

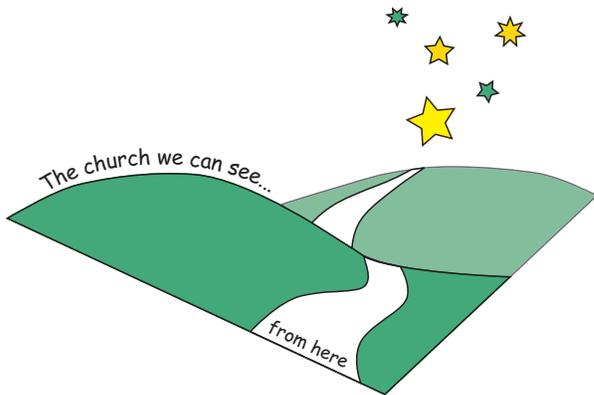


Fall 2009

# The Covenant Connection

A Newsletter of the Covenant Network of Presbyterians (Vol 12, #3)

2515 Fillmore St. San Francisco CA 94115 ♦ 415 351 2196 (v) ♦ 415 351 2198 (f) ♦ [www.covenantnetwork.org](http://www.covenantnetwork.org)



## 2009 Covenant Conference November 5-7, 2009 Cleveland, Ohio

The Conference Team is excited about the unfolding plans for the 2009 Covenant Conference, *The Church We Can See from Here*. We'll explore changes in four areas: Reformed theology, race and ethnicity, youth ministry, and Christian ethics of sex. We'll hear from established church leaders and some fresh new voices. We'll think together about what is changing, why it is changing, how it is changing—and how it is not. We hope you're planning to come!

Registration is easy on-line. And while you're there, please consider helping to sponsor a college student or seminarian with a donation of \$50 or \$100. Your help lets us continue our policy of free registration for students who will play critical roles in the church we can see from here! While you're on the website, also check out the video where our friend Ted Smith shares his enthusiasm about the conference leaders. See page 6 for an excerpt.

### Thinking About Marriage and Same-Gender Relationships

In September, the Special Committee to Study Issues of Civil Union and Christian Marriage will release its draft report and invite feedback from the church. As congregations study the report and the issues it addresses, several resources can provide helpful background. David Jensen's essay, "What Do Presbyterians Say About Marriage?" in the Covenant Network's *Frequently Asked Questions about Sexuality, the Bible, and the Church* is a good starting point. Two recent books could well serve as the basis of an adult ed study series: *A Time to Embrace: Same-Gender Relationships in Religion, Law, and Politics*, by Stacy Johnson (a free study guide is available on our website); and *As My Own Soul: The Blessing of Same-Gender Marriage*, by Chris Glaser.

### 219th General Assembly: July 3-10, 2010 Minneapolis, MN

It's not too soon to start thinking about next summer's General Assembly. Will your presbytery be electing commissioners in the next few months? Think about nominating open-minded presbyters—perhaps God is calling you to submit your own name. Would you consider attending GA to volunteer? We can offer a range of opportunities to make a difference. Or maybe you are interested in exploring the possibility of your presbytery sending an overture. Please be in touch with Covenant Network National Organizer Tricia Dykers Koenig as you make your plans. She can be reached at [triciadk@covenantnetwork.org](mailto:triciadk@covenantnetwork.org) or (216) 658-1770.

### Covenant Network in Alternative Gift Markets

As you plan your congregation's Alternate Christmas Market, please consider including Covenant Network as a potential recipient. We can supply attractive gift cards for donors. For more information, please contact the office at (415) 351-2196.

Also, Covenant Network's colorful "Good News" notecards make great Christmas cards. See our e-store for more information and to place an order.

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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 it in its entirety at [covenantnetwork.org/c2cc06.htm](http://covenantnetwork.org/c2cc06.htm).

# No Longer “Outside”: Embraced by Our Church

*Don Ristad*

When my partner, Kent Cassidy, and I read the details about the opportunity to legally marry as a same-sex couple in California, we both knew it was what we wanted to do. After a lifetime of feeling on the “outside” we were eager to formalize our relationship in this way. We have been partnered for almost seven years: built a house together, adopted a dog (a shar-pei named Ella), opened up about our relationship in our work settings, at church, and with our families.



Photo © George Byron Griffiths

**Kent Cassidy (left) and Don Ristad at the service of blessing of their marriage, held at Westminster Presbyterian Church in Minneapolis, MN.**

Early in the planning stage for our trip to California, we wanted to find out what our options were to have our church bless our marriage. We emailed Tim Hart-Andersen, our senior pastor, late one summer evening and he responded that night! He made it clear to us from that communication that he was very supportive of our plans and said he would enthusiastically participate in a service of blessing of our marriage at Westminster.

Somewhere in this process I had expressed to Kent that I had dreamt of the day when we would stand in the sanctuary at Westminster and feel like we, as a couple, had the love and support of our congregation.

Our legal marriage occurred on August 22, 2008 in the perennial garden in Golden Gate Park in San Francisco. We had the experience of getting our marriage license at the famed San Francisco City Hall. That morning we were among a constant flow of joyous same-sex couples of all types who were there for the same purpose that we were. A group of seven friends and family joined us for the marriage and we all were changed by the experience. Our joy was crushed when a slim majority of California citizens voted to pass Prop 8 in November 2008. And it was a bittersweet reprieve when the California Supreme Court declared that the marriages that occurred from May to November 2008 are still valid.

We then jumped into our plans for the celebration and blessing of the marriage at Westminster. I have been an active member for more than 20 years and Kent joined the church

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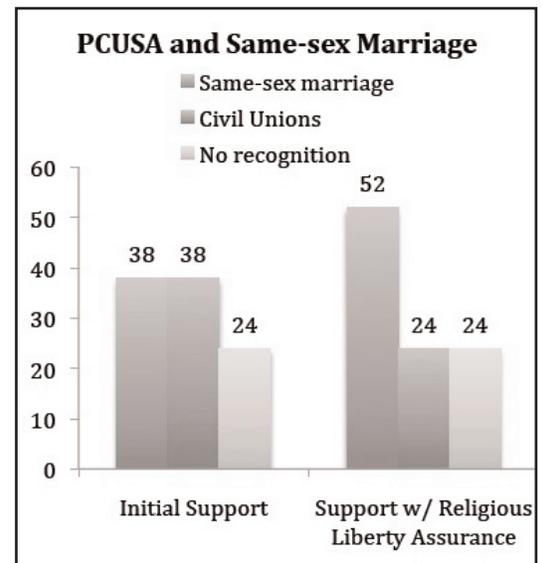
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## Three-quarters of Presbyterian Clergy Support Recognition of Same-Sex Couples’ Relationships

More than three-quarters of PC(USA) clergy support some legal recognition of gay couples’ relationships. Thirty-eight percent support same-sex marriage, and 38% support civil unions for gay couples. Only about one in four (24%) say there should be no legal recognition of a gay couple’s relationship.

When clergy are offered a religious liberty reassurance that the law would guarantee that no church or congregation would be required to perform marriages for same-sex couples, support for marriage increases 14 points to majority support (52%), support for civil unions falls to 24%, and the same number say there should be no legal recognition for same-sex couples (24%).

These are some of the results in the recent national Clergy Voices Survey (CVS), the largest survey of mainline Protestant clergy ever conducted. The full Presbyterian results are posted on our website. More information about Public Religion Research, which conducted the study, can be found at [www.publicreligion.org/](http://www.publicreligion.org/) or [www.facebook.org/publicreligion](http://www.facebook.org/publicreligion).



about five years ago. We both participated in the officer training program led by Pastor Kathy Michael at the church this past year. And in May, Kent was ordained as a deacon and I as an elder.

Pastor Tim met with us starting in February to begin the dialogue and planning for our service. Melanie Ohnstad, the minister of music and organist at Westminster, is a long-time friend. With their support and guidance we were able to create a service of thanksgiving and a blessing of the marriage that was very affirming and celebratory. Because this service was the first of its kind in Westminster's 150-plus years, we decided to include an open invitation to the congregation in the church newsletter. The response was remarkable: a wide range of members of the congregation, from seniors to families with children, took time out of their day on Saturday, June 20, to celebrate with us.

Instead of a prelude, we opted for a thirty-minute recital to set the mood for the afternoon. The music included a Mozart piano duet, solos by an oboist who plays with the Minnesota Orchestra, classical guitar selections and vocal numbers from three of the members of Cantus, the professional male vocal ensemble. The music created a worshipful and celebratory tone.

With Tim and Melanie's help, we structured the service like a traditional worship service. Pastor Kathy Michael joined Pastor Tim in leading the service of blessing. The congregation heartily sang three hymns: *For the Beauty of the Earth*, *O God You Give Humanity Its Name*, and *Now Thank We All Our God*.

Pastor Tim got everyone to laugh in his meditation when he commented on the memorable nature of the day and said: "A dentist and an ophthalmologist, who'd ever believe it!!"

After a small reception at the church we hosted 200 friends and family for a reception and dinner at our home. Even though some of our family members chose not to participate in the day, those family and friends who were with us helped create an unforgettable milestone in our lives. In lieu of gifts, we suggested that guests consider a contribution to the Covenant Network or a favorite charity. We were so pleased by the response in giving to the Covenant Network in recognition of our marriage.

As we take time to reflect on our new status, nothing has changed so much as a new sense of belonging, not only in society at large, but specifically in our church home. We hope and pray that some day this type of event is not a rarity.

*Don Ristad and Kent Cassidy live in Wayzata, MN, and attend Westminster Presbyterian Church in Minneapolis.*

## A Statement by the Board of Directors of the Covenant Network of Presbyterians

### To the Special Committee to Study Issues of Civil Union and Christian Marriage:

*The Board of the Covenant Network of Presbyterians is thankful for your leadership in helping the Presbyterian Church (USA) explore issues related to civil unions, Christian marriage, and the church, and appreciates the opportunity to participate in the conversation.*

### What is the place of covenanted same-gender partnerships in the Christian community?

Gay and lesbian Christians are members of our families and congregations, no different from all members of the Body of Christ in being full participants in the Christian community by God's grace. The church is called to provide wholehearted support which fosters the well-being of all families.

Gay and lesbian persons in committed same-gender partnerships stand in the same relation to God as all other persons. Therefore, the church should extend to them the same pastoral care it offers to other couples and families, helping them to work out their discipleship in the context of their relationships, not apart from them.

The church blesses heterosexual marriages contracted under civil law because for centuries marriage partners have testified that their bond is a means of grace. When same-gender partners testify that their committed relationships have the same benefit, they should receive the same blessing.

## Love Does Not Discriminate

*An excerpt from the Meditation offered by Tim Hart-Andersen on the occasion of the Blessing of the Marriage of Don and Kent*

"... We are not here to *witness the marriage* of these two fine gentlemen; that happened last August in San Francisco. Our job—the reason we are here today—is to call upon God to *bless this marriage*, to make *holy* what the State of California has decreed to be *legal*... to ask God to grant Kent and Don the gift of love that deepens over time, the grace to sustain their marriage, and the courage and strength to fulfill the promises they make, in plenty and in want, in joy and in sorrow, in sickness and in health, as long as they both shall live.

"... Marriage is hard work, but it is good work, *important work*, because in our covenantal relationships with one another we catch a glimpse of the kind of love God has for us. A good marriage is a reminder of God's love; it shows forth an unconditional embrace of the other. Kent and Don, there may be moments when you will be—at least for a time—rather unlovable to each other. The covenant you have made enjoins you to do everything in your power to keep the integrity of your promises—to have faith in one another, to trust one another, to respect one another, to understand that your love is a gift from God and, therefore, precious indeed.

"Keep covenant with one another, thereby honoring the Source of your love, the Giver of the gift."

# Al Winn: A Bold Witness for Justice

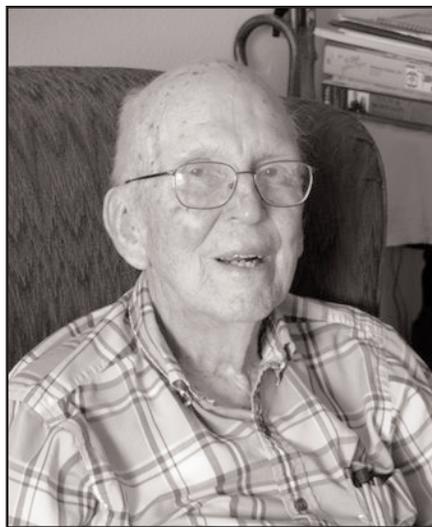
*Jean Rodenbough*

When Albert Curry Winn began his long career in the ordained ministry, he had no idea that what lay ahead would be as rich and challenging as it has been. Navy chaplain, parish pastor, college and seminary professor and president, Moderator of General Assembly for the former PCUS, author of ten books, chair of a committee formulating a new confession of faith, strong voice against racism and against discrimination against gay and lesbians—these contributions provide only a partial accounting of his many interests and his varied career within the Presbyterian Church. Throughout his life he has been a faithful follower of Christ and a man devoted to his wife, four children, and five grandchildren.

When he was interviewed recently at his home in Winston-Salem, NC, Al shared recollections of his long career in the ministry. Growing up in what he termed “a typical Southern Presbyterian church” in Greenville, SC, during the 1930’s, he was active in its youth programs, yet convinced that he would never go into the ministry. Never! Grandson of two preachers, he knew that call was not his.

Until that General Assembly Youth Conference after his first year in college. A series of lectures there on the prophet Amos by Dr. Tom Currie of Austin Seminary opened windows of insight for him and he realized that biblical truths were still relevant in his own time. Currie had drawn parallels between ancient Israel and the situation in our own country approaching the 1940’s and the prospect of war, and a new vista opened before young Al Winn. Before he returned home from that conference he knew his calling was to the ministry. It had been a significant event. One of two that changed his life, for it was at the conference that he met Grace Walker, who would spend the rest of her life as his wife.

Returning home, he was met with two reactions. Al’s visage must have resembled Moses coming down from the mountaintop, for his mother immediately asked him, “What is her name?” And his grandfather, retired from ministry and living with them, listened to Al’s newly discovered sense of call. Though the elderly minister had never mentioned his hope



**Al Winn at home in Winston-Salem, NC**

for his grandson to follow in his footsteps, Al was amazed to hear his grandfather’s response, uttered in a tone of fulfillment, “Laddie, I have prayed for this every night since you were born.”

The catalyst for these memorable decisions was Euphemia Gordon, a young DCE at his family’s church in Greenville, SC. Her encouragement and guidance for the direction Al’s life would take was “a tremendous influence on my ministry,” he said. For one thing, she had encouraged him to get to know Grace, who would be attending the conference. In addition, her pacifist leanings, supported by his mother’s, initiated a sense of compassion for his Davidson College classmates who were going into the military after the Japanese attack upon Pearl Harbor. As a result, Al’s initial plan on entering seminary was to become a military chaplain. After seminary he entered the Navy’s Chaplain School and was ready to serve, only to learn at that time of the Japanese surrender. One friend quipped, “They had heard Al was headed their way so they gave up!” During his days as a Navy chaplain in Seattle, he found it “a marvelous opportunity to get to know that generation” of young people who came to him for counseling. One of the young men he counseled was struggling with his sexual orientation. “Nothing in my training had given me any preparation for helping this young man,” said Al.

There were then the five years he served four churches in rural Virginia, a new experience for a city-bred Presbyterian. From there he spent seven years teaching at Stillman College, in Tuscaloosa, Alabama, a Presbyterian college for black students. President Sam Burney Hay invited him to teach during the summer sessions and then as permanent faculty, teaching the Bible. During these busy years, Al also began work on his Th.D. in New Testament at Union Seminary in Virginia.

While teaching at Stillman, Al was often invited to fill the pulpit at many of the local Presbyterian churches. After the Supreme Court decision in *Brown vs. Board of Education*, integrating the public schools, Al discovered that he was no longer welcome to preach at the white churches. However he continued to receive invitations from the black churches, and Al recalls his wife declaring that he truly honed his gifts of preaching in those welcoming black congregations.

As Al’s life and ministry challenged the evils of racism, he caught the attention of the Ku Klux Klan. During this time of unrest and uncertainty, with exclusion from the white population and threats from the Klan Grand Dragon, Al feared for the safety of his family. Police and the FBI provided no protection for them, as these entities were

heavily staffed by Klan members. It was in this situation that Al developed his special love for the Book of Psalms. Beset by enemies, the psalmists' only refuge was the living God. After seven years, Stillman's President Hay was retiring and Al realized that he was being groomed to step in as president of the college. However, Al felt strongly that Stillman should be led by an African-American president.

When an opportunity to teach at Louisville Seminary opened up, Al and Grace decided to move their family to Kentucky and Al was given time off to refresh and deepen his knowledge of Systematic Theology. Teaching at Louisville Seminary was enjoyable for Al, and after being there seven years, he learned that the seminary president, Dr. Frank Caldwell, was leaving to work with the Presbyterian Foundation in Charlotte. The Seminary Board of Directors encouraged Al to assume the presidency. Encouraged by his fellow faculty members, he accepted the challenge, remaining at the seminary for six more years before returning to his "first love," that of parish ministry.

He served churches after that time until his retirement, including Second Presbyterian Church in Richmond and the North Decatur Presbyterian Church in Atlanta. In Richmond, he encouraged the church to establish a support program for people with family members in Georgia prisons, and at North Decatur he led the congregation in efforts to help the homeless, including the establishment of a house for families in transition from homelessness.

While at Second Presbyterian Church in Richmond, Al was elected as Moderator of the 119th General Assembly (1979) of the PCUS, the "Southern" Presbyterian Church. Surprised by the General Assembly vote choosing him, Al served with pleasure and appreciated the opportunity to travel across the denomination and abroad meeting with other Presbyterians.

In light of his pacifist leanings, Al consistently objected to warfare, believing that peaceful means in solving conflicts was what faith required. Once retired, he devoted considerable time to writing a book on this subject, which became his treatise against war, *Ain't Gonna Study War No More: Biblical Ambiguity and the Abolition of War*, published in 1993. Though Al's approach to the topic was unique in his use of biblical passages referencing both war and peace, the public showed little interest in reading about war and the book did not sell well. Much to Al's dismay, the publisher destroyed 1,000 copies of his book, and there were then no hard copies available when the war in Iraq began and people tried to buy the book. (The entire book is available online through religion-online.org).

One of Al's efforts met partial success when he chaired a General Assembly committee organized to write a new confession. The committee, "a

wonderful group of people," worked for five years to bring it to completion, and it was approved by the 1976 General Assembly of the PCUS, but did not receive enough votes from the presbyteries. There were "ugly and controversial" reactions to the confession, now known as "A Declaration of Faith," and it never was included in the *Book of Confessions*. However, it was recommended for study and use in worship, and has enriched the life and ministry of many congregations ever since.

An advocate all during his ministry for matters surrounding peace and justice, Al has most recently worked for the full inclusion of gays and lesbians in the church. He had been mainly focused on racial issues, until his retirement to Winston-Salem to be near his daughter Grace and son-in-law, Stewart Ellis, a minister member of Salem Presbytery. Stewart was deeply involved with GLBT concerns, and in support of that effort, Al became involved as well.

Al was instrumental in setting up a Covenant Network chapter in Salem Presbytery, and as a former General Assembly Moderator, was invited to serve on the Board of Advisors of the national Covenant Network. He has been active in addressing his presbytery in favor of amendments before the GA on the matter of ordination for gays and lesbians, as they have come up since 1996. The most recent effort was this year, as Salem Presbytery voted on Amendment 08-B. Salem became one of the 34 presbyteries that switched from voting "No" to change in 2001, to voting "Yes" in 2009.

When asked about the current GA study on Civil Union and Christian Marriage, Al pointed out that whenever he was asked to counsel with a couple planning marriage he was always encouraged to realize that they wanted God to be part of their life together. Yet this option of publicly seeking God's blessing is not available to gay or lesbian couples, which is grievous to him. He finds nothing in the bible which would prevent their marriage, so he sees this as clearly a social issue and not a theological one. And, "I've learned not to foresee outcomes because I'm often wrong," he noted, "but I do see a growing awareness" of the need to widen the ordination process and eliminate the current restrictions on gay and lesbian candidates for ministry.

*Jean Rodenbough is a minister member of Salem Presbytery and had the pleasure of interviewing Al Winn, along with Lou East, Program and Communications Coordinator of the Covenant Network of Presbyterians.*

*An advocate all during his ministry for matters surrounding peace and justice, Al has most recently worked for the full inclusion of gays and lesbians in the church.*

# Standing Outside the Tent

*Karen Turney*

I was on the planning team for the Peacemaking Conference at the first-of-its-kind PC(USA) Big Tent event in Atlanta, June 10-13. At our conference, “Peacemaking in the Neighborhood,” we were pleased to have over 100 participants—one of ten groups meeting with over 1,500 participants overall. And, the idea of “cross-attendance” from one conference to another worked well for us—we had a number of folks who were registered for other conferences come to our workshops and dinner. We had terrific, inclusive messages in Peacemaking from Rev. Mark Lomax of the First Afrikan Presbyterian Church in Atlanta. “Peacemaking in the Neighborhood” focused on a variety of programs in the Atlanta area and then encouraged attendees to share about peacemaking in their neighborhoods at home—wherever that might be.

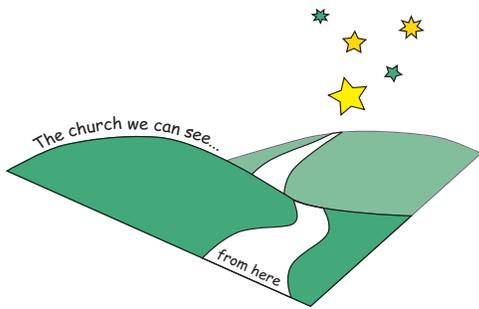
There was “Big Tent Worship” each day which encompassed all the conferences and a “Big Tent Exhibit Hall” for a multitude of exhibitors of program information for the conferences. But purposefully by the event organizers, no “special interest” groups were invited—no Covenant Network, no More Light Presbyterians, no TAMFS, etc.

This event, you see, was evidently designed as a sort of “Presbyterian-lite” and for that reason was commended by many whose evaluations I was privy to read as a Peacemaking Conference planner. Over and over I read how it was so nice to have an event without “fighting,” without “conflict,” without “special interests” dominating the discussion. And in the next evaluation question, the same writers would be congratulatory about the “diversity” and “multi-cultural representation.” It took me a while to sort this out in my mind, but I have finally come to the conclusion that those who view the Covenant Network as one “side” of a big, bothersome “fight” that gets in the way of being Presbyterian don’t see the personal pain, the hurt, and the consequence of exclusion. How can we help them understand what it means to be a GLBT person or allied friend who believes “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.” I want us all to be peacemakers, and I’ll start by telling the organizers—“this tent could have been a little bigger.”

*Karen Turney is a member of the Covenant Network Board of Directors and she serves the Presbytery of Greater Atlanta as a volunteer. She lives in Decatur, GA.*



**Karen Turney with her grandson August**



## Covenant Conference 2009: *The Church We Can See from Here*

Here is an excerpt from the 2009 Covenant Conference promotion video, which can be found on the CovNet website at [www.covenantnetwork.org](http://www.covenantnetwork.org):

“Our fourth plenary speaker is Dawne Moon. Dawne Moon is Assistant Professor of Sociology at Marquette University. She is the author of *God, Sex and Politics: Homosexuality and Everyday Theologies*, one of the smartest, most insightful, and most helpful books on the church and sexuality to come out in recent years.

Professor Moon is not a theologian. She is not an ethicist. She is a sociologist, an ethnographer. She is skilled in the arts of critical and charitable listening, and she listened for a long, long time as church folks talked about sexuality. Her book discerns the deep patterns of those conversations. It helps us see the implicit theologies, discover some surprising places of overlap, spot some interesting divergences, and identify some surprising opportunities that might be there if we decide to pursue them.

“Sometimes I despair of the quality of the debate in our denomination about sexuality. It seems like we’re lining up at the microphones to recite one more time, a little bit louder, the same arguments we’ve been making for thirty years. If we’re ever going to say something new, if we’re ever going to *hear* something new, it’s going to take a moment of critical self-reflection, a time of holding a mirror up to what we’ve been doing. It’ll take a time of penitence and a time of recommitment. I think Dawne Moon can help us in that work.” —Ted Smith

# Clowns and Calvin: Sparks of Glory in Unlikely Places

Deb Avery

God has engraved unmistakable marks of glory, so clear and so prominent that [no one can] plead the excuse of ignorance . . . There is no spot in the universe wherein you cannot discern at least some sparks of that glory.

(Calvin's *Institutes* I.5.1, quoted by Dr. Cynthia Rigby)

When I first told my Session that I planned to attend the Calvin Jubilee celebration in Montreat, I spoke of my yearning to sit at the feet of some of our best theologians and learn more about that austere intellectual whose life

work is at the heart of Presbyterian doctrine. The response of the elders around that table was not unlike that of many of the speakers at that very event: who in the world would think to put Calvin and Jubilee and celebration in the same sentence?



## Deb Avery at the Presbyterian Women's Gathering in Louisville in July

### *Distinctive Speakers & Inspiring Preachers at Covenant Conference 2009:*

**Mark Achtemeier**, Associate Professor of Systematic Theology and Ethics, University of Dubuque Theological Seminary;

**Gregory Bentley**, President of the National Black Presbyterian Caucus and pastor, Brown Memorial Presbyterian Church, Tuscaloosa, AL;

**Melva Wilson Costen**, Professor Emerita of Music and Worship, Interdenominational Theological Center, Atlanta, and author of *In Spirit and In Truth: The Music of African American Worship*;

**Kenda Creasy Dean**, Associate Professor of Youth, Church, and Culture, Princeton Theological Seminary, and author of *Oblivious: What the Faith of American Teenagers Is Telling the American Church*;

**Eddie Glaude**, Professor of Religion and African American Studies, Princeton University, and author of *In a Shade of Blue: Pragmatism and the Politics of Black America*;

**Dawne Moon**, Assistant Professor of Sociology, Marquette University, and author of *God, Sex and Politics: Homosexuality and Everyday Theologies*;

**Ted Smith**, Assistant Professor of Ethics and Society, The Divinity School, Vanderbilt University.

But as I began to reread the *Institutes*, as I listened to the various lectures, as I engaged in worship and in conversation with some of the nearly 200 participants, I began to see with new eyes the essential hope found in Calvin's life and work. My first tears of joy fell in the first lecture given by Cindy Rigby and I'm still celebrating.

Expecting to find an introvert's paradise, an intellectual summer camp, I was surprised by what God's Spirit brought to us. I don't know if any of us expected the Calvin Jubilee to bring about theological affirmation and spiritual renewal. Yet that is precisely what happened as one by one the speakers encouraged us to wake up to the wonder of creation, to the gift of salvation, to the reality and the relief that God is God and we are not. We were pushed to be fully cognizant of our own limitations (sin, depravity) and to consciously acknowledge God's limitless capacity and unbounded desire to redeem and renew. We were reminded to look at the world with new eyes—to be "suspended in wonderment," to be "stirred deeply" by the fact that our God, who is all in all, calls each one of us by name. In the face of such an amazing gift, the theological differences found even in that room seemed somehow less urgent.

Still filled with this intellectual and spiritual euphoria, I travelled on to the Presbyterian Women's Gathering in Louisville where I was greeted by the sight of nearly 3000 people (mostly women) worshipping together. Through the next several days, I learned about environmental knitting with plarn, handed out tattoos at the Covenant Network booth, reunited with friends from all over the country, and learned to overcome my distrust of Toot the Clown. While not exactly a move from the sublime to the ridiculous, to be honest, I am much more inclined to hang out with Calvin theologians than I am to spend time at the large floppy feet of a clown.

I am the first to admit that clowns scare me. But Toot, while dressed in silly clown clothes and wearing silly clown makeup, spoke in a real human voice about the real human experiences of joy and pain, of hope and suffering. The great mysteries of our lives, even the paradox of salvation, were embodied in her: a symbol of the unexpected surprise of joy and amazement in the midst of the reality of the pain and chaos of life. Here again, hope burst forth in the most unusual way.

As I returned to my congregation, I shared my renewed hope. To be sure, the reality of the struggle and pain within our denomination continues. But as Michael Jenkins shared with us in Montreat and as those Presbyterian Women demonstrated in Louisville, the Church is not just an association of like-minded individuals. Belonging is not contingent on our assent to propositions of faith or, dare I say, politics. Even though our human will may bring us to a decision about belonging, ultimately, we belong to the Body of Christ because in God's great love, we have been chosen from the foundation of the world. In these difficult days, it's easy to lose sight of hope, but there are signs everywhere that God is not done with us yet. God is faithful and no matter how bad things look, God's glory still shines. Thanks be to God!

*Deb Avery is pastor of Palo Cristi Presbyterian Church in Paradise Valley, AZ.*



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

### A Letter from our Co-Moderators: *Fall 2009*



*"We Gather Together."* That familiar Thanksgiving hymn may seem out of season as you read this newsletter, but it's a good theme song for the summer of 2009. Even without a General Assembly, we Presbyterians gathered together.

There was the "Big Tent" event in June, with the blessing of *"God with us joining"* and without the "distressing" of polity and policy (see verses one and two). Deborah—who still misses annual assemblies—was there; Tricia Dykers Koenig—who was relieved not to be strategizing an assembly—was there, along with board members Karen Turney and Louise Westfall.

There was the "Calvin Jubilee" in July at Montreat. Deborah, Pam Byers, and board member Ken Kovacs arrived early for a gathering of our courageous and faithful friends in the Presbytery of Western North Carolina. What an honor for us to personally thank them for a stunning turnaround vote early this year in support of the proposed Amendment 08-B! *"Thy name be ever praised! O Lord, make us free!"*

At the Calvin event we sang the praises and forgot *"not (our) own"* Founding Forebear on the 500th anniversary of his birth. Calvin himself was not a fan of birthday celebrations, but surely he would have smiled on this gathering, a coming together of his theologically diverse and still reforming descendants, still claimed by the vision of a church that is generous in its grace, faithful to the Word, liberated and reconciled by the sacraments.

"The Gathering" in Louisville brought thousands of Presbyterian Women and a few of their brothers together to celebrate God's presence *"beside us to guide us"* in mission and ministry.

Each time we Presbyterians "gather together, to ask the Lord's blessing" on our life together, to be "chastened and hastened" toward knowing God's will, to engage one another without "oppressing or distressing" and with God "at our side" (not "on" our side!)—is a time of thanksgiving.

We'll gather in Cleveland in November for our annual Covenant Conference, hoping to glimpse this church God is "ordaining" for God's reign. The view is divine. See verse two of the hymn for that wonderful image. Better yet, sing it.

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