture or

the Constitution. Indeed, our Historic Principles of Church Order emphasize that “there are truths and forms with respect to which men of good characters and principles may differ. And in all of these we think it the duty both of private Christians and societies to exercise mutual forbearance toward each other.” [G-1.0305]

There are unhappy times in our history when we have erred, and embraced an unnecessarily strict orthodoxy for all – but, time and again, we have healed the resulting breaches by reaffirming freedom of conscience within the bounds of covenant trust.

We don’t have any very clear tests for determining when something is “essential” or not. Perhaps the best test for whether something is “essential” is what the Adopting Act of 1729 first reflected: that our disagreement relate to something so fundamental that we are “incapable of communion” with each other. Given our faith in the saving power of Jesus Christ, and his prayer that his followers “all may be one” (John 17:21), we should reach such a conclusion only with the greatest reluctance and care.

Not a Checklist, but a Conversation

The 217th General Assembly reminded us of something important: We can rarely determine what’s “essential” in a vacuum. Why? Because different candidates may behave or state their beliefs in different ways. Likewise, any particular act or belief may be colored by all of the candidate’s other acts and beliefs. We need to consider the whole person.

In 1967, we adopted a *Book of Confessions*, which supplemented the Westminster Standards with seven other creeds from different times and places. Those statements differ from one another in various respects. That action reinforced that candidates need not – indeed, cannot – subscribe to a single formulation of belief when they are being examined.

If an issue arises in examination, the candidate must be given an opportunity to explain his or her position, the reasons he or she holds it, and how it relates to the standards of the church. Because two candidates might hold the same position for different reasons, a session or presbytery might find one, but not the other, fit for office. Every candidate is different. Accordingly, findings regarding a person’s compliance with our standards, and the permissibility of any departures from “essentials,” will differ from case to case.

Excerpt from **Guidelines for Examination of Church Officers**

Tim Cahn
Blair Moffett
Doug Nave
Peter Oddleifson

*A revised version of
Guidelines for
Examination of Church
Officers was released at
the 2006 Covenant
Conference.*

*The Guidelines are for
sale (\$5) online
through the Covenant
Network e-store at
www.covenantnetwork.org/store.htm or by
phone at (415) 351-
2196 during West
Coast business hours.
Those with a
broadband connection
may chose to
download the pdf from
the website at
<http://covenantnetwork.org/resource-cat06.htm#Geo>*

Lisa Larges

Certain Reversals

Luke 1:39-56

Sermon (excerpt)

The full text can be found at www.covenantnetwork.org/sermon&papers/larges-co6.htm

Lisa Larges is Regional Partnership Coordinator of That All May Freely Serve.

Rarely in Scripture do women talk to each other – Naomi with her daughters-in-law, Ruth and Orpah, and then Mary and Elizabeth.

Imagine these two.

Imagine first the old lady. Imagine being very old and very pregnant. The text tells us that for the first five months she hid herself. This pregnancy was a miracle, indeed, an answer to prayer. Imagine her years of quiet shame as a childless woman in a culture where child bearing was all. But now, imagine the buzz in the village – the neighbors walking slowly by the house. It isn't so far from being the recipient of a miracle to being a freak.

And imagine her body. We were not meant to be old and pregnant. Imagine her fatigue. Imagine the strain. Imagine the way she aches.

And imagine the girl. Imagine being very young, and very pregnant, and not very married. Imagine her terror. Imagine her shaking. Imagine the strange changes taking place inside her body. Imagine her shock!

Imagine them together, the old woman and the young woman. Imagine the sheer relief at their meeting. Imagine something incomprehensible has happened to you. Imagine being comprehended. Imagine that you don't even know it yet but that there is one other person, and just one, who understands almost precisely what it is that has happened to you. Imagine opening your door one morning and finding that that person has come to you.

Here we are on the threshold of incarnation – with two women talking. We can only imagine, through these few verses what it is they are thinking or feeling; but something of their friendship comes down to us through the third Gospel – something raw and simple and direct and tender. Something like love.

And there is another in that house with Mary and Elizabeth – Zechariah, Elizabeth's husband, who is, shall we say, a man of few words. Zechariah is, like Elizabeth, righteous and blameless before God, which is code in Scripture for a good guy. Zechariah is a priest – a Minister of Word and Sacrament in certain very loose translations.

Zechariah has just returned home from Jerusalem where he had been chosen by lot to enter the temple and make the priestly offering. At that time – and imagine this – there were more priests than priestly functions so just who would enter the temple to make the offering was determined by lottery, and no one could make the offering more than once in his life, and some

never got to be commissioners to the General Assembly at all. So Zechariah, righteous and blameless before God, enters the temple, and as he is making the offering, a messenger of God – a certain Gabriel – meets him there and tells him that he and Elizabeth will have a child, and gives him the name for the child. Afterward, this same Gabriel, a kind of divine UPS man, will visit Mary, and tell her that she too will have a child and give her the name for that child.

Imagine what words are to a priest – to say all the prayers and blessings of all the rituals of the Law. A priest is never silent. Speaking is a reminder of the divine Word by which all things were spoken in to being.

Imagine yourself there, a priest in the temple. A messenger of the Most High God comes to you with good news for you; and when you ask for a point of clarification, the messenger of the Most High God tells you to sit down and keep quiet.

This is harsh. But the Bible too is harsh. Listen to Mary's interpretation of the ancient song of Hannah: "God has shown strength with the arm, has scattered the proud in the imaginations of their hearts, has put down the mighty and exulted the lowly. God has filled the hungry with good things and the rich God has sent empty away." ¹

Reading the Scripture through the lens of empire biases us toward mercy. Yes, justice for the sinned against, but mercy, dear God mercy for the perpetrators. Most of us here in empire are good people. We do not mean for our comfort to be derived from the hard and abysmally compensated labor of others. We do not mean for our consumption to relegate three fourths of the world's population to abject poverty. God forgive us our refrigerators, but grant us our refrigeration. Justice for the sinned against, but mercy for those of us caught in the avaricious vortex of empire.

That God should fill the hungry with good things is to us the acceptable half of the parallelism. That God should send the rich empty away seems to us a kind of crude and rudimentary form of rough justice. We are confident that God does not operate some kind of cosmic seesaw of the eschaton, on which the lowly shoot up fast and the powerful come down hard. Yet, indeed, Jesus says, "The first shall be last and the last shall be first."²

In a similar way, Jesus says³, if you go to a party, one of those sit-down catered dinner things, don't plant yourself at the head table, or else the host might come along and with that awkward clearing of the throat, say to you that you are sitting in dear Aunt Betty's place – she with the



recent heart trouble – and then you’ll have to scramble for your purse, and take the water glass because you already drank from it, and then, just as Pastor Judy is saying the grace, there will be that horrible loud scraping sound as you pull out the metal folding chair at the children’s table, because by now that’s the only seat left, and you’ll spend the evening with your thirteen-year-old nephew, Lester, a nasty kid who shoots squirrels and who will entertain the table by making farting noises with his armpit. (Perhaps I’m over-sharing!)

Instead, Jesus says, when you go to a party, sit over with your cousin Larry and his partner Ray and their twins, and then maybe the host will come along and say to you, “Come tell Aunt Betty that hilarious story of yours about that Lester kid.” The last shall be first and the first shall be last.

“God has filled the hungry with good things, and the rich God has sent empty away.” We, good people of the empire, so uneasy with our ill-gotten power and our unearned privilege, do not know what to do with such verses. To read the Scriptures through the lens of power is to filter out any critique of power. Yet the Scriptures, which are silent on, oh, say, sexual orientation, or gender identity formation, or one-man-one-woman-one-dog-two-kids-one-SUV marriage, have a whole lot to say about power – its abuses, its regulation, its redirection.

When are we, good people, going to talk about power? We are awash in power – it is as pervasive as the air we breathe, and just as invisible to us. Our government has gone mad with power. Who will speak a word?

When will the trembling begin in us because we have heard the Biblical witness and understood it?

Unless and until we can talk openly about power, we will be unable to speak wisely and meaningfully and politically about love. Here in empire we are ruled and driven and kept in our place by power, yet we dare not speak a word. In empire, love is filial, not social, romantic, not political. But the Biblical truth that caught fire in the souls of the Reformers is that all power is derivative, that God alone is sovereign, and to that sovereign God belongs all power and all glory. It is for us only to love God and to love one another – for love is the reordering of power

in the service of the divine will.

The author of the third Gospel means for us to understand that it should have been Zechariah. Zechariah was a priest – a conduit to the holy in the sacred community. He and Elizabeth, righteous and blameless before God, are old and without children, and so we are meant to recall Abraham and Sarah and the patriarchs. Were they to have a child – a son say – he would be descended on his mother’s side, the side that counts in a matrilineal tradition, from Aaron.

Zechariah leaves the temple and he cannot tell what happened to him. Gabriel moves on to Mary, and Mary does tell – but she doesn’t tell the authorities.

Here at the threshold of incarnation, we are not

with the priest in the temple, we are only in the house with the two women. These two women, one old and barren, the other young and unmarried, count for next to nothing in their culture. But there in the house, Mary tells Elizabeth of the reordering of power, and there in the house, Elizabeth feels inside herself a small and holy kick, and she calls it joy.

Because it wasn’t Zechariah. Because it was Mary instead. Because it isn’t about our power. Because it is about our love instead. Therefore let us be as politically astute about love as Karl Rove is about power. Let us not be co-opted by power through our failure to notice it, name it, understand it, and redirect it. For love is the reordering of power in the service of the divine will.

Sisters and brothers, before we get to love, we’ve got to talk about power. This is our work to do. It is for us to take up the work that the Task Force could not finish, and talk about power. Maybe, if we do that well, then all the other conundrums handed to the Task Force – scriptural authority, the lordship of Jesus, ordination standards – will work themselves out. And it is not for the sake of the church that we should do this, for the church is but the “provisional demonstration of God’s intention for the whole world.”⁴ That blood-soaked, war-ravaged, violence addicted world and its empires are desperate for another way. That way is love, and that love is manifest in incarnation. For in incarnation the sovereign God of the universe, to whom belongs all power and all glory, came to this world in love. Amen.

But the Biblical truth that caught fire in the souls of the Reformers is that all power is derivative, that God alone is sovereign, and to that sovereign God belongs all power and all glory.



footnotes

1. Luke 1:51-53
2. See Matthew 19:30, Matthew 20:16, Mark 9:35, Mark 10:31, Luke 13:30,
3. Luke 14:7-11
4. G-3.0200

Sheila C.
Gustafson

Water-cooler Evangelism

John 4 (Selected
Verses)

Sermon (excerpt)

The full text can be
found at
<http://covenantnetwork.org/sermon&papers/Gustafson-co6.htm>

Sheila Gustafson is
pastor of First
Presbyterian Church
of Santa Fe, NM

I stand in this pulpit today as one of the 4,000-plus spiritual daughters of Margaret Towner, on behalf of whose ordination to the ministry of word and sacrament someone spoke out over 50 years ago; and I wear this stole (which I just retrieved from the Shower of Stoles display) as part of my commitment to continue to speak out on behalf of voices still silenced by the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) – voices faithful, and gifted, and called to the ordained ministries of the church.

The issue of call, having been more or less settled for me for years in its Calvinist four-fold sense, is re-surfacing in my life in a new way. I find myself increasingly wondering if call is a matter of matching the gifts one brings to ministry with the needs of the church, as I had been taught long ago or, more profoundly, a matter of identifying how our own lacks and limitations, our own longings and seekings, might evoke the grace of God in the world.

As a fairly faithful follower of the preaching lectionary, I am one who has come to recognize that, every three years, a particular text re-exeges me. It has taken me approximately ten times preaching on John 4 – along with the discrediting by eminent feminist scholars of twenty centuries of interpretation which created for the Samaritan woman a seamy sexual history – to come to the realization that she is the woman in the scriptures with whom I most identify. What I offer to you this morning, then, is less a sermon than a testimony.

Her story, most scholars agree, is a theological construction by the Fourth Evangelist, designed to encounter a set of traditional religious values and sanctions with a new and world changing ethic of eschatological inclusion. The characters, the story line, the geography, even the props (who has what, who lacks what, who abandons what) are brilliantly employed to challenge the religious status quo and to thrust the implications of radical gospel insight into the consciousness and behaviors of faith communities both inside and outside of the story.

I recognize myself, and my kind, in the woman who carried her water jar to the well at midday to draw water for the use of her household. She was doing the traditional work which, even today, centuries later, falls to women around the world – traveling, sometimes, miles to carry back, often on their heads, the water without which life cannot be sustained.

But inside that female head which had been historically valued as a platform for heavy burdens, the author of the Gospel of John placed

questions of truth and meaning which were anything but traditional. What Samaritan woman of the first century had been encouraged to think about, never mind to raise to the level of conversation, theological questions? And how many women in the centuries since – up to and through the 1960's (when I did much of my own water carrying) – have been taken seriously as theological inquirers?

I find no evidence in the text that Jesus ever received the drink that he had asked for. Instead, it is the deep thirst of the Samaritan woman which is surfaced by the ensuing verbal exchange: the thirst for – at first, perhaps – only a serious conversation; for the experience of having her questions heard as legitimate and appropriate, and having them answered thoughtfully. But, as the conversation continues, Jesus, stunningly, offers to her a complete reversal of the request for hospitality with which the conversation began: he offers her a hospitality of mind and soul, of connection, of unconditional regard, of personal presence, of meaningful discussion, and of metaphorical insight into another dimension of being – a dimension which he pays her the supreme compliment of expecting her to apprehend!

Before I became a part of the early wave of Presbyterian women's ordination as a second career minister, I had been that woman, thirsting for something I could not have named, filled with questions for which I had no answers, longing for serious theological dialogue and a discipline which would give me the tools to think, and the vocabulary to articulate, and the structure to reason so that I too might come, in spirit and in truth, to worship, not what I did not know, but what I might apprehend as the mystery of God. And, though it took me a long time to be able to identify and verbalize this, I also wanted to integrate those new learnings into the person I already was: a woman, a nurturer of relationships, a maker of connections, a proud member of the tribe of those who carry water to minister to the thirst of the world. It was important to me not to have to reject those parts of myself in order to be allowed to pursue new levels of understanding.

Like the woman at the well, my motivation for ministry, for testimony, for proclamation, is and always has been the sheer joy and excitement of sharing what I have received: the good news of the Gospel; the living water; the offer of unconditional regard; hospitality on the part of the Christ who knows everything I have ever done and invites relationship anyway – relationship and a safe space to ask my questions and seek my answers. I consider the best possible



outcome of pastoral encounter to be the empowering of men, women, and children to get excited about seeking their own relationship with Jesus Christ. To be allowed to have those conversations, and to resource those explorations, and to witness the blossoming of faith, is the greatest satisfaction of my ministry.

Over the last several years – along with many other projects of First Presbyterian Church in Santa Fe – we have built a new building; and have, at the same time, developed a partnership relationship with a small congregation in Sagua La Grande, Cuba. We dedicated the building in Santa Fe in April; and a week ago we dedicated the building in Cuba.

One evening the Pastor of the Sagua congregation asked me to lead a service for wholeness and healing for the church members who showed up faithfully every night we were there. In a desperate mixture of Spanish and English, the two of us tried to plan. The sticking point seemed to be the anointing with oil and the blessing for healing, which would be a radical departure for Cuban Christians who were still operating on the basis of 1950's Presbyterian liturgy. I remembered how carefully we had introduced the concepts to our own congregation with explanations of the ancient tradition and lots of permission to choose not to participate if it did not seem comfortable. I could not imagine how, without language, we could expect these lovely people to understand, never mind accept, the ritual we were proposing to them.

We began with prayer, and we sang, and we stood in a circle and passed a candle from person to person as each prayed for intercession. And then it was time for the anointing, which the Pastor had asked me to do on the premise that it would be more difficult for the congregation to refuse, coming from a visitor and a guest in their midst. It was explained in Spanish that our signal for inviting anointing and blessing was a raised hand; and I glanced with trepidation around the circle where I saw that about half of those assembled had indicated their willingness to be touched and blessed. As I worked my way around from raised hand to raised hand, making the sign of the cross on foreheads and speaking the simple words, sometimes in Spanish, sometimes in English, “I anoint you for healing in the name of

the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit. Amen,” I was overwhelmed by the trust and the faith I saw in the eyes of these former strangers. Any barriers that had existed – of language or culture, or race or gender, or even of half a century of Presbyterian practice – fell away. The living Christ was present among us, in Spirit and in truth. I could only say like the Samaritan woman, “Come and see” – and they, like the citizens of her village, responded, “We have seen for ourselves.”

When the circle had been completed and I prepared to move back to the front of the church, I glanced up – and the hands of the other half of the people were raised.

Two nights later, the whole of Presbyterian Cuba gathered in the new sanctuary of the Sagua La Grande Church – packed in, standing room only. The great shutters were thrown open to the street, and the singing, and the drumming, and the praying, and the preaching spilled out over the crowds of children gathered at the windows,



peering through the grills. During the offering, the mission team from Santa Fe carried down the aisle and placed on the communion table replicas of our own communion ware. Then, the service ended, we jumped onto our bus and rode through the

night to Havana to catch our early morning flight home.

The very next morning, back in Santa Fe, I walked into our sanctuary where our own communion ware stood on the table in preparation for the celebration of All Saints Day worship – and I burst into tears. (Women are just too emotional to be ministers!)

I am thinking again about the concept of call, about the giftness of it, about the un-earnedness of it, about the grace of it – and about the incomprehensibility of thinking that we have any control over it – that the church can control it – or that we could think it depends on our qualifications, or our competence, or our gender, or our sexual orientation, or on anything at all that we can, or cannot, do anything about. The Fourth Evangelist told a story about an encounter which took place in the midst of a woman's ordinary day, among her routine responsibilities, when a man asked for a simple drink of cold water – and offered to satisfy the thirst of the whole world. Thanks be to God.

Before I became a part of the early wave of Presbyterian women's ordination as a second career minister, I had been that woman, thirsting for something I could not have named, filled with questions for which I had no answers,

New Subscription
Policy for Covenant
Connection - see article
on Front Page!

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

A Message from our Co-Moderators

December, 2006

"Distress among nations ... fear and foreboding of what is coming upon the world ..." The evangelist brought us to Advent with a description of things to come that sounds a lot like things that are. We are distressed, weary and wary. Even in the church, fear and foreboding are plentiful, peace is tentative, and the Christmas leap of faith is a limp.

In 2006 Advent is authentic, its themes resonant, its promise all the more compelling. This is the world God chooses to save. This is the church God calls to courage and hope.

Our Covenant Network Conference answered that call. A Youth Advisory Delegate to the General Assembly came and was enthusiastic about the hopeful and determined tone of both leaders and participants. Our Moderator was impressed by the "good spirit" and testified that it was the most positive group of people she had been with. The evaluations of those who attended reflected a resolve to continue a strong and faithful witness to full inclusion and to equip ourselves to make the General Assembly's recommendations for peace, unity, and purity work – in good faith and in good order. The big leap of faith toward a generous and just church came in a smaller step than we work for, but we walk in hope.

Our conference celebrated that hope. Remembering the struggle for women's ordination gave sobering and yet inspiring perspective. The opening of the constitutional door happened over a fifty-year period for deacons, elders, and ministers, and the opening of hearts and minds to the ordained leadership of women continues to challenge the church. The Rev. Margaret Towner, whose October 1956 ordination was a "first," told how initial resistance became a source of renewal in the church. That story reminded us that we are taking small but sure steps on a long journey.

Distress? Fear and foreboding? We are people of the Advent, who believe that into such a world and such a church God comes, with newborn hope in arms. Such a leap of faith on God's part deserves more than a limp on ours.



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