



Winter 2007-08

The Covenant Connection

A Newsletter of the Covenant Network of Presbyterians (Vol 10, #2)

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

“This is the church
we’re working for;
you can see it
right here and now.”

“I was thrilled, touched, moved to tears and called to action,” writes one person who attended the November 1-3 Covenant Conference in Atlanta. “I come from a ‘just us’ church, and I had no idea there were passionate people in a body of this kind and size.” Others commented that “this is the church we’re working for,” because “you can see here and now what it means for believers to gather in openness and without fear.”

You can read all about it and sample the conference spirit in the texts of plenary addresses by Anna Carter Florence, Don Saliers and Beverly Gaventa and the sermons by Jessica Tate, Scott Black Johnston, Joanna Adams and Teresa Fry Brown that are now posted on the Covenant Network website. They are also available on tape or CD through our online store.

218th General Assembly
June 21-28, 2008
in San Jose, California

When you find your way to San José... consider making your experience more meaningful by volunteering with the Covenant Network. From hospitality to errand-running to supporting commissioners and advisory delegates; from an hour to a day to the whole week and more... we have numerous opportunities for service that can help you enhance your knowledge of the PCUSA, find new friends, and make a difference in the church's witness. To learn more or to sign up, contact National Organizer Tricia Dykers Koenig, triciadk@covenantnetwork.org.

An Important
New Film:
*For the Bible
Tells Me So*

One of the highlights of the Atlanta conference was the screening of an award-winning new documentary film, *For the Bible Tells Me So*.

The film is about scripture and how Christian families come to understand (or fail to understand) their gay children. Made with the help of the Human Rights Campaign, the film features interviews with Archbishop Desmond Tutu, Harvard professor Peter Gomes, Bishop Gene Robinson (and his family), former House Majority Leader Dick Gephardt (and his lesbian daughter), and three other American, Christian families of gay children. See the website www.forthetibletellsmeso.org for a schedule of screenings around the country and information on ordering DVD's.

Brueggeman and
Johnson to Keynote
2008 Conference

Sorry you couldn't attend this year's conference? Put next year's on your calendar now. It will be held November 6 - 8, 2008, at Westminster Presbyterian Church in Minneapolis. The topic will be “Covenant: God is Faithful Still,” with Walter Brueggeman and William Stacy Johnson as keynote speakers.

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.

Witnessing in Atlanta



The Rev. Chandler Stokes
Pastor of First Presbyterian Church
of Oakland, California
and a new member of the
Covenant Network Board of Directors

“Testimony” was the theme of the Covenant Network conference, and I surely was blessed by the witness I received. I’d like to share two enduring images with you.

Sustaining worship

One of Fred Craddock’s Cherry Log Sermons expresses his grief that too few youth were finding their way to church. He said: “It just hurts me to think of the young people who do not know a hymn, who do not know a single Scripture verse, and who have never sat next to the strong shoulder of a believing man or woman. How will they ever make it? You see, what we do here on Sunday, in case you’re wondering, is that we’re making memories. What happens today will be the only food you will have one of these days. But it will be enough. It will be enough.”

The opening worship service was that kind of an experience. I was fed in a way I knew would help to sustain me for the days ahead. Particularly during the singing of hymns, the sanctuary at Trinity Church resonated with strong voices and a sense of vibrant faith and the Holy Spirit. I suppose that sounds cliché to say, but it was a great gift. I come from a smaller (250 member) congregation. I imagined that others from smaller churches were glad to have their voices surrounded and supported by so many, many believing women and men. We know that we are not alone in our convictions, but we don’t always feel that reality.

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I felt surrounded by a cloud of witnesses that knew my heart and knew my struggle and whose shoulders I was glad to have next to mine.

We know that we are not alone in our convictions, but we don’t always feel that reality.

During that service, I stood between good friends that I had not seen in too long, and while we sang “Ye Watchers and Ye Holy Ones” I felt surrounded by a cloud of witnesses that knew my heart and knew my struggle and whose shoulders I was glad to have next to mine.

I had a conversation with a woman who said that she was the only one attending from her presbytery and that she was really feeling the isolation. I pray that the conference was a balm to her as it was to me. They say that this was the youngest group to attend the conference. I pray this witness was the balm to them that it was to me.

Affirmation and challenge

Saturday morning, Jin Kim from Church of All Nations in Minneapolis offered a workshop on the multicultural church. Rev. Kim is a former head of Presbyterians for Renewal.

The congregation I serve is multicultural (30% African-American, 5% Asian- and Native-American, 65% Euro-American), and I was very interested in hearing about his ministry. His workshop was insightful and provided a number of helpful parallels to my own work, as I had hoped and expected.

What I had not expected was Rev. Kim’s strong affirmation of the Covenant Network Conference. His views of human sexuality are not mine and not those of the Network, but he was generous in his appraisal of our work.

I paraphrase here, but he said something to the effect that “this is one of the best conferences in the denomination. Sometimes, in our zeal for righteousness, we evangelicals just don’t get grace. You all get grace.” And he was pleased and felt blessed that he had been welcomed to do a workshop at our conference.

His challenges to the Network were to broaden our area of concern, in particular, to pay attention to the great unfinished work against racism and white privilege in our country, and to consider why there are so few people of color at our conference. His was a compelling testimony and an offer to consider new horizons.

Andy Cullen's Testimony

at the 2007 Covenant Conference

*Rev. Andrew Cullen is Interim Pastor of
Rolling Hills Presbyterian Church, Overland Park, Kansas.*

*In Heartland
Presbytery I used to
endorse and work for our
denomination's exclusion
of "self-avowed, practicing" gay
and lesbian persons for ordination.
At that time I could see only "issues"
and not people.*

I remember one Presbytery meeting when Rev. Jay McKell was sitting in front of me. After I had been speaking to table a motion regarding the "gay and lesbian issue," Jay turned around and said, "When will we get to talk about this?"

God is a speaking God. Jesus is the Living Word. God speaks through other people. I started listening. The journey was beginning for me. Here are some of the stepping-stones along the way:

Before 1993:

- I was angry that our denomination had to deal with the gay and lesbian "issue." I remember hearing Janie Spahr speak. I was very, very angry with her testimony about coming out as a lesbian.

- On another occasion at a presbytery meeting, before celebrating communion we sang a song written by the Rev. Ron Roberts. The words spoke about all people - young and old, gay and straight - being invited to the table. I was so upset about the words that I had to go outside and calm down.

- Having a Presbyterian elder tell me that the solution to the gay and lesbian "problem" would be to take "those people" out in a field and shoot them. I thought, "These are the folks I'm identified with?"

After 1993:

- Participating with Tammy Lindahl at a program on how to communicate with people you disagree with.

- Hearing the late Merrill Proudfoot, a gay Presbyterian minister, tell his story. I was deeply touched and moved by his journey.

- Being part of a year-long pastor's group in Heartland Presbytery to dialogue about human sexuality.

- Being at the Heartland Presbytery meeting in 1995 when Martha Juillerat set aside her ordination.

- One of our elders had just come out — a man who was married and had two sons. He brought his certificate of ordination to me, "Andy I want to give this to you before the session tells me to give it back." He said, "You won't understand this, but I feel more 'normal' now than ever before."

- Eating lunch with a Southern Baptist pastor, who said, "I need to tell you something, I'm gay." I thought, "I wonder if I can still eat lunch with him. What will people think?" He is Paul Smith, pastor of the Broadway Church in Kansas City. We still eat lunch together. He is my best pastor friend.

- In December of 2002, at my annual review, I told the personnel committee of the church I had served for 16 years, that I thought we should do a better job of talking about issues of human sexuality, e.g. what about our gay and lesbian brothers and sisters in Christ? One of the elders said, "What's there to talk about? We know what the Bible says and it sounds like you're getting soft on the Bible."

I knew the Spirit was taking me in a different direction. The church was growing. We had wonderful new facilities. In January of 2003 I asked the Session to call a congregational meeting for the purpose of concurring with my request to ask the Presbytery to dissolve the relationship. Last month that congregation in Heartland Presbytery voted to leave the PCUSA.

I am now in my fourth interim position. After a long and difficult journey involving much study, reading, discussion, arguing, questioning, weeping, praying — and, indeed, some laughing — and getting to know my lesbian and gay sisters and brothers in Christ — I now say, with all my heart, that the Spirit brought me to a new understanding. It is time to open the door to all persons, regardless of their sexual orientation, who desire to follow Jesus Christ ... and like all of us when we stumble and fall in our attempt to follow Jesus, God picks us up and sets us back on the path.

Several months ago I said to Nancy, my wonderful wife of 36 years, "Maybe I should get a new clergy robe." She said, "Really, so late in your ministry?" Well, in many respects, I feel like my ministry is just starting.

Thank you for letting me share in this conference. It's great to be here!



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Alisa Porter's Testimony at the 2007 Covenant Conference

Alicia Michelle Porter - "proper noun, indicating a black woman, mother, grandmother, lesbian, and most importantly, a child of God."



Who would do the work if I was fired? And I would be fired.

Who would feed my own children?

Good morning, greetings from Oakhurst Presbyterian Church in Decatur, Georgia. Welcome to Atlanta for many of you and from our pastors, Nibs and Caroline. I'm currently participating in elder training. I'm in preparation for ordination in January.

We recently reviewed the Brief Statement of Faith adopted by the Presbyterian Church (USA) in 1990. A portion of that states "In a broken and fearful world, the Spirit gives us courage to pray without ceasing, to witness among all peoples to Christ as Lord and Savior, to unmask idolatry in church and culture, to hear the voices of peoples long silenced and to work with others for justice, freedom and peace."

If you were to look up Alisa Michelle Porter in the dictionary, it would say "proper noun, indicating a black woman, mother, grandmother, lesbian, and most importantly, a child of God."

In 1998, I was asked to take a position as CEO of a statewide non-profit, the Georgia Coalition Against Domestic Violence, a group struggling to overcome a long history of racism and homophobia. They had figured out certainly, that I was black when I joined them, but not that I was a lesbian, because I was passing at the time. I accepted the opportunity to work in an organization that I thought I could unify and improve its public image. Clearly, power was held in a few white women's hands. They limited access to information and resources and isolated anyone who would question their position.

I thought in my wisdom that I would create a series of workshops, because workshops fix people and change them, just like task forces. So I thought this would be an opportunity to begin dismantling the system that was stifling the sharing of power and marginalizing those who were not like them. I hired a consultant —because you know, heaven forbid I do it, they did pay my salary — to come in and do some Diversity and Coalition Building 101. This was an opportunity to secure everyone a level playing field and change the face of our organization for the betterment of those we served. This was very important to me, because I knew that silence

equaled death in my world. Silence harbors secrets that lead to violence being perpetrated and tolerated.

During our workshop we participated in an exercise. I would like for all of you today to play along, so if you are able, please stand as I ask you. I will ask a series of questions, and please stand up if it applies to you.

Stand if you are a Christian.

Always been a Presbyterian?

Born in the United States?

Born outside of the United States?

Consider yourself white, Anglo-Saxon, European?

Consider yourself a person of color?

If you're female, stand.

If you're male you can stand too.

At this point, the writing was on the wall. I knew what was next, and I needed to decide if I would stand.

Would I come out to my board of directors and other colleagues, claim my identity and place in this world? Acknowledge my life, my family, my dignity? Or would I sit idly by and do nothing, remain silent, harboring my secret, denying my two beautiful stepdaughters and my partner, denying my place as a child of God?

And for what? To continue to serve the women and children who suffer in their homes, day in and day out, from violence? To continue my efforts to change an organization steeped in homophobia and racism? Who would do the work if I was fired? And I would be fired. Who would feed my own children? Thinking all of this, and in a split second, mind you, when asked "if you're gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgender, queer, so on, so on," I did not stand.

As the weight of the world came down on me, a part of me became very dark that day. I could not see any light in my tunnel. However, at that moment I made a commitment to myself and my family and my God that I would not let fear silence me again. Children of God do not have to hide under a bush.

Right now — if you are gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgender, or if you love someone who is — please stand.

Can I Get a Witness?

The Rev. Scott Black Johnston, Pastor, Trinity Presbyterian Church, Atlanta, Georgia - excerpt from his sermon to the Covenant Conference on November 1, 2007

There's a whole lot of theology packed into the question, "Can I get a witness?" It implies that the gospel that we share is alive and active, that the God we worship is busy knocking about in the world today. It also places the community at the heart of Christian proclamation. For with this question, one of the faithful says to the other, "This is how I am experiencing God," in order to ask, "Are you experiencing this, too?"

On the road to Emmaus, the resurrected Jesus appears to the disciples, opens the scriptures to them, and then in the breaking of bread is revealed to them. Before they have finished chewing, Jesus vanishes. As these befuddled, wide-eyed souls resume their journey, they turn to each other for confirmation of what has just happened. "Didn't our hearts burn within us as we walked along, listening to him open the scriptures?" You experienced what I just experienced; didn't you?

Now, all this talk of experience (while biblical, to be sure) is enough to get a true-blue Presbyterian worried. After all, one of the strengths of our Reformed tradition is the recognition that human experience can be a source of moral rot. We never want to imply that just because people can point to a "common" experience means that they have latched onto God's truth. We have seen too many cases when demagogues have used similar-sounding rhetoric to goad people into pooling their prejudices.

Consider the Ku Klux Klan, the Nazi party, or any of history's hate-mongers; they, too, have experiences that they want to hold up as the truth. They spew their vitriol, and then ask if others haven't experienced blacks, Jews, women, Roman Catholics, immigrants, homosexuals, Bosnians, and Native Americans that way, too. Their awful "witness" reminds us of the old Methodist adage: taken alone, human experience is a one-legged stool that cannot stand as an authority.

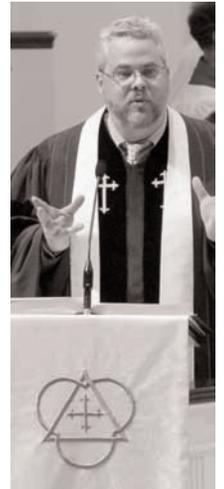
When the Apostle Paul writes to Christians in the bustling city of Thessalonica — a city where he and his sidekicks Silvanus and Timothy had planted a church — he writes with great affection. It is a love letter. Listen again to his language: "So deeply do we care for you

that we are determined to share with you not only the gospel of God but also our own selves."

Also our own selves! These words are striking. In this section of the letter, scholars like Beverly Gaventa see Paul describing what it means to be a true apostle — a witness. In this, Paul claims that sharing the good news of God requires more than a disciple armed with a profound subject; it insists that apostles do more; that they share their lives, their selves, their energies, their stories with each other. Isn't this, after all, the message of the incarnation? God didn't send us a textbook on faithful living; God came, sharing God's own self with us, for us.

About nine months ago a friend said to me, "Scott, I think that the legislative period in the life of our troubled denomination is drawing to a close and we are entering a judicial season." I asked him to elaborate. "Well," he said, "it's like this. We have fought and fought and fought over the Book of Order. We have battled ourselves into a bloody stalemate, and now I think, with the passage of the PUP report, we are not going to have as much energy for the next charge onto the legislative fray. Instead, we are going to move to a time when individual cases are being decided on the floors of presbyteries, and at session meetings, and in front of the Permanent Judicial Commission. This means that our church's conflict will no longer be focused on a generic issue; it is going to be about specific candidates."

I think his analysis was pretty good, although it remains to be seen whether this change of venue will move us (as a denomination) a single step closer to the kingdom of God. What I do believe is that if we are, in fact, entering a judicial season in sorting through the church's current turmoil, if we are entering a time then these issues will be considered in the context of ecclesial courts, then, it is the time, my friends, for witnesses.



Paul claims that sharing the good news of God requires more than a disciple armed with a profound subject.

It insists that apostles share their lives, their energies, their stories with each other.

Isn't this, after all, the message of the incarnation?

The Rev. Joanna Adams, Pastor,
Morningside Presbyterian Church, Atlanta,
Georgia - excerpted from her sermon,
"No Other Plan," to the
Covenant Conference, November 3, 2007

How Do You Know?



I was reminded of the ministry of Jesus Christ and the ministry of his great servant Martin Luther King, Jr. — that we really do need to open the doors and invite people in. We need not only to open the doors, we need to go out the doors ourselves with the message of hope and a message of reconciliation we have to share and without which the human race will not survive. The doors must be open. The good news is not ours to keep, it's ours to share, and every time we share it, the good news just gets better and better, and hope is reborn again and again. I pray for the day when the Presbyterian Church USA opens its ordained offices officially to all whom God calls to serve, not simply to be nice to gay, lesbian, trans-gendered and bi-sexual people, but because the church will be so blessed and enriched by the spiritual gifts of all whom God calls to serve.

I think today how Jesus did not instruct his disciples to go carry the good news to certain categories of people. I'm thinking how he said, "Baptize them all, sealing them in the great promises of salvation."

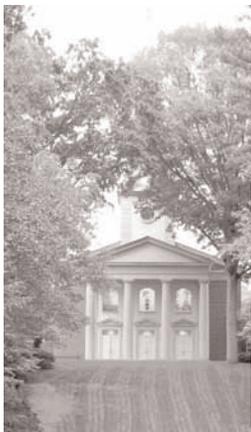
As we work with the new Authoritative Interpretation, let us remember who has the final authority in heaven and on earth. Jesus said, "All authority has been given to me." Surely his teachings, his passion for the left-out and the marginalized must be authoritative in all cases. Wherever the people gather in his name, let us never tire of pressing on to the goal of a church that is as just and generous as God's grace.

I want to close today by getting personal with you. I want to ask you how you came to know Jesus Christ. I don't mean that he was a good man and all of that. I mean, how did you come to know that his way was THE way you wanted to follow? How do you know that God is love? How do you know that your sins are forgiven? How do you know? I would suggest to you that you know because someone made a witness to you, by how she lived, by what he said, by what his values were, by the courage she was able to muster. The church made its witness to you, and you became a believer. Some teacher, a parent, friend showed you, in word or deed, the way to the fountain that never will run dry.

Let us make our glad and confident witness to this saving power of our Lord Jesus Christ, whose final word was his promise of his presence and his strength, no matter how long the journey or how distant the goal, I will be with you always, to the end of the age.

Thanks be to God.

..... you know because someone made a witness to you



Photos from
Atlanta

Left to Right - Kim Long, Beverly
Gaventa, Jack Rogers, Mark Lomax,
Jessica Tate

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A Message from our Co-Moderators

December 2007

It has been the longstanding goal of the Covenant Network to share with our denomination a vision of a church as generous and just as God's grace. This means that we have been working faithfully for ten years now, ever since G-6.0106b became a part of the Book of Order, toward a church that is better than that provision of our constitution; more inclusive, more welcoming, and more ready to receive and to deploy the gifts of those who would serve Christ as officers and ministers in the church without regard to sexual orientation. We have been striving to accomplish that goal while also working and praying for the unity of the church. In a season in which a small number of churches have left or threatened to leave the denomination, our unity as Presbyterians has been sorely tested.

Why do we hold to both of those goals, justice and unity, especially when it would seem so much easier to be single-minded in our approach, uninterested in those with whom we disagree, and uncaring about the unity of the church, so long as GLBT Presbyterians can be ordained? There are a number of reasons why unity is important to us and why we try to build bridges with Presbyterians who do not presently see things the way we do.

The first reason is Biblical. Christ calls us to be one in him. Jesus prayed on the night of his arrest, "Holy Father, protect them in your name that you have given me, so that they may be one, as we are one" (Jn 17:11). Paul similarly called us to unity when he reminded the Romans, "We who are many are one body in Christ, and individually members one of another" (Rom. 12:5). He warned the Corinthians that "the eye cannot say to the hand, I have no need of you," nor "the head say to the feet, I have no need of you" (I Cor 12:21). Separation is not an option for the church. We are meant to be together because Christ is better served in unity than in discord.

Another reason we should try to maintain unity is because in so many places GLBT folk and their supporters are isolated, surrounded by churches and congregations that are deadening to their spirit of hope and survival. The Covenant Network's vision of a church that one day may live together in unity with justice is all that keeps some of our supporters within the Presbyterian Church.

It was Reinhold Niebuhr who said, "Nothing that is worth doing can be accomplished in one lifetime; therefore we must be saved by hope." And that is another reason to stay together. When God finally brings about a church as generous and just as that grace that already reigns in heaven, it would be good to be found living together in unity rather than in discord. Our impatience with G-6.0106b is exactly that ... our impatience. It has taken over thirty years of struggle already and some of us have yet to see justice done. Surely God is more impatient than we to see justice done, but the timing must be God's; and part of the challenge that God has placed before us is to come to the end of this matter together — if not of the same mind, at least at peace with one another in a church that is tolerant, understanding, and respectful of differences.

Finally, we must stay together because it will take time to educate, build relationships, build trust, and thereby change and be changed by one another, one person at a time. The truth is that many hearts and minds must change before those whom we hope will be ordained will actually be received in a church ready to deploy their gifts. The hard work of unmasking and changing the homophobia of the church takes time. That is why we continue to work with all who will listen, building friendships where we can, opening dialogue where it is possible, so that the whole church will be able to receive ever more widely the gifts of our GLBT leaders.

The church will not always be as contentious as it is today. God is working out purposes that are greater, braver, and more just than any of us have yet imagined. For a while, as we work through this time, there will continue to be places where injustice is done, where presbyteries and congregations will experience pain, where candidates for ministry and service will be held back, and where the dying out of old ways will be difficult to endure. But the time will come, in God's good time, aided by our faithfulness now, when the church is indeed as generous and just as God's grace. May it be so... God willing, as soon as possible!

Grace and Peace,

Deborah A. Block
Pastor, Immanuel Presbyterian Church
Milwaukee, WI

Jon Walton
Pastor, First Presbyterian Church in
the City of New York





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Toward a Church as Generous and Just as God's Grace: A New Statement of Direction

by the Board of the Covenant Network of Presbyterians - November 1, 2007

The Covenant Network vigorously pursues its founding goal: to build up the church by removing barriers to ordained service by gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender members and by so doing, to further the unity of the church.

The 217th General Assembly (2006), led by the Holy Spirit, made progress toward this double goal. Calling all Presbyterians to strengthen their covenanted partnership with each other, the Assembly offered a renewed vision for church unity. In its Authoritative Interpretation of Book of Order § G-6.0108, the General Assembly reminded the church of one means by which that unity will be achieved: through faithful application of church standards, with respect for individuals' freedom of conscience within the bounds of the church's polity.

We are heartened by the serious and sustained efforts being made by sessions and presbyteries to understand and work with the new Authoritative Interpretation and the Assembly's other decisions. All over the Presbyterian Church (USA), we see a new embrace of the longstanding traditions that have grounded our life together as Presbyterians for over two hundred years. There is much work yet to do, but we are hopeful that we Presbyterians can and will do it well.

Given recent denominational actions, some congregations and ministers have left the denomination (fewer than 50 of the Presbyterian Church (USA)'s more than 10,000 congregations). We grieve these losses. At the same time, we are gratified that the great majority of Presbyterians has heard and heeded the General Assembly's call to work together in ways that upbuild the mission and presence of the Presbyterian Church (USA).

The Covenant Network of Presbyterians offers resources and assistance to individuals, congregations and governing bodies, as the church implements the Authoritative Interpretation and other recommendations of the 217th General Assembly. We pledge our legal, advisory, and educational resources for those in the ordination process. As we look toward the next General Assembly, we will continue to monitor both local ordination/installation practices and judicial decisions to determine which additional measures we should pursue at this time to achieve our longstanding goal: a church as generous and just as God's grace.