



Winter 2009-10

The Covenant Connection

A Newsletter of the Covenant Network of Presbyterians (Vol 12, #4)

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

San Francisco Presbytery Votes to Ordain Lisa Larges as Minister of Word and Sacrament

On November 10, 2009, the Presbytery of San Francisco voted to ordain Lisa Larges as Minister of Word and Sacrament, validate her call as Minister Coordinator of That All May Freely Serve, and enroll her as a member of the Presbytery. In approving the ordination of a ministerial candidate who asserted a “departure” on G-6.0106b, the presbytery followed the process lifted up in Authoritative Interpretations of G-6.0108 by the 2006 and 2008 General Assemblies. Though she has been under care of the presbytery for twelve years, this was the first time the whole presbytery had actually had a chance to meet and examine her. Ms. Larges’s answers—eloquent, biblical, occasionally humorous, and clearly showing her deep piety and faith—satisfied a majority of presbyters that she is both gifted and called to her ministry and that her departure did not constitute a “failure to adhere to essentials of Reformed faith and polity.”

Preparing for G.A.

The 219th General Assembly will meet July 3-10, 2010, in Minneapolis to consider numerous issues of significance for the PC(USA) and the world, including ordination, marriage, social justice, peace, additions to the Book of Confessions, the proposed new Form of Government, and more. For ideas of overtures your presbytery might send, please be in touch with National Organizer Tricia Dykers Koenig, triciadk@covenantnetwork.org.

As always, the Covenant Network will be present at G.A. to support commissioners and advisory delegates with a vision of “a church as generous and just as God’s grace.” Public events include the pre-G.A. Commissioner Convocation Dinner Friday evening with speaker Doug Nave, and the Monday Covenant Network G.A. Luncheon with keynoter Gustav Niebuhr.

If you will be in Minneapolis, Tricia is eager to help you plug in to our activities; we need dozens of volunteers, and there’s an opportunity to serve with your name on it! If attending G.A. in person is not in your plans, you can help by introducing commissioners and ADs to CovNet, inviting them to attend our events and offering to purchase their tickets; by making a contribution to help us defray costs; and of course, by remaining in prayer for the G.A. and the whole PC(USA).

Two Important GAPJC Rulings

The General Assembly’s Permanent Judicial Commission has upheld the right of presbyteries to consider “departures” declared by candidates for ordination or for entry into presbyteries. In *Naegeli et al. vs. Presbytery of San Francisco*, the GAPJC upheld the right of San Francisco Presbytery to examine candidate Lisa Larges for ordination, with a declared “departure,” and in *Bierschwale et al. vs. Presbytery of the Twin Cities Area*, the GAPJC upheld the Presbytery’s decision to restore Dr. Paul Capetz to the exercise of ordained office despite his declaration of a biblically-based “departure” from G-6.0106b. These decisions build on the Authoritative Interpretations issued by the 2006 and 2008 General Assemblies, helping return the church to its historic practice of mutual forbearance in matters of biblical interpretation and conscience. Both cases were argued by Covenant Network director Doug Nave.

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.

The Body We Can See From Here

Acts 1:1-11

Ted Smith

Excerpted from his sermon at the
2009 Covenant Conference

Without the gift of the Holy Spirit, we don't even know what we are missing. It is the presence of God in the church that lets us see the absence of God from the church.

If there's one thing we know about Jesus, it is this: he is gone. Gone. Scripture, confessions and cynics all agree. Jesus is gone. Our lesson from Acts gives details: "a cloud took him out of their sight" and "two men in white robes"—might as well call them angels—attend the scene (1:9-11). Luke 24 gives the plain version: "he withdrew from them and was carried up into heaven" (v. 51). The Gospel of John doesn't say much about Jesus' departure, but it remembers him talking about it all the time. "Do not hold me," Jesus says to Mary in the garden (20:17). I'm going to "go away," Jesus tells the disciples (14:28). Different books tell the story in different ways, but everyone agrees: Jesus is gone.

The confessions of the church follow the witness of Scripture. "He ascended into heaven," we say. He's gone.

Here is one place where the creeds and the cynics agree. "He's gone. Well isn't *that* a handy little doctrine? You say he rose from the dead. But where is he? He rose, but then flew up into heaven? Isn't that *convenient*?" He's gone.

I believe all serious talk about the church happens in the wake of the Ascension. It begins with a recognition that Jesus is gone. For if the church is the Body of Christ, then the question of the church we can see from here becomes a question of the body we can see from here. And we must say: the body of Christ is gone. This is not just an abstract doctrine. It is the deep, faithful, painful recognition that our congregations and denominations are not as they should be. It is a recognition that children baptized in the church's fonts, fed at the church's tables, and called to ministry through the church's preaching are then turned away because of who they love. And, as Melva Costen reminded us, this is not the first time the church has proven that the body of Christ is gone. *We would not tell the truth about Scripture or our lives if we said anything else.*

And we would not tell the truth if this was all we said. The Gospel of John, especially, reminds us that the going of Jesus is inseparable from the coming of the Holy Spirit. "I will not leave you orphaned," Jesus says to the disciples. "I am coming to you" (14:18). He promises them the gift of Advocate, Paraclete, Comforter. Jesus ascended, Ephesians says, "so that he might fill all things" (4:10). John Calvin has these passages in mind when he writes (*Institutes* II, xvi, 14),

Carried up into heaven, therefore, he withdrew his bodily presence from our sight, not to cease to be present with believers still on their earthly pilgrimage, but to rule heaven and earth with a more immediate power. But by his ascension he fulfilled what he had promised: that he would be with us even to the end of the world.

Jesus is gone. And the Spirit of Jesus has come, to fill heaven and earth with an even more immediate and intimate power, that Jesus might be with us always, even to the end of the age.

Stay with me now: there's one more move in unfolding this dialectic by which we live. **Jesus is gone, the Holy Spirit has come ... and still, more than ever, Jesus is gone.** The persons of the Trinity are not interchangeable parts. They are not fungible goods. The Ascension is not like some cosmic change machine (put a dollar bill in, get four quarters back, and it all spends the same).

Canadian theologian Douglas Farrow says it like this: "Pentecost does not resolve the problem of the presence and the absence. It creates it, by adding a presence which discloses an absence." Without the gift of the Holy Spirit, we don't even know what we are missing. It is the presence of God in the church that lets us see the absence of God from the church. This is what I mean: it is exactly at the communion table, when God gives Godself to us most deeply, when we taste and see that the Lord is good—it is just there that we feel the distance of the church from God most deeply. It is as we gather around the table that we feel the absence of those many thousands gone, those enslaved bodies, those transgendered bodies, those gay and lesbian bodies, those sick bodies, those criminal bodies, those poor bodies, those bodies declared illegal, that crucified body of Jesus ... all those bodies we have tried to stuff under the table and into the closet, just out of reach of our memory. The presence of God reminds us of their absence. In the presence of God, they cry out—we cry out—with the souls under the altar (Rev. 6:9-11). "Pentecost does not resolve the problem of the presence and the absence. It creates it, by adding a presence which discloses an absence" (*Ascension & Ecclesia*, p. 271).



Ted Smith

Imaginations formed by the Ascension can think—can live—presence and absence together. They can say no to visions of unqualified presence. This is, I think, what Eddie Glaude was calling us to when he called us to be Saturday Christians. He called us to hold off on the rush to Sunday, the rush to Alleluia. This is a call to hold open the space for deliberation in the meantime, the in-between-time, and so to refuse the easy comforts of false fulfillment.

Imaginations formed by the Ascension also say no to unqualified absence. They refuse the cynicism that sees only power politics at work in the church. They refuse the despair that says things will never change. And they refuse the hubris that says it is all up to us. Imaginations formed by the Ascension refuse any vision of absence that forgets the presence of God.

Christians in the wake of the Ascension see both presence and absence. They sit in the dark of absence long enough that—in the phrase we learned from Howard Thurman via Gregory Bentley—the dark becomes luminous. This is the kind of faith, I think, that has sustained Melva Costen’s family through eight generations of mixed messages—and worse—from Presbyterians. It is the kind of faith shown by the glbt Christians who, Mark Achtemeier said, were “miraculously willing to hang in there with me.” Such faith is a miracle. It involves seeing enough of the presence of God in the life of the church that you can’t let go, but then finding yourself broken open by the depth of the absence that presence discloses ... and then finding yourself, in that breaking, bound yet more tightly to the one broken for us.

This is the kind of faith, I think, to which the Task Force on Peace, Unity, and Purity called us. To say that *Christ* is the peace, unity, and purity of the church is to proclaim a kind of presence. It is to say that where we see only conflict, Christ has already made peace. It is also to refuse every other source of community as false. It is to say no to peace built on agreement about how to vote, or whom to ordain, or how to interpret Scripture, or what kind of worship we prefer. Ascension faith has the courage to refuse alternatives like these. It has the tenacity to wait for the peace of Christ by the peace of Christ. Ascension faith has the capacity to *yearn*. It knows how to yearn for the body we can see from here.

And surely this rainbow stole I wear was knit in the luminous darkness of the Ascension. It was made, you remember, by the prayer-shawl ministry team from Fairmount Presbyterian Church. It is a prayer shawl, for comforting a body that has grown ill in the absence of Jesus. And it is a stole, a recognition of the gifts already poured out, the means of grace already passed on by a rainbow of God’s people, the living presence of the Holy Spirit. It is both prayer shawl and stole, a faithful recognition of the ways presence and absence are knit together in the life of the church.

At the end of today’s lesson the “men of Galilee” are left staring in to space. They have seen the body of Jesus ascend, and they are just waiting for him to come back. And the angels say, “Don’t just stand here looking at the sky, contemplating the dialectic between presence and absence. Jesus will return to you in the manner in which he left.” That is, he did not leave because you sent him away, and he will not return because you tell him to. The men of Galilee seem to get it for a change. They do not stay to gaze into the sky. They come down from the high of the conference. They go back to the work of being church, back to yearning. They go back to the upper room, back to the place the women have been all along. I like to think of them sitting together, making prayer-shawl stoles for the church we can see from here.

Ted Smith is Assistant Professor of Ethics and Preaching at Vanderbilt Divinity School and a member of the Covenant Network Board of Advisors. The full text of this sermon is posted on the Covenant Network website.

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Conference CDs Available

The mind-stretching plenaries and all the wonderfully rich worship services from the 2009 Conference, “The Church We Can See From Here,” are available on CD or audio cassette. Order through the CovNet e-store.

And Grace Will Lead Me Home

Mark Achtemeier

Excerpted from his plenary address
at the 2009 Covenant Conference

The full text of this address is posted
on the Covenant Network website

There is a destructive myth circulating in both the right and left wings of the church, which says that if you're really serious about biblical authority you will of course embrace a traditionalist point of view in this issue, whereas a more progressive stance requires you to hold onto the scriptures more loosely. Well I don't believe it, and neither should you! It is time to put these misleading stereotypes to rest.

I started out very sure and very settled and very content with seeing exclusion as God's will for the church. Like many, I had succumbed to the temptations of an ecclesiastical tunnel-vision: I read authors I agreed with. I talked with people I agreed with. I hung out with people I agreed with. I was exceedingly comfortable holding the position I did, I was supported in it, I was popular. And I had absolutely no reason to question any of it.

But God had other plans. Out of the blue, opportunity opened up for serious conversation and friendship with some quite remarkable gay Christians. This was new for me. When you are a firebrand exclusivist, hurling thunderbolts and belching fire against the opposition, gay people with any sense tend to avoid your company, or at least they avoid telling you they are gay. But suddenly here I was confronted with these new friends who were eager to talk about the faith, this despite the fact that a lot of what they heard coming from me was unwittingly insulting or offensive. Their willingness to engage in frank conversation was a remarkable gift of grace, and the experience proved powerfully unsettling for two reasons. First, I started to realize the extent to which the church's traditional teaching functioned like a sign over the door saying to gay people, "There is nothing here for people like you." This was disturbing for a good evangelical like me who fervently believes that Jesus reaches out to everyone.

Even more unsettling was the fact that I wasn't finding at all what I expected to find in these people. Let me talk about those expectations a bit, because this is where my comfortably settled convictions really started to crack.

Like so many traditionalists, I was accustomed to thinking of homosexuality as a kind of destructive addiction, a disordered inclination toward damaging behaviors that was comparable in some respects to alcoholism. The consequences of viewing homosexuality in this way are pervasive and far-reaching. For me and many others, it led to a clear and straightforward set of pastoral prescriptions. As with anyone who struggles against a destructive addiction,



Mark Achtemeier

the first and most important message to them is that they need to stop acting on their compulsions.

Believing as I did, it was perfectly clear to me that this had to be the church's message to gay and lesbian Christians.

Viewing homosexuality in this way also meant that for me, like so many traditionalists, calls for justice and equal rights made no sense whatever. Such appeals have obviously been a mainstay of progressive rhetoric for years, but they have absolutely no traction among traditionalists. The reason is that no one in their right mind would argue that the cause of justice and equality was served by affirming the right of addicts to pursue self-destructive behaviors. Human beings do not possess a God-given right to harm themselves!

Appeals to compassion also make no sense if one assumes that homosexuality is a harmful compulsion. Consider again the case of persons struggling with alcohol abuse. It is completely inconceivable that the church, in the name of a superficial compassion, would affirm their self-destructive behavior, assure them it is who they are, or celebrate their compulsion as God's good gift. I trust you can see why those who view the issue through the lens of the alcoholism analogy find the progressive agenda so deeply disturbing.

So I was expecting to find self-indulgent individuals, who were inclined to elevate their own personal gratification above any serious wrestling with Christian discipleship. My prejudices could not have been more mistaken. What I found instead were devoted Christian believers, filled with grace and a loving concern for the downtrodden deeply engaged in spiritual disciplines, acutely aware of their own sins and failings, and eager to bring their faults to God for healing.

What absolutely did not compute for them, though, was trying to view their lifelong commitment to a partner under the category of sins and failings. "I just can't make sense of it," one friend said to me. "My relationship with my partner is

the part of my life that demands the greatest sacrifices and stretches me the most in my ability to love. I think it is very important to confess my sins, and I do it regularly. But far from feeling sinful, this feels like the one area of my life that brings out the very best in me.”

The kind of people God led me into fellowship with bore absolutely no resemblance to what I expected to find on the basis of my view that homosexuality was a spiritually destructive compulsion. Could it be, I wondered, that I was mistaken?

Now immediately all kinds of theological alarm bells started going off, because what it meant was, I was allowing experience to call my understanding of the Bible into question. And as a good, neo-orthodox evangelical, I have on many occasions delivered the standard speech about the terrible dangers that result if we allow personal experience to trump the Bible’s witness. Such a move threatens to set our own personal authority above that of Scripture; it undermines the ability of Scripture to challenge and correct us.

I continue to believe that. But struggling with this, I came to realize that this important affirmation does not exhaust what needs to be said about the way the Bible and our everyday experience interact with one another.

Let me illustrate what I found. Scripture says that those who abide in Christ “ought to walk in the same way he walked” (I John 2:6). Saint Augustine jokingly points out that Jesus walked on water! So surely walking in the same way he walked means we should walk on water, too. Doesn’t that make sense? (Homilies on First John, in *Works of St. Augustine*, B. Ramsey, trans., p. 31).

In fact, we reject this particular interpretation of Scripture because it contradicts our experience. Walking on water like Jesus did is impossible for ordinary people. Does acknowledging this mean we are elevating our experience above the authority of the Bible? Of course not! It means that we must find another interpretation of this passage that makes better sense of what we experience in the world.

And so it is that Augustine finally suggests to his hearers that walking in the way Jesus walked means following the path of righteousness and charity that he pursued on his way to the cross. Is Augustine playing fast and loose with Scriptural authority by this suggestion? To the contrary, he is taking that authority seriously!

This is a hugely important point. When we find ourselves in a situation where our understanding of the Bible collides regularly with the lived experience of Christian believers, we don’t take that as license to ignore Scripture. But it certainly ought to make us ask whether we’ve correctly understood the Bible’s teaching.

And the contradictions between my assumptions and my experience continued to mount up. If you can get an alcoholic to stop drinking, you expect that person’s life to get better. Indeed, it’s not unusual to hear people saying “I got my life back” when they talk about recovering from a destructive addiction.

If homosexuality is a destructive compulsion like alcoholism, one would surely expect to hear similar sorts of testimonies about it. However once I started paying attention, I began running into more and more instances where devout gay Christians, following the church’s traditional counsel, failed to find the life-giving liberation one would expect if the alcoholism analogy were true. Instead their, heroic efforts at faithfulness led to results that were spiritually and psychologically crippling.

How did any of this square with my belief that gays and lesbians were called to embrace abstinence or heterosexual marriage as an expression of obedience which led to abundant life?

When it came to committed, loving, same-gender relationships, the assumption that these relationships also constituted a sinful, destructive departure from God’s will failed miserably to account for what I and many others had encountered in the actual lives of committed gay people.

Is there another way of understanding homosexuality from the Bible, a different interpretation of it, which makes better sense of what I and so many others were seeing? In Genesis 2:18 God says, “It is not good that the human being should be alone; I will make a helper corresponding to him.”

Genesis describes God’s creation of human beings for intimate fellowship with another person. This is not a choice that we can simply reverse or undo. It is deeply inscribed in our nature as human beings.

So isn’t what we’re dealing with here an alternative form of God’s gift of life created for communion with a life-partner? Within the context of my traditionalist assumptions, I had been effectively assuming that this aspect of our God-given nature just wasn’t there for gay and lesbian people. When I thought about this, it seemed uncomfortably close to saying that gay people weren’t fully human. It was shocking to realize that the position I’d held in practical terms was fairly close to that.

The amazing thing about understanding homosexuality in this new way was that suddenly everything I had been seeing made perfect biblical sense. There turned out to be a substantial theological literature describing how spiritually and psychologically damaging it is to deny that aspect of our nature which Genesis 2 describes. I am referring of course, to the Reformation critiques of mandatory celibacy.

Suppose the church told you that you should not only exercise self-discipline while you are single, but that you should completely and permanently renounce the possibility of ever finding that special someone to share your life with. That is the requirement that the Protestant Reformers were denouncing and that is the requirement our current church teaching imposes on gay and lesbian believers!

(continued on p. 6)

And Grace Will Lead Me Home (cont'd from p. 5)



Scripture tells us, after all, that God's dealings with human beings are not arbitrary, and God's commands are not lacking sense. I give you these commandments "for your good," says the Lord (Deut. 10:13), which means if we cannot discern the good purposes behind them we have not understood them correctly. God has come among us as the incarnate *Logos* – as sense, as reason, as the fundamental rationality underlying the entire cosmos. If the Bible's teaching does not help us make powerful sense of life and experience, if biblical faithfulness is not life-giving, that is a sure sign we have not understood our Scripture properly.

Understanding homosexuality as an alternate form of the divine gift described in Genesis 2 yields a Bible that makes powerful and life-giving sense. I am committed to praying and working with all of you for the day when the whole church comes to recognize and embrace this, consecrating the marriages of our gay sisters and brothers, and confirming their calls to all the ministries of Christ's church.

Mark Achtemeier teaches systematic theology and ethics at the University of Dubuque Theological Seminary.

A Healing Experience of Worship

The CovNet Conference Committee is deeply grateful to the students from Coe College and their chaplain, Kristin Hutson, for the Saturday Morning Worship Service on Nov. 7, 2009, which they planned and led for us in Cleveland. Kirsten Kingdon wrote of her experience:

It was a simple service by the young adults. An interfaith chapel. A few rows of metal folding chairs. Rows of shoes outside the door. People sitting on the floor. A piano. A few quiet voices. Some simple songs.

Scripture: 1 Samuel 17:38-47, Genesis 32:22-31, and Genesis 21:9-20. Powerful messages of risk, struggle, and inheritance, each followed by profoundly moving witnesses, a prayer, and a song. Anointing with oil and a blessing.

Yet, as the service ended, people lingered. Hugs abounded among people who were no longer strangers. Hearts were touched to the core. Tears appeared unbidden in the eyes of many. We walked out of that 40-minute service, knowing we had shared holy moments.

Abundant, rich worship has always been a highlight of Covenant Network conferences. This one was no exception. It was just one of five worship experiences. The night before, for instance, we had been lifted up by a magnificent service, complete with two choirs, brass instruments, organ, and a stirring, eloquent sermon in the cathedral-like Church of the Covenant.



Kirsten Kingdon with her son Jim

I left the conference—as I have left all Covenant Network Conferences—humbled by my experiences of God's holy presence within a community of fellow believers.

Kirsten Kingdon is an elder at New York Avenue Presbyterian Church in Washington, D.C., and a member of the Covenant Network Board of Advisors.

Kristin Hutson (left), chaplain at Coe College, Coe College students **Jenny McArdle** (front) and **Taishima Moore** (right), and **Linda Morgan-Clement** (back), college chaplain and director of interfaith ministry at College of Wooster, participate in one of the many inspiring worship services at the 2009 Covenant Conference.



2009 Covenant Conference

The texts of the compelling presentations and sermons from the 2009 Covenant Conference, *The Church We Can See From Here*, can be found on our website. Preachers or plenary speakers pictured (L to R) include **Melva Costen**, **Kenda Dean**, and **Eddie Glaude**. (Not pictured: **Gregory Bentley** and **Dawne Moon**).



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

Sisters and brothers in Christ: We thank you for your effort to guide the church into faithful consideration of a complex and important issue. As you draft your final report, the board of the Covenant Network respectfully offers the following suggestions.

We encourage you to give a fuller response to the urgent questions facing Presbyterians in states that recognize same-gender civil marriage, and in congregations where the joyful and unapologetic blessing of same-gender partnerships is an indispensable exercise of pastoral care. If we are to honor the covenant you propose, what does mutual forbearance mean in practice?

You were charged to consider “the place of covenanted same-gender partnerships in the Christian community.” We submit that it is not enough simply to “acknowledge the presence of same-gender partners in our communities and congregations”; **we call on you to affirm unequivocally that there is a place at Christ’s “welcome table” – and in the PC(USA) – for Christians in same-gender partnerships and their children.** We are convinced that “failure to do so constitutes a rejection of Christ himself and causes a scandal to the gospel” (G-5.0103).

While we recognize that Christians disagree concerning blessings for same-gender partnerships and civil marriages, the church nonetheless can affirm, with Genesis 2 and John Calvin, that it is not good for humans to be alone. If our experience and study of Christian marriage have shown us anything, it is that lifelong, covenanted partnerships yield rich benefits for spiritual formation and nurture, not only for the individuals themselves, but also for their families, their communities, and their churches. Accordingly, as members of Christ’s body, we celebrate same-gender partners and their families, and welcome them, their gifts, and their witness to us.

We in the Covenant Network affirm your call to the PC(USA) to exercise mutual forbearance while we study, debate, and pray about the complex issues related to civil and religious recognition and solemnization of same-gender partnerships. We urge your support for the following understanding of true mutual forbearance.

True mutual forbearance means that, while remaining together at Christ’s table and continuing to dialogue with one another, we do not seek to initiate disciplinary or remedial actions against pastors or sessions who exercise a different expression of conscience. As you observe, the right to perform marriages is given by the state. **Mutual forbearance at minimum must mean that pastors in states that recognize marriage equality must be able to perform civil marriages for all their congregants, without fear of ecclesiastical charges. If in your judgment constitutional interpretation or amendment is necessary, we urge you to recommend it.**

Mutual forbearance further means respecting the discretion of pastors to extend needed pastoral care, counsel, and support to all congregants, following their own biblically-informed conscience. **Mutual forbearance demands assurances that no pastor will be compelled to officiate at a marriage ceremony in violation of his or her conscience.** Though it is our hope that more states will legalize same-gender marriages, changes in civil law do not and should not create enforceable mandates on religious officers or bodies.

The positions on same-gender relationships of our ecumenical partners form an important part of the context for the PC(USA). We would highlight that two of our “full communion” partners, the United Church of Christ and the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, as well as the Episcopal Church (with whom we also have an Agreement) have made decisive shifts towards the full recognition of families with same-gender partners. We hope the Presbyterian Church will shortly join them.

Thank you for your important work. We in the Covenant Network continue to hold you all in prayer.



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

A Letter from our Co-Moderators: *Winter 2009-10*



The new church year doesn't begin at Easter or in the spring of the year with promises of budding new life. It begins on the first Sunday of Advent when it gets dark early and the winds have become bitter. That intentional, liturgical starting point speaks a message of hope to people who know what it is to wander in darkness. Many Presbyterians, who have had their hopes dampened by attempts to exclude and deny them their calling from God to serve the church they love, feel like they have been wandering for a long time. Some of us feel as though the church is wandering. It feels that way when Presbyterians resort to combat in their presbyteries rather than having genuine, honest conversations with one another. For many it feels that way when church courts are used to harass qualified, faithful GLBT candidates and discourage them from seeking church offices. And it must surely feel as though the church is wandering and even lost at times, to a generation of young people who simply don't understand why this is such a big deal.



The good news, made possible for us in the Bethlehem birth, is that even in our wandering, we are never alone—God is with us. Even when it seems bleak at times, there is always light to be found shining in the darkness. God is always doing a new thing in the world, surprising us in ways we never before imagined and catching us off guard. How could it be otherwise? For now, however, the Covenant Network of Presbyterians continues to work in hope and in the sure and certain knowledge that we are moving much closer to a church as generous and just as God's grace. As our amazing fall conference in Cleveland recently celebrated, it truly is a church we can see from here.

Blessings in the New Year.

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

David A. Van Dyke
Pastor, House of Hope Presbyterian Church, St. Paul, MN