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Open & Hands

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Summer 2000

Shaping An Inclusive Church

THE GOD OF VIOLENCE

Carter Heyward on Nonviolent Atonement
How the Bible Understands Violence
The United Methodist General Conference
William Sloane Coffin on Gay Marriage
Two Poems by J. Barrie Shepherd
A New Song by Marsha Stevens

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DOWN ON THE FARM

Addressing Rural Issues

Theme Section: How is it for lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender people, their families, friends, and congregations, in rural communities and towns? How do agrarian congregations and governing bodies deal with issues of diversity and inclusion, especially in the area of sexual diversity? And what are some of the misconceptions of their urban brothers and sisters? For this issue, we welcome a good mix of personal stories of individuals or individual congregations (or church bodies) as well as analysis articles.

1000-2500 words per article, photographs welcome.

Ministries Section: Columns may include: Welcoming Process, Connections (with other justice issues), Worship, Spirituality, Outreach, Leadership, Marriage, Health, Youth, Campus, Children, and Parents. These brief articles may or may not have to do with the theme of the issue.

750-1000 words.

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The god of Violence

Chris Glaser

In the film *Dominick and Eugene*, the mentally disabled Dominick witnesses child abuse firsthand, perpetrated by a father on his son, a boy whom Dominick befriended along his garbage route. Seeking refuge in the sanctuary of his Catholic church, a priest approaches him to see if he can be of any help. Tearfully Dominick points to Jesus on the cross and passionately says, “I would *never* let that happen to my son!”

Even growing up as a fundamentalist biblical literalist, the concept of a bloodthirsty god who demanded the death of his own son seemed out of kilter with what I had otherwise been taught about God. Singing hymns like “There Is a Fountain Filled With Blood” and “Washed in the Blood of the Lamb” offered gruesome images. (I also wondered how blood could make me “clean” or “white as snow!”) And yet there was some comfort in it. Jesus paid the price that I deserved. But in turn, *that* conjured up frightening possibilities. What could I have done by the age of six, when I was baptized, to deserve crucifixion?

And though I was taught that Jesus was crucified so others would not be, I grew up recognizing that the crucifixions had *not* stopped. Like the one of the beloved volunteer youth worker in my American Baptist Church who was chased out of our congregation simply for *being* homosexual (he himself thought it was a sin and chose not to practice) and then outed by our “pastor” in three congregations he subsequently tried to join. This spiritual abuse would appear to the perpetrator mild compared to the abuse God “required” “his” own son to endure.

I write this on Maundy Thursday evening in the year 2000 when most self-respecting Christians are in church observing Christ’s premonition of his death and his offering of the first

eucharist, the last supper. They’re doing the right thing being in church on this holy anniversary of that event. But I felt that my own devotion should be spent in this exercise of exorcizing the supposed violence of god.

For those who want a more detailed argument in favor of a different understanding of the atonement, I encourage you to read Carter Heyward’s article that follows—better yet, read the book from which it’s excerpted, *SAVING JESUS From Those Who Are Right*. And I have the *chutzpah* to suggest my own book *Coming Out As Sacrament*, which explores traditional notions of atonement in the light of LGBT experience and René Girard’s school of thought regarding the scapegoat mechanism. When the *Open Hands* Advisory Committee chose this theme, *The god of Violence*, I knew I would have to put in my two cents. I can’t remain silent in the slandering of God.

Because I believe that, in the biblical witness, even *before* Jesus comes along, God comes out to us as One who desires mercy and not sacrifice, justice rather than solemn assemblies, kindness and humility rather than sacrifice of the firstborn, whether God’s or anybody’s.

God comes down from a mountain of expectations (Mount Sinai) and descends to a grave, a creed says even to hell itself, to embrace us and our human experience and vulnerability. What kind of love is this? It’s the toughest love—not the “tough love” some parents and friends and congregations practice toward their gay and lesbian and bisexual and transgendered children that pushes them away, but the tough love that goes the extra mile to embrace us.

This is a love that doesn’t care about ancient Jewish or Roman or latter-day American understandings of retributive justice (“an eye for an eye” or a life for a life), nor about cultural mores or governmental or denominational laws, but only about open hands, welcoming

arms, affirming hugs, reconciliation of persons, and more light from the Spirit.

This is a love that doesn’t care about control or coercion or conformity. This is the love of the Good Shepherd, the rabbi, the healer, the evangelist, the Suffering Servant, the Messiah, that leads, teaches, touches our wounds, proclaims the Good News, is vulnerable, and delivers us from oppression. This is the love that is the power of God. As humans, we have mistaken and limited and distorted notions of power. We think of it as control. But God’s power is love, which is not about control but about persuasion. When we really understand ourselves as the beloved, we are transformed, certainly, better able to love ourselves and to love others. But we are not asked to change our spots anymore than the leopard. We are called only to come out, to come out of ourselves, and *any* confining space, to love (with *agape* and *eros*) and serve (providing hospitality) and celebrate (thanksgiving).

Coming out is a sacrament, a sacred act in which God’s presence is felt, not because of the suffering it may cause us, but because of the vulnerability we offer and therefore invite. Coming out begets coming out. And God is present in vulnerability—that is, for those with faithful vision and open hands and hearts. God is there choosing life for us, the abundant life Jesus promised. As “living sacrifices,” the sacrifice is not the goal but the life to be lived to its fullest. Crucifixion is a product of human evil. Resurrection is the promise of God’s will.

The god of violence is a false god. The God of loving vulnerability is the one true God. God comes to us not as an armored warrior, nor even a robed cleric waving the Bible as a weapon. God comes out to us as a naked lover, ready to share his/her body. “This is my body.” “You are the Body.” May we receive the body with open hands. ♥



Chris Glaser, M.Div., is the editor of Open Hands and the author of Coming Out As Sacrament (Westminster John Knox Press, 1998).

Toward a Nonviolent Understanding of Atonement

Carter Heyward

Excerpted from her new book, *SAVING JESUS From Those Who Are Right* (Fortress Press, 1999). Please read the book for the full context of these excerpts.

The Crucible of Atonement

The historical context of evil is the crucible of atonement. Wrong relation between groups of people, in which one group is violating and destroying another, or in which people are destroying other creatures and the earth itself—this is the context in which right relation with God always need to be made. But what does such atonement actually involve? And how does it happen?

We sometimes can image atonement more easily if we have a personal picture of God as “one of us”—anthropomorphized, if only momentarily, so that we can notice the relational dynamics of atonement. In this spirit, let us image God for a moment as one of us: She is devastated that Her human friends have betrayed her. Our response to God’s call, historically and still today, has been to turn away. We deny our white privilege. We are oblivious to our anti-Semitism. We trivialize our misogyny. We justify our homophobia. We make excuses, always excuses, for ourselves.

What is God’s response?

As the source of justice-love, God is also the wellspring of compassion, the creator and liberator of all that is wise and good. Because She knows the secrets of our hearts and our wounded, frightened places. She also understands that we are not being true to ourselves, one another, or Her. God knows that, in this sense, we do not know what we are doing. Still, She loves us and She

yearns for our well-being. She grieves our violence against one another and ourselves. In her yearning and grief, She offer us Herself—as friend. Reaching for us, She longs for us to reciprocate, to meet Her as companion. This is her forgiveness—the YES which is Her yearning, Her grief, Her offering, Her reaching, without ceasing.

God forgives us. But She knows that we cannot “accept” this forgiveness, because we do not experience it. And we do not experience it because we have not turned around to meet Her. We fail to notice that She is with us. In our ignorance or fear, we do not hear God, we do not believe Her, and we don’t yet know that we need Her. Instead, we mangle in violence and confusion, guilt and self-justification. Over time, we languish, cut off more and more from others, from ourselves, and from the Spirit, descending to that “place” in ourselves and our world that many poets and religious teachers have called “hell,” a place of utter isolation.

Our own experiences tell us that nothing is sadder than to watch those whom we love turn away from us and slowly, or not so slowly, descend into hell. So too with God, nothing could be sadder for God than when we turn away, knowing not what we do, and slip away into hells of our own making.

How then, in this situation, is right relation made? Where is atonement?

Like forgiveness, atonement has two “moments.” The first is eternal: the Spirit is constantly yearning, offering, and reaching for us. There is never a moment in or beyond time and space in which this is not the case. In the sec-

ond, we are moved through solidarity, community, friendship, prayer, and other resources to go with God, to live willingly in her Spirit. This often involves our repentance, our commitment to turn from the wrong we have done and live differently by turning to God and one another in the struggle for mutuality. But turning to God, going with God, choosing to live in the Spirit of mutuality, has consequences.

For Christians, this is what the cross represents: consequences. It is also what the Empty Tomb points to. Going with God, we suffer at the hands of those who turn away from her. Yet mutually involved with the Spirit of Life and love, we are sustained a day a time through friendship, community, prayer, and other spiritual gifts. Living in the Sacred, embodying its power, we ourselves become agents of atonement, participants in making right relation with God and one another.

This is the historical and spiritual process of incarnation. It is also the historical and spiritual process of atonement. It is what the Jesus story was all about and still is, insofar as we embody it in our lives. In the Spirit that sparked Jesus, we too live. And we suffer *because* we too live passionately with God.

The Problem With Atonement Tradition

No one whose work I know has done a clearer, fairer exposition of the atonement tradition in Christianity than D. M. Baillie. In response to “modern man’s [sic]” question, “Why speak of atonement at all?” Baillie sets out to persuade the modern reader that the good life is “bankrupt without the message of the forgiveness of sins” and that

this message of forgiveness “must rest on a doctrine of divine atonement.” I agree with both of these assumptions, but Baillie’s understanding of “divine atonement” is very different from mine. His position—a modern, neo-orthodox view—illustrates what I believe to be the root problem with how atonement has been presented in Christian tradition.

I strongly agree with Baillie’s understanding of our need for God, not just better self-understanding. Except for his dismissive attitude toward emotional trauma as a root cause of human distress, I think he sees rather clearly the problem with our attempts to get on with our lives without coming to terms with our failures. We may be able to get on with our lives, but our spirits cannot soar. We are weighted down with guilt and shame from which there is no simply rational, psychological, or physical release.

In the language of AA, we need “a spiritual awakening.” We need to know the Sacred Power in which we live and breathe and have our being.

Forgiveness is our way to God (our power in mutual relation).

Forgiveness is our way to god (verb).

Forgiveness is spiritual liberation from the shackles of the past. It frees us to go forward, “not to shut the door on the past” (to quote the Big Book of Alcoholics Anonymous) and to know peace. Knowing ourselves forgiven by the Spirit of life itself—empowered to go forth, unstuck and able to live each new day with a sense of personal grounding in the Spirit—we ourselves become God-bearers, agents of forgiveness, to others. And that, of course, is atonement—making right relation with God.

The problem therefore with the traditional and by far most widely held Christian understanding of atonement as a “substitutionary” and “sacrificial” act of God is that it drives a huge and misleading wedge between how we experience God’s love and suffering and how we experience *our own* love and suffering.

Most of what we humans actually *experience* as healing and liberating—justice, compassion, children and family, human love and friendship, beauty of creation, meaningful work, enough to eat, a place to live, animal companions, self-confidence, erotic pleasure and joy, mutuality in relation to others—is assumed by most Christians to be *human*, not necessarily divine, experience.

Whether God is actually present and active in our embodied lives, most Christians believe, depends on the quality of our faith in God through our faith in (the divinity of) His Son Jesus Christ. We doubt human experience as a reliable source of sacred meaning unless the particular experience is that of a faithful Christian. Our hesitancy to recognize ourselves and other humans and creatures—regardless of religious affiliations and creeds—as sources of God’s love, power, and beauty reinforces the God-over-and-against-us dualism that continues to haunt us and generates our alienation from ourselves, one another, other creatures, and God. It also allows us to imagine that God, since we experience Him as wholly other than ourselves, one “out there” beyond us, actually might be the author of blood sacrifice traditions, ancient and modern.

Lament of Matthew Shepard

Elaine Blanchard

Based on Psalm 88, the only psalm that includes no praise or assurance—only lament. Elaine Blanchard wrote this as part of her study of the Psalms at Memphis Theological Seminary in the fall of 1998. She graduated this year and plans to serve in the United Church of Christ as an ordained minister.



O Lord, God who baptized me,
at St. Mark's Episcopal
here in Casper, Wyoming..
it's night
and I'm crying out to you-
strapped to a fence-post
and beaten
until my skull is crushed.
I've been burned
and I'm freezing in the cold-
snow is falling on my wounds.
Let my prayer come before you;
incline your ear to my cry.

For my soul is full of troubles,
and my life draws near to Sheol.
I am counted among those who
go down to the Pit;
I am like those who have no
help,
like those forsaken among the
dead,
like the slain that lie in the
grave,
like those whom you remember
no more,
for they are cut off from your
hand.
You have put me in the depths
of the Pit,
in the regions dark and deep.
Your wrath lies heavy upon me,
and you overwhelm me with
all your waves.
Your blessed christian preachers
gather crowds to condemn me,
to wave signs for my destruction-
declaring you want me to die,
forgotten
and alone in the night-
bleeding into Wyoming's soil.
I am shut in so that I cannot
escape;
my eye grows dim through
sorrow
and because the butt of the gun
has blasted the bone
of my forehead into splinters,
piercing the orbit of my eye.
Every day I call on you, O Lord;
I spread out my hands to you.
Will it be in death,
in the grave,

that you whisper a word
of hope for me?
Will it be in mourner's clothes
my parents
will hear your word
of justice?
Look at them
under umbrellas,
standing under the snow
and icy screams of hate
from your righteous believers.
Look at my mother's face.
Look at her, God.
And look into the hearts
of your preachers.
Are your wonders
made known
in a fanciful world
beyond the grave?
Has justice deserted
the earth?

But I, O Lord, cry out to you;
in the morning my prayer
comes before you.
Yet no ambulance has yet
arrived
for the pieces of my unconscious body.
O Lord, why do you cast me
off?
Why do you hide your face
from me?
Wretched, outcast and abused
by my peers
from birth-
I suffer the terror
no mother's child should endure.
I suffer the terror
known to all
who are different...
not dominant,
not powerful or
armed.
I suffer the terror
of being attacked
for being who I am.
Should I thank God
for your work in me?
Should I thank you for
your righteous thugs who
picked me out-
pretended to appreciate
and want me-
Your devoted soldiers
marching in war
against
me...even to my grave?
Their assaults destroyed me.
You no longer live
if I no longer live.
Hope has been abandoned.
Hell is now
my home.

Baillie writes that it is not enough for us to love one another, yearn for right relation, and struggle to go with the Spirit in our daily affairs. This is fine, but for Baillie it is not the spiritual or moral equivalent of putting our faith in a God who loved us so much that he gave his only Son to be sacrificed for us—to undergo a death that we, not he, deserved (and deserve) as punishment for our sins (moral failures). Baillie and with him much of Christianity maintains that it is precisely God's willingness to punish and be punished (for remember that Jesus is God in this story, both Father and Son)—as a surrogate, in our place—that reveals His relentless love for us sinners.

For us to liberate human bodies and spirits through social movements and personal transformation, to redeem one another from bondage to past mistakes and violence, to temper judgment with compassion and solidarity—this forgiveness is not enough for most Christian teachers, preachers, and pastors.

For brothers and sisters to reach out to us, offering gifts of their experience, strength, and hope, and for them to watch sorrowfully as we turn away into isolation and despair—this forgiveness is not enough for mainline Christians.

For God to wait—simply to wait—with us in faith, hope and love—this forgiveness is not enough for Baillie's "God."

God as a Spirit of "Revolutionary Patience"

Very early in the shaping of Christology, the "fathers" (dominant theological forces) realized—rightly, I believe—that our human experiences of justice-making and love, of contrition and forgiveness, of vulnerability and compassion, of loss and grief will not make a perfect world, one without sin and evil. These theologians believed that the completion, or perfection, of creation requires *more* than the struggle for right relation, *more* than one another's solidarity, *more* than our faith in the power of God with us to change the world, and *more* than the patience to wait with one another by the power of this same Spirit. The fathers believed that the *more* required to usher in the realm of God in its fullness is Jesus Christ, and that this Jesus must be *more* than merely a good (human) example or "moral influence" (Abelard). Thus, the fathers taught that Jesus was not simply a human brother ablaze with the spirit and love of God. He was God, and not just any god but one who, in the sacrificial tradition of Israel, offered Himself as a blood sacrifice "for the sins of the world."

But why was and is such carnage the will of a God who is love? Because, the fathers tell us, divine love is like that of a really good friend. When we betray a true friend, Baillie notes, we suffer for what we have done. We suffer *because* we realize that we have violated a significant relationship. Moreover, the one whom we have wounded suffers with us because those who love suffer with those whom they love. It is in the very nature of love—to suffer with others. This is true, of course. But what Baillie and most Christian theologians seem not to see is that such a truly beloved friend does not punish by humiliating or destroying those whom he or she loves.

No true lover injures or kills the beloved as punishment for wrongdoing. We do not have to give up our deep sense of the need for forgiveness, a yearning that goes far beyond our capacities to reason or work it out by ourselves, to reject as morally bankrupt the church's atonement tradition of humiliation and destruction. We need to say *no* to a tradition of violent punishment and to a God who would crucify us—much less an innocent brother in our place—rather than hang in with us, struggle with us, wait with us, and grieve for us—forever and eternally if need be.

If God is our creative and liberating power, then this same God is a Spirit of “revolutionary patience,” as Dorothee Soelle entitled her 1977 book. After all, God's creation is unfinished and imperfect. We humans are unfinished and in many ways raw and rough. In our ignorance and fear, often not knowing what we are doing morally or spiritually, we turn away from God and break rank with the sacred Spirit of mutuality. In this real life context, God's healing power is Her presence as a deeply sorrowful God who can do nothing except continue to reach out to us through Her friends and other sacred resources, one day at a time. Continuing to reach out to us, steadfastly refusing to give up, relentlessly pursuing us generation to generation—this is God's forgiveness.

The deity we must reject is the one whose power over us is imagined to be His love, the god who morally *can* destroy us. Such a concept of deity is evil—a betrayal itself of our power in mutual relation—in a world being torn to pieces by violence done in the name of gods who demand blood sacrifice. Such god-images feed twisted psychospiritualities that normalize sadistic and masochistic dynamics, rape and intimate violence, abuse of children, relationships of domination and control, violence against people and all creatures, and wars justified as holy.

Moreover, in the context of such distorted spiritualities, violence often is experienced as passionately erotic. This is because our erotic energy is at root a yearning for God as our power to make and sustain mutuality. When this yearning twists into a desire for domination or submission—which is what patriarchal relations do to our sacred erotic energies—the desire creates closets in which men (and sometimes women) experience our erotic yearnings for God as violent and often, for this reason, seek God in the convergence of sex and violence.

The deep roots in Christianity of a psychosexual spirituality that links sex and violence are being cultivated to this day by a twisted understanding of atonement that is assumed by most Christians to be right and central to Christian faith. Most

Strange
How bread
In breaking
Spreads
Shares
Itself divides
Distributes crumbs
All sundry

Take care your
Fair white linen
Not confine
The scattered seed
To virgin soil
Or all too narrow
Furrow

-J. Barrie Shepherd

Christians do not realize that this central tenet of our religion is steeped in our collective fear of experiencing the power of mutuality—in truth, our fear of God's love for us and of our love for God.

We fear this primary experience of God's incarnation—we fear living passionately. And we fear atonement, which is our liberation from the powers of evil through God's passion working in our lives. We fear our power in mutual relation because if we go with it, we—like Jesus—will suffer, perhaps even die, at the hands of culture of violence that demands our worship; moreover, *we will live*.

[The traditional understanding of atonement] reflects a god who is the quintessence of patriarchal logic rather than the wellspring of justice-love from which we draw strength, hope, and our experiences of forgiveness. This tradition, as we see, has been associated with the violence of bloodshed. In

Western patriarchal monotheism, ruling class males have constructed

theologies in which the shedding of innocent blood is assumed to be *necessary* to making right relation with God. This seems to me an amazing thing! The suggestion that, throughout human history and culture, men (I do not use this word inclusively in this context) have concluded that the only way to get right with the Source of love and justice in history is to offer Him the blood of innocent “victims.”

Unfortunately, I am not embellishing one small problematic theme in an otherwise liberating theological heritage. Nor am I being too literal in suggesting that blood sacrifice has been established spiritually and politically as *the* way to God/god in Christianity.

Jesus Christ as Adversary

Alongside images of Jesus Christ as authoritarian Lord and righteous moralist is another image often held sacred by those Christians who are right: Jesus Christ as adversary, fighter, and finally victor over his enemies, the evil ones who oppose God. The christological image of a divine man who casts opponents into hellfires diminishes our capacity as Christians to imagine, much less experience, the healing power generated not through shame and demolition but rather through forgiveness.

But forgiveness is a badly misconceived notion—especially among those Christians who spiritualize and individualize it, reducing it to the level of a soft, morally vacuous, personal feeling. This is probably what most of us do at least some of the time. Those who go about piously “forgiving” others may be among the least forgiving when it comes to exacting revenge on those who hurt us personally. Moreover, “forgiveness” so often is pared down spiritually to petty self-righteousness (“See how good I am. See how I can forgive you!”). And



in the larger picture, on the front lines of history, countless violent, brutal crusaders for what is right no doubt have experienced themselves as godly, forgiving people in relation to those whom they love.

The point is not simply whether we individually can let go of our resentments toward those who have offended us; nor is it simply whether we can accept the pardon of those whom we ourselves have hurt. The larger question is whether together we can reconstruct the world around and within us on patterns of forgiveness rather than resentment, compassion rather than retribution, peace rather than violence. The future of our families and communities, cultures and societies, religions and nations is at stake here. The future of our love and work, of what we will do and of how we will do it, depends upon our shared commitment to learn forgiveness as a way of life. Indeed, the future of our species and of the earth itself rests more than anything on our capacity, as an earthpeople, to move morally beyond adversarial, hostile posturing in relation to those whom we hate or fear.

Our salvation is not rooted in a Jesus who lords His righteousness over us or a God who will beat us into submission or cast us into a fiery furnace if we aren't right. Whether we are right or wrong in the specifics of lives and deeds, we will be saved primarily by a capacity (that is innate to us all) and a willingness (that can be learned with each other's help) to practice forgiveness precisely because, so often, we "know not

what we do." The Jesus we need is the one we have in *learning how to forgive* (for that's where most of us are). We need him to be what he is—through faith, our brother and ally, teacher and friend, spiritual presence and ongoing resource of hope.

Could it be that Jesus himself, like probably every one of us, had a hard time forgiving certain of his adversaries? When he said, from the cross, "Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing," was he asking God to do something that he, Jesus, could not do in the particular moment, so anguished was he? (I am grateful to Diane Tingley for this question.) Or was he bearing witness to the possibility that *only* God, in God's own mysterious ways, can forgive? That the Spirit has to work out, over time and through history, how to take away our sins and let the slate be wiped clean?

I am suggesting that, because God is *our* power in the struggle for justice-love, we are indeed able to forgive, provided we realize how truly empowered we are in and through God.

Compassion and Nonviolence: A Spiritual Path

None of us, including Jesus, needs to be destroyed so that the rest of us can live holy lives. We are envisioning a spiritual path that leads us away from blood sacrifice as in any sense acceptable to the God whom Jesus loved.

[We are faced with] several problems with the mainstream Christian atonement tradition:

1. It is steeped in the trivialization and deprecation of human experience as ungodly.
2. For this reason, it represents a more radically dualistic apprehension of the divine-human relation than most mainline theologians will admit.
3. It is built around an image of a deity whose "inexorable love" is experienced by human beings as punitive, shaming, cruel, and even sadistic in relation to people whose psychospiritualities have been shaped, to various degrees, by images of a god whose love is violent—toward others, toward His Son, and toward Himself.
4. It promotes blood sacrifice—that is to say, the sacralizing of violence against others and oneself—as a (or even the) way of spiritual liberation.
5. Finally, it reflects a deity made in the image of human impatience with one another, ourselves and our Sacred Source. In the best, most mutual relationships that have been broken—relationships not only between individuals but also supported by strong, respectful friends and community—those who have been violated and those who have done wrong often can find ways to restore what has been lost or at least some significant part of it. In relationships more like the one that most of us actually experience between ourselves and God—in which time and again we turn away from the vocation to love justice and show mercy in our relations—it is hard to imagine how we might restore a right relation with the Spirit of justice-love and compassion. Furthermore, it is not hard to understand why so many Christians, like Anselm, Baillie, and countless others, have

imagined that surely God had to exact a harsh penalty for the terrible sins of the world.

What these Christian believers have lacked is faith in God's inexorable patience as a significant dimension of God's love.

To be sure, the evil among us is rampant, exacting tolls too high for many of us to pay or even imagine. And we humans must do everything in our power to protect one another, ourselves, and other creatures from the violence that invariably results from the fear-based betrayals of our Sacred Power in mutual relation. This means that, in this real world of ours, we will always be looking for better ways of protecting ourselves and one another from violent people and from others whose fear, greed, dishonesty, or rage threatens to harm us or disrupt the relative stabilities we are able sometimes to create as communities and cultures.

But we must not confuse protecting ourselves and those we love with inflicting upon our enemies the same torture and brutality that they may have inflicted (or wished) upon us. Contrary to the prevailing religious, moral, and political sentiments on the Right today, might does *not* make right. Justice makes right relation. Justice-love *is* right relation. We do not need an "almighty" god, except insofar as God's love—Her justice-love, Her compassion—is Her strength and Her power.

Putting our faith in God's patience with us in this imperfect, morally cluttered, and often evil world generates greater social and spiritual space for us to be honest, gentle people with ourselves and one another—space in which we are able to cultivate humility rather than fear as the basis of our life together and thereby become more deeply moral people. We need more images of a patient God who loves the world so much that She gives her people time and resources like history and culture, human friends and animal companions, work and play, mountains and water, food and music, memory and reason, imagination and talents, and prayer and worship, and as many chances as we in our fear may need to come to our senses.

We need not sacrifice one more child to the bloody god who needs innocent victims, one more person or creature to a deity who must punish either us or himself in order to love the world.

There is another way to god, in which compassion replaces honor and even self-respect as the highest good and in which nonviolence becomes a way of life, a liberating response to the ongoing savaging of ourselves and one another.

[It is my belief] that these twin commitments—compassion and nonviolence—are *living sacraments*, outward and visible signs among us of an authentically liberative atonement tradition. ♥

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The Biblical Word on Violence

Oppression vs. Liberating Justice

Tom Hanks

Influenced by literalist and decontextualized misinterpretations of the Book of Revelation, modern interpreters have often concluded that the New Testament portrays God as the author of violence and even models violent behavior for believers. William Klassen shows that this common misinterpretation rests on a literalist reading of the book's symbolism and a failure to note the significance and centrality of the slain lamb (Revelation 5) for the book's message (Klassen 1999: 393-410).

More fundamental for proper interpretation of the Bible's teaching on violence, however, is the much neglected doctoral dissertation of the late Jacques Pons (Pons 1975/81). In his perceptive pioneering work on the vocabulary for oppression in the Hebrew Bible, Pons's starting point is the Hebrew term *hamas* (violence; noun 60x; verb 8x), which he demonstrates is fundamental to the entire Hebrew semantic field for oppression (some 20 words, occurring 555 times, by my later reckoning; Thomas Hanks 1983:40).

Traditionally, theologians such as Augustine, Aquinas and Calvin have sought to distinguish between that which is legal ("force") and that which is illegal ("violence") and this distinction remains common in modern cultures and the media. However, as Pons has shown, in the Hebrew Bible the distinction is not between whatever may be legal or illegal (in oppressive empires and their colonies), but between force used to oppress (injustice) and force used to liberate from oppression (liberating or saving justice).

Significantly, in the Hebrew Bible God is never said to be the author of violence: "Yahweh [the Liberator God of the Exodus] tests the just and the

oppressor, and his soul hates the lover of violence," (Psalm 11:5; see Proverbs 3:31). Rather, God's power manifests itself in acts of liberating justice, while "violence" is attributed only to human oppressors (but compare Job's rhetoric in 19:7, presumably a false accusation). The traditional distinction between legal force and illegal violence has been denied by some Christian scholars (Jacques Ellul, Giulio Girardi, Paul Tournier), but they neglect the possibility of the biblical distinction between unjust oppressive violence and the force of liberating justice.

Violence in the Bible is one of many terms that illustrate how the same word can mean virtually opposite things. During the decades of turbulence in Latin America, the media commonly labeled any activities of guerillas and others who resorted to arms to overthrow dictators as "violence." However, when dictators used such tactics, the media only labeled it "force"—even when Nicaragua's Somoza bombed his own civilian population! The current Russian determination to label "freedom fighters" as "terrorists" reveals the same linguistic manipulation, echoing Ronald Reagan's success in labeling his "terrorist" contras, who slaughtered innocent civilians in Nicaragua, as "freedom fighters."

Similarly, "justice" in the Bible reflects the cry of the oppressed poor for God's liberating justice, while in the mouths of the oppressors it refers to a kind of "law and order" that bolsters their privileges and power. Another biblical example is the vocabulary for "authority": in the mouths of the oppressors it refers to their authority to maintain a repressive regime, while the Bible mainly applies it to such figures as Moses, Jesus, and Paul, who represented the "subversive authority" that undermines oppressive regimes.

To a large extent, the failure of the church to interpret Scripture properly stems from its failure to use the perspective of the oppressed as the appropriate "hermeneutical wedge" for interpreting biblical language. Elitist academics, theologians and philosophers tend to misinterpret the Bible as the discourse of oppressors, rather than hearing in it the subversive voice of the oppressed.

Remarkably, although the New Testament centers on the violent act of crucifixion that Jesus suffered at the hands of imperial oppressors, explicit vocabulary for violence is difficult to pinpoint (see the Suffering Servant who "did no violence," Isaiah 53:9b). Perhaps the clearest example is when John the Baptist forbids soldiers (of the oppressive occupation force) to "extort money by violence" (literally, *shake violently*, Greek *diaseio*, Luke 3:14). The "sword," literally or as metaphor, may represent either legitimate "force" or oppressive "violence" in the New Testament (Rom 13:1-7; Luke 22:35-38, 49-51). Only when the context indicates the presence of injustice or oppression would "violence" be signified.

Other Greek terms sometimes rendered *violence* (*bia/biadzomai*) actually have a broader significance, including legitimate "force" (Acts 2:2; 5:26; 21:25; 24:7; 27:41). In the New Testament's most controverted text on the subject, Jesus refers to the Kingdom of God as "suffering violence" (*biadzomai*, probably with reference to persecution; Matthew 11:12 // Luke 16:16), although many have understood the term in a more positive sense of "entering forcibly" into the Kingdom (see NRSV vs. NIV, their notes and the commentaries).

When Jesus cleansed the Temple (Mark 11:15-19 // Matthew 21:12-17 // Luke 19:45-46 // John 2:13-22) he employed physical force that was both legitimate ("my Father's House") and an expression of liberating justice ("den of thieves"). Commentaries and theologians, however, ignoring the biblical

distinction between the violence of oppressors and forceful expressions of God's liberating justice, often leap to the conclusion that Jesus resorted to "violence" in the Temple purification.

When Moses killed the Egyptian taskmaster in order to save the life of an Israelite slave, the Bible avoids describing his act as one of "violence" and does not condemn Moses (Exodus 2:11-15). That this distinction carries through in the New Testament is evident from Stephen's speech in Acts: "And [Moses], seeing one suffering *injustice* (*adikoúmenon*) defended him and, striking the Egyptian, wrought *liberating justice* (*ekdikésin*) for the one *suffering oppression* (*kataponoumeno*; compare 2 Peter 2:7). Moses thought that his brothers would understand that God was using him to liberate them, but they did not" (7:24-25). After Hebrews 11:23, some Greek manuscripts (chiefly Western) even add "By faith, Moses, when he was grown up, destroyed the Egyptian when he observed the humiliating oppression of his brethren." While this is not the preferred reading, the textual variant makes clear how differently early Christians viewed Moses' use of force. In contrast, commentators since the last century often suggest that God punished Moses with forty years of exile because he used "violence," even though neither Exodus nor the New Testament indicate anything of the sort.

Similarly, the book of Judges in the Hebrew Bible never condemns the charismatic liberators ("judges," empowered by the Spirit) for killing foreign oppressors in order to liberate the oppressed, nor does it ever describe their actions as expressions of "violence." And in Joshua 1-12, the bloody conquest of the promised land is never described as "violent" but as "holy war," or more accurately "the war of Yahweh, the Liberator God." In the late books of Chronicles (circa 400 BCE) David, who had fought as a guerrilla leader when Saul was still king, could declare himself "innocent...of any violence" (1 Chronicles 12:17).

What the Hebrew Bible condemns frequently modern social scientists would describe as "institutional violence," the violence employed by the powerful and the institutions that rep-

resent their interests, against the weak, poor and marginalized: "Thus says Yahweh, the Liberator God of the Exodus: Enough, O princes of Israel! Put away violence and oppression and do what is just and fair. Cease your evictions of my people, says the Liberator God" (Ezekiel 45:9; see also 7:23; 8:17; 2:16; Amos 6:3; Micah 3:1-3; 6:11-12; Jeremiah 6:7; 13:22; 20:8; Habakkuk 1:2-3,9; Isaiah 59:6; 60:18; Joel 3:19; Obadiah 10; Zephaniah 1:9; 3:4; Malachi 2:16; Psalm 73:6).

In the text traditionally interpreted as messianic, Jacob prophetically condemns his sons Simeon and Levi ("weapons of violence are their swords"), but hopes for one to come who will exercise just authority (Genesis 49:5,8-10). In this tradition Psalm 72 portrays the ideal king whose basic task is to free the poor from the violence committed by oppressors: "For he shall rescue the needy when they call...From oppression and violence he redeems their life; and precious is their blood in his sight" (12, 14; see 140:2,5,12; 18:48).

Recent New Testament studies remind us of the oppressive imperial context of Jesus' and Paul's teaching (Matthew 5:38-48; Luke 6:27-36; Romans 12:14-21), a context that rendered any resort to arms futile and necessitated a more subversive, creative confrontation with oppressors. Traditional efforts to elucidate an "ethic"—or even an "ethical absolute"—of non-violence or abstention from all military force fail on several counts. First, because "ethics" and "morals" are Greek universalist philosophical categories alien to biblical thought, which is ever grounded in history and reflecting specific historical contexts. Hence, we can seek and expect nothing more (or less!) from inspired texts than divine wisdom discerned as appropriate to our own historical context. Second, while the Hebrew Bible often denounced violence, the New Testament makes even clearer the need to counter the violence of oppressors ("enemies") with the force of love and persuasion rather than physical force (however just).

The New Testament does not call the weak and oppressed to passivity, but to a militant struggle of faith. Not just adult Jewish males, but persons of all

ages, nations, sexual orientations, and genders are exhorted to "put on God's armor," exercise prophetic gifts (including denunciations of oppressors and their violence), proclaim the Good News of Jesus' triumph, and create inclusive communities of solidarity amongst the weak and oppressed. The "followers of the Lamb" discern clear words of divine wisdom in the New Testament (Ephesians 6:10-20; 2 Corinthians 10:3-5), but recognize that this way also was anticipated in the Hebrew Bible (Exodus 14:13; Zeph. 4:6; Isa 30:1-7, 15-17; 31:1-4; 53; Daniel). ▼

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They Know Not What They Do

Martha Juillerat

"Just Kill Them," one delegate shouted.

This has been one of the most exhausting and painful weeks of my life.

I am in Chicago this evening, half way home to Minnesota from two weeks at the United Methodist Church's General Conference in Cleveland [May, 2000]. For the past two days I have been trying to put words around my overwhelming feelings in response to what happened there on Wednesday and Thursday. For the most part, I am still at a loss for words. But I, along with many others, am beginning to sense that what happened there was a watershed event in this movement, and all Christians must open our eyes and look very carefully at every single event that occurred there, from the polity problems and lost legislative battles to the protests and their dramatic outcome.

By now those of you who have followed the media coverage have learned that all of the legislative contests were lost, consistently by about 2/3rds of the vote. The remarkable thing is that the body didn't even "throw us a bone" by passing one of those "don't you dare ordain or marry them, but at least be nice to them in church on Sunday" sorts of petitions. In fact, the vote margins were slightly worse than they were four years ago.

But the real story came in the very carefully planned, non-violent response to these votes. On Wednesday, as the committees wrapped up their work, Mel White's Soulforce staged a protest, a symbolic "blocking of the entrance," outside the convention center, which resulted in the arrest of 191 people. Those participating in the action, both as marchers and as those

who stepped forward to be arrested, came from many different faith groups, from Protestant to Catholic to Jewish.

We were able to identify four different anti-gay groups near us, including Fred Phelps and company. Sadly, his contingent was mild compared to one new group which shouted a constant string of obscenities at us for three straight hours barely stopping to take a breath. We arranged ourselves in circles of 15 to 20 people and sang loudly to cover them up, with varying degrees of success. Those arrested were people of all ages and races, including a United Methodist bishop, Gandhi's grandson, Martin Luther King Jr.'s daughter, and the Rev. James Lawson, a United Methodist minister who learned non-violent methods from Gandhi himself and taught them to King.

On Thursday, over 200 supporters wore stoles [from the Shower of Stoles Project—see author description] and sat in the balcony of the convention center. When the Faith and Order Committee (which handled business related to heterosexism) began its report, these 200+ people rose and began slowly walking in silence in a long single-file line around the middle aisle of the balcony. People began leaving their seats to join the line, until it stretched the entire length of this very large balcony. When the vote came, all stopped where they were and held hands.

Polity wrangling ensued, along with "points of order" that turned into speeches, and we continued to stand. The vote was lost, and immediately 27 of our people marched to the front of the floor, in front of the podium, and turned to face the delegates. The Presiding Bishop (who did an AMAZING and grace-full job of being fair and

maintaining order) requested that they leave, or face arrest. They refused to leave, and after some time the Bishop requested a 20 minute recess to talk with their two spokespeople. We in the balcony continued to stand, along with about a quarter of the delegates on the floor and 15 bishops.

After the recess, they suspended business and had an orderly debate about the possibility of at least calling a moratorium on judicial proceedings. This failed, and the body adjourned for lunch. By now we in the balcony had stood silently in one place for almost 3 hours.

After lunch, the 27 on the floor continued to stand their ground as well, eventually moving slowly and orderly to a place that blocked the podium. At this point they were finally arrested (including two bishops). The presiding bishop buried his face in his hands and said that he couldn't watch the church do this to its people.

It was a deeply painful thing to watch these arrests take place. All I can say is this: We may have lost the vote, but they will never forget that we were there. And they will never, ever be able to take us for granted again.

I have thought about the effects of this for a long time. It has often disturbed me that many people of faith—particularly ministers—who would never have hesitated to join a civil rights march, find this sort of action to be inappropriate for the GLBT movement, or feel it necessary to put the unity of the church above our demands. I can't help but think that if this had been about race instead of sexual orientation, thousands would have joined us, and the demands would have been uncompromising.

At the end of the civil rights movement I worked for a short time with a civil rights group in Mississippi. One of

our acts of civil disobedience was to simply show up in church—one black person and one white person together—and sit in a pew, until we were asked to leave. We would then be forced to leave or face arrest. I saw no difference—felt no difference in my gut—on Thursday as I witnessed a church choosing to arrest its members rather than invite them in.

In Mississippi I remember people shouting obscenities at us, and threatening us. When we did dialogues in the Presbyterian Church six years ago I remember one elder telling us that he would rather take us out into a field and shoot us than talk to us. And on Thursday we heard a delegate from Texas shout to the 27 protesters, “Just kill them.” I felt no difference in my gut among these various incidents.

On the street Wednesday, people shouted at us, “Don’t pull that ‘civil rights’ stuff on us. Sex isn’t about civil rights.” But what more basic civil right is there than the right to companionship and to love another person? It is, indeed, the one thing that crosses all racial, cultural and economic boundaries.

And perhaps that was the watershed. Perhaps now, thanks to the descendants of Gandhi and King, and thanks to an African-American judge who “got it,” reducing the charges and fines for all arrested and quietly telling each person to “keep up the good work”—perhaps now the church will begin to see this movement as more than just a “sex problem.” Perhaps now they—and we—will have to take this movement seriously, as the legitimate civil rights cause that it is. I know that I, for one, will never see this movement in the same light again. ▼

Martha Juillerat is cofounder with her partner, Tammy Lindahl, of the Shower of Stoles Project, an ingathering of ordination stoles from GLBT clergy and would-be clergy who have served and continue to serve the church with commitment and compassion.



Joseph Lobdell was born Lucy Ann Lobdell in 1829. Dressing as a man, Joseph became a hunter, and married a woman. Lobdell served as a revivalist Methodist preacher in upstate New York. Declared insane and institutionalized until death, Lobdell was respectfully called “Reverend” in the published article of a psychiatrist who practiced in the asylum. Lobdell wrote an autobiography entitled, The Female Hunter of Delaware and Sullivan Counties.

—Based on Lesbian Lists by Dell Richards (Boston: Alyson, 1990) pp. 188-189, and additional sources.

Becoming Joseph

If there had been a ritual,
you would have had a right.
You could have pointed to the Bible page
hand-writing family history
and joining it to scripture. Here
the date when I was born, and christened:
1829. The preacher wrote the names
Father Son and Holy
Ghost and Lucy Ann in water
on my forehead, but only Lucy Ann
in black ink in the Bible. Honoring
the old names with new bodies:
further up the page the previous Lucy,
there from another branch the earlier Ann.
The biblical begats list strange half-lineages,
sometimes a man, sometimes
a woman, never the complete life
story in the verses. One name
seeds one name, not growing in a script
flowering of family tree but in the holy wandering
vine that explodes modestly into sweet
close fruit. Joseph dreams his way awake
and out of slavery, feeds others
by saving himself. Midway
down the blank page of the new book you are writing
is black ink, your hand
writing Joseph back into history, honoring
old body with new name, re-baptizing: So,
here is the date when, self-begotten,
Lucy Ann is become Joseph, emerging
into new air, taking the breath
that remembers all life before
as nearly drowning.

—Thomas Kelson Lewis

No Excuse for Abuse

Michael Kinnamon

I had just finished making an opening statement and the floor was open for comments and questions. The first man to speak—a Disciples minister, I am told—started out rather blandly. I was vaguely anticipating where his remarks might go when suddenly I heard him say, “After all, these people [meaning gay men and lesbians] are just worthless scum.”

This is awful enough [I still hear the phrase rattling in my head]; but what really haunts me is that I let him speak. Indeed I never denounced him. Why? In part, I suppose, because I was caught off guard. At a deeper level, however, the question strikes at the heart of my identity and that of our churches. Like our churches, I am deeply committed to the ecumenical movement. My life’s work centers around reconciliation, an attempt to hold community together, to insist on hearing all voices. But isn’t there something fundamentally impoverished about an understanding of reconciliation that left me unprepared to respond immediately and forcefully to this man?

“Welcome one another, as Christ has welcomed you, for the glory of God” (Romans 15:7) states succinctly the basic thesis of Paul’s letter. We are here at the heart of the gospel, and I know of no way to express it except by paradox. We are called to welcome those whom God, the universal creator, has welcomed; and, for precisely that reason, we are called to abhor those ways of acting, those attitudes of mind, that meanness of spirit which threatens or devalues those whom God has welcomed. To put it sharply, there is in the writing of Paul a principled basis for refusing to tolerate intolerance. Yes, given our sinfulness, this always risks betraying the very message we proclaim—as when we end up denouncing the ungenerous ungenerously. I am

now convinced, however, that this is an unavoidable risk.

The importance of all this is underscored by a second incident. I was met at the door of a church by a man, a Disciples licensed lay minister, who informed me that he was going “to pin back my ears”—whatever that might mean. I told him he was free to say whatever he wanted in the discussion, at which point he said, “The trouble with people like you is that you just don’t believe anything.”

It would be malicious of me to present this man as a spokesperson for any wing of the church, but the assumption behind his remark is widely held: namely, that the newly public support for gay rights is a sign of moral relativism, the reflection of a culture of personal preference that must be opposed in the name of biblical truth. For too long now, our society has acted as if openness were a sign of weakness, as if those with firm convictions about the gospel will always want to draw firm boundaries to exclude those who are different. Thus, it is crucial that we understand as clearly as possible the good news proclaimed by our faith and take our stand *explicitly* on that.

You see, what haunts me about the earlier episode is that my actions there *did* betray a certain kind of relativism. “All voices need to be heard. We need the witness of those who see things differently from ourselves.” *Yes—unless* the gospel of God’s gracious love for all persons is threatened. At that point, my response should have been: “Brother, sit down! Such talk (referring to sisters and brothers for whom Christ died as ‘scum’) has nothing to do with the good news we proclaim. Such talk has no place in a community of those who know that they are redeemed only by grace.”

What lessons did I learn from these experiences? That one cannot stand above the fray in the name of a reconciling vision. That, while we are (in

Paul’s words) “ambassadors of reconciliation,” we can speak the word of reconciliation too early or too easily. That in a dangerously narrow world, we dare not be caught off guard. That the church, by its very nature, must be an aggressive counterculture to every society bent on exclusion. That the bottom line of all that we do and are is grace. ▼

Michael Kinnamon lost his bid as General Minister and President of the Disciples General Assembly in 1991 because of his membership in GLAD Alliance and his support of lesbians and gay men. A professor of theology at Lexington Theological Seminary in Kentucky, he was recently appointed as General Secretary of the Consultation on Church Union (COCU), an ecumenical cooperative effort of nine denominations. This article is excerpted from the September 1993 issue of The Disciple.



The Sacrifice
A Short Story
D.S. Carlstone

Abe and Sara sat in the leather chairs in front of the doctor's big desk. A thick carpet covered the floor; the heavy drapes were closed; plaques and certificates hung on the dark paneling, nearly covering one wall. It could have been a very relaxing room, but Abe surmised that it was designed to dampen the effects of bad news. Sara had just completed an examination and she and Abe waited, as they had done several times in recent months, to talk to Dr. Simon Hardy, her gynecologist and fertility consultant.

Abe, who took seriously his responsibility for the well-being of his wife, always accompanied her to the doctor. Sara, his wife of fifteen years, accepted without question or qualification his conviction that the man served as the head of the household, and that the wife stood in subjection to him. A pale woman, she dressed very plainly, and wore no make up. Keeping house for only her husband did not require much of her time, but she spent her days mostly indoors, working on any number of church related projects, such as sewing, or preparing meals for shut-ins, or making posters for her husband. There was only one problem with their marriage: Sara remained barren.

Dr. Hardy entered, and greeted Abe. "I'm sure Sara told you. There is still no success. I'm afraid that I have come to the end of the road. We have done all the simple things—not that they are all that simple. The only thing left to us is to consider the more exotic solutions, such as embryo implants."

"We've been praying for success, and my prayers led me to believe that we would be successful this time," Abe said. "With all the advances of medicine in recent years, I thought that something could be done. I guess that was foolish."

"This is such a disappointment," added Sara.

"Yes, I understand your disappointment and frustration. Mr. Smith, you are right about this being a golden age of medicine. So many important advances have been made just in the past two years, effective treatment for some cancers, tremendous advances in genetics, the understanding of the carcinogenic effects of tobacco, a breakthrough in Alzheimer's disease, and many other things. In fertility studies alone we are doing things that were not possible even last year, and without the threat of multiple births. In the case of Sara, however, I don't know what to do, other than the more exotic treatments. You indicated earlier that this is not an option for you."

"No. I am convinced that God does not want us to use these artificial means of conceiving a child. It is not for us to interfere with God's plan. Test tube babies are an abomination. Man's foolishness. Perhaps God is trying to tell us that we should not have children."

"Perhaps so, Mr. Smith. There is no guarantee that the exotic methods would work, anyway. Sara's condition being what it is, I don't know that she can ever conceive in the normal sense. Even with a new breakthrough, I'm not certain that her uterus is able to function properly. Perhaps, if she were younger.... I think we have seen a uterine deterioration even since we began this program. I'm sorry that I can offer little hope."

It was with a heavy heart that Abe and Sara left the doctor's office.

"I am so ashamed," said Sara as they drove back to their home. "What have I done, Abe? I wanted to be a good wife to you, to have your children. Why has God done this? Am I being punished for something? Are we being punished?"

Abe was silent for a long time before speaking. "We have to follow God's will. Our mistake was in going to all these doctors in the first place. We have to have faith. Doctors can help do certain things, but if we put our reliance upon them instead of on God, we sin. That was our problem. We'd better ask for forgiveness."

That evening, Abe and Sara prayed together. They asked for forgiveness for relying upon the wisdom of man, and asked for God's hand to heal the condition that kept Sara from conceiving. Afterward, they were silent, as they listened for God to speak to them. Nothing was heard.

The next evening Abe had a meeting at his house with the elders of his church. Twelve years ago, he and four other men had established a non-denominational congregation. In the original plan, the five men would share the preaching tasks, but as time progressed it became clear that Abe was the only one with the gift of exhortation. He had no formal training in theology, but he read the Bible, and he possessed the conviction that it was God's Word, and that it should be followed exactly. In addition to maintaining a full-time job, Abe developed into the preacher and the leader of the small body. Obedience to the Law was central to his preaching. To Abe, obedience called one to action. He believed and preached each week that it was not enough to practice personal piety. God wanted us to be involved in the fight against evil in the community. There were many ways that his church could participate. Under Abe's leadership, the membership slowly grew, until today the congregation of over 100 owned a small church building.

As always, Abe led the meeting of the elders. "This is the month we planned to picket the School Board. We need twenty members, each with a poster that tells of the evils of teaching evolution." Abe described some of his ideas for slogans to use on the placards. He gave assignments to his elders.

"Then, in February it will be our turn to picket the abortion clinic on Fourth Street. I told the Right to Life Committee that we would take every Tuesday during the month. Robert, will you start a list for names of volunteers? Thank you. Mother's Day comes in May. I suggest that we ask for special contributions to put an ad in the newspaper to attack the feminist movement as anti-family. Also that month, we will be involved in the petition drive to stop the Lesbian and Gay Parade that is scheduled for June. If the City Council does not support our petition, we will protest during the parade."

Upon completion of the planning, Abe closed the meeting with a request. "I have a sorrow to share. As you know, Sara and I have been unable to have children. This has been one of the great disappointments in my life and in Sara's life. I must confess that we have visited a fertility doctor, who tells us now that there is nothing we can do. I confess our sin of relying on the ways of man. We should trust only in God. I ask you each to pray for us. Pray for our forgiveness, and pray that Sara will conceive."

That night a visitor came to Abe in the depth of his sleep. Abe was so excited that he almost woke Sara to tell her the good news, but he waited until morning. At the breakfast table he made his announcement.

"Sara, an angel came to me last night. It was so wonderful. Sara, you are going to conceive. You have already conceived, if I understood it correctly. You are pregnant, Sara! Just believe! Just believe, and everything will be all right!"

"Oh, Abe, can it really be? What did the angel say?"

"The angel said '*Abraham, fear not. The Lord has heard your prayer. Thy wife Sarah has conceived and shall bear a son, who shall be a blessing unto you.*' That's the way I remember it."

"The angel called you Abraham, even though Abe is just a nickname? Why didn't he call you by your real name, Albert?"

"It doesn't matter. Listen to the message."

"You are right. Oh, Abe, this is wonderful. I am so thrilled." They said a prayer of thanksgiving together.

"What did the angel look like?" Sara asked, as she cleaned up the breakfast dishes.

"I don't know. I didn't really see the angel. He—or she—was just there. It was the announcement that I remember."

"Abe, I still need to see the doctor."

"Yes. We will allow Dr. Hardy to watch over the development of the child."

Six weeks later, Dr. Hardy confirmed Abe's diagnosis.

"How do you understand it, doctor?" asked Sara.

"I really don't understand it, Mrs. Smith. Things happen sometimes that I can't explain."

"I say it's a miracle, doctor. That's all there is to it," said Abe.

"I suppose you are right," said the physician. "However, we need to watch this pregnancy very carefully. There have been some amazing medical advances in the past year. By comparing Sara's blood with the blood we took before she became pregnant, we can trace the development of the fetus. We can look for problems at various points along the way. Sara, remember, we took a sample of your blood at the very beginning of your fertility treatment. We split it into several samples, and froze them. Now we will take one sample of the original blood and compare with your blood profile each visit. From this, these new techniques allow us determine the health of your uterus—one of our big concerns right now—and we can look at the genetic profile of the fetus as well. All I need is your permission to use the frozen blood samples."

Sara looked at her husband, seeking theological guidance as she always did. An immediate decision was needed. Abe did not have time to pray about it and wait for an answer. "I think that will be all right," he said. "There's no reason not to run your tests, if it will make you feel better. This is God's baby, so we know everything will be all right."

On their next visit, Sara again joined Abe in Dr. Hardy's office. The doctor followed her a few minutes later. "We have mostly good news. It is a boy. Everything looks normal. I am pleased about how well the uterus is holding up." He drifted into some technical talk that neither Abe nor Sara understood. "There is just one problem. One thing you should know. The blood comparisons show that the genetic composition of the child is consistent with homosexuality. In fact, there is a 99% probability that the child will develop some form of homosexuality." He again gave an exposition on the reasons for that prediction, but neither Abe nor Sara heard him.

Abe felt as though a sledgehammer had hit him in the chest. Sara sobbed beside him. Somehow, they made it out to the

car, and drove home. There was a pall of gloom around the house. Abe could not speak about his feelings. Sara was not given permission to do so.

The next few weeks were filled with agony. Abe and Sara felt that their world had come

apart. They could not understand why God had let this happen to them. He had promised a child that would be a blessing, a fulfillment of their deepest desires. But, now, they were told, their child would be homosexual. That was impossible to understand. It was an obvious contradiction of everything they believed.

A few days later, Abe had another vision. Again, he described it at the breakfast table.

"Sara, the angel came back last night."

"Oh?"

"Sara, the angel said '*God demands a sacrifice.*'"

"What does that mean?"

"I don't know what it means. What do you think it means?"

"I'm sure I don't know," said Sara.

"I don't know either. I shall have to pray about it."

The angel return again that night. At breakfast the following morning, Abe explained what had happened. "It was the same message: '*God demands a sacrifice.*' Sara, do you think that God is asking us to sacrifice the child?"

"Oh, no, Abe. How could he?"

"I don't know. I just don't know. The angel was not very specific. It just seemed that he was talking about the child."

The third night, the angel reappeared. Abe woke with a start. Yes, he understood what the angel was saying. God demanded that the child be aborted. This time he did not mention the visit to Sara. It was still too frightening. How could God, after promising a child, turn around and take that child away? How could He expect Sara to abort the child? How could he himself turn away from the values that he lived by? It was too confusing.

'Thy wife Sarah has
conceived and shall
bear a son, who shall be
a blessing unto you.'

Abe slept very poorly the next few nights. As he dozed off, his subconscious would reawaken him with thoughts that he was trying to suppress. These kept him awake, usually, until the early hours of the morning. Just before dawn, several days later, Abe had his answer. He explained it to Sara after breakfast. "Sara, above all we must be obedient. God has demanded that we sacrifice our homosexual child. Homosexuality is such an abomination that it is better that the child be ripped out of the womb than that he grow up to practice a life of homosexual disobedience. That is the hard decision. That is our burden. Perhaps we are being tested. We must do it, Sara. I never thought that abortion was consistent with God's will, but maybe it is in some cases. I don't know how I will ever explain this to the congregation, but perhaps God will show me a way." Sara rose silently and left the table. Abe heard her sobs coming from the bedroom.

Abe called Dr. Hardy. They met with him later in the week. After a lengthy conference, a date was set for the abortion. Abe and Sara hardly spoke the next few days. It seemed that any talk, beyond the functional words of everyday living, was too painful. They were unable to comfort each other.

The night before the abortion, the angel came again. "Look in the thicket, Abraham," she said. Abe awoke, startled. It was 5:30 a.m. What did the angel mean this time? Suddenly, he understood.

"Sara! Sara! Wake up!"

"I'm awake, Abe. I've hardly slept all night."

"Sara, God does not want us to sacrifice the child. He wants me to sacrifice my attitude toward having a homosexual son. We must cancel the abortion. Thank God. Thank you, Lord. Fix breakfast, Sara. You eat, too. We must celebrate."

Abe called Dr. Hardy's answering service, and left a message. Before long, the physician returned the call. "We are canceling the abortion, Dr. Hardy."

"I'm glad, Mr. Smith. God bless you."

Abe and Sara sat at the breakfast table for a long time, reflecting upon their experience. "Sara, as we sit and talk, it is becoming clear. God is leading me into a new way of thinking. A few days ago, I accepted the possibility of abortion—something I thought I could never do. Now I must learn to accept the possibility of homosexuality. I never thought I could do that. It will not be easy. Is there more to come? Where is God leading me? Perhaps God is telling me that I must look at the Law and at obedience in completely new ways. This is very frightening. How far am I expected to go? How far can I go? Can I share this with my congregation? Do I dare? Can I keep silent? Sarah, I think we must be prepared for some changes in our lives. We must set out on a new adventure. I don't know where it might lead us."

"Yes, Abraham," she said.

And the angels sang. ▼



D. S. Carlstone of Oklahoma holds a Ph.D. in physics, and has recently retired after teaching his subject for 31 years. He has a longtime interest in the influence of science on philosophy and theology.

Real Presence

J. Barrie Shepherd

Yes, a frilly pink tutu
was, more or less-more less
than more-all he wore,
that and a tall pair of teetering
stiletto heels and parasol-from tip
to toe in matching lurid pink,
strutting his jet-glow black and
body-built stuff from side to side
in flagrant full gay pride
parading down Fifth Avenue.

From giant urns outside our church
we plied the passers-by with plastic
cups "o' kindness yet" on a hot June
afternoon-"in Jesus' Name."
Fully clothed, and more,
dark clergy suit, black shirt and
stiff white collar, I stood my ground,
clutching a tray of cooling draughts
to represent a welcome and a blessing-
at the least-as a child of God.

Beaming, he tripped across bestowing
smiles, spectacular, on all and sundry,
chiefly me. Daintily he took the cup
I offered, leaned perilous close-
those tipping heels!-and kissed me on one
startled cheek, his bristles coarse, lips-
generous smile notwithstanding-brushing
deep, appalled revulsion through my gut,
despite all my head was murmuring of
tolerance and Christian love.

"Oh Reverend," laughed the lady
from the sewing circle,
"you should see the juicy kiss
mark on your cheek." And as we both
collapsed in honest, healing mirth,
first head, then heart took over
from my gut and raised a prayer
of thanks for grace's all-too-often
way of shoving me, still screaming,
toward birth.



J. Barrie Shepherd has served for the past eight years as minister of the First Presbyterian Church in the City of New York. The author of 13 books, his poetry has appeared in many publications, including The Christian Century and The New Republic. A Britisher by birth, he was reared in England and Scotland and, after service in the RAF, was educated at The University of Edinburgh and Yale. Shepherd serves on the national board of The Covenant Network, Presbyterian churches committed to removing antigay restrictions in the denomination's Book of Order. Another of his poems appears on page 8.

A Poem for the Millennium March
Delivered in Washington, D.C., April 30, 2000
Keith Boykin

"When I dare to be powerful—
to use my strength in the service of my vision—
then it becomes less and less important
whether I am afraid."
Audre Lorde

I Speak Today As One Black Gay Man

I Speak Because
Barbara Jordan
Langston Hughes, and
The Reverend James Cleveland
could not speak

I Speak for myself,
but I also speak for my uncle,
a black gay man
who could not be here
because he was murdered in his own
bedroom

I Speak to stop the violence
from Wyoming to Alabama
and all points in between,
and yes, in Texas and New York as well

I Speak to tell
George W. Bush and Rudy Giuliani
not to pack your bags for Washington
because you will not be living here next
year

I Speak knowing that
the right-wing may vilify me,
closeted gay men may deny me
and religious demagogues may decry me

I Speak to tell Jesse Helms,
and Trent Lott,
and Strom Thurmond,
your days of division are numbered
I Speak Because
two homosexuals who share their lives
together
deserve at least the same rights
as two heterosexual strangers who met
last night on prime time TV

I Speak Because
James Baldwin
Lorraine Hansberry
Bayard Rustin
Audre Lorde
Glen Burke
Simon Nkoli, and
Bessie Smith
could not be here

I Speak as a member of the family
because there are problems in the family
that cannot be healed
by sweeping them under the sterilized,
sanitized rug
of homogenized homosexuality

I Speak Because
Martin Luther King
and Huey Newton
would support my cause

I Speak To Resist
the commercialization
and commodification
of a mainstream "gay lifestyle"
that enriches a privileged few
and impoverishes the masses
with a bankrupt culture of uniformity

I Speak Because
Alain Locke
Joe Beam
Essex Hemphill
Mickey Fleming
Greg Hutchings
Assoto Saint
Craig Harris, and
Alvin Ailey
could not be here

I Speak Because
two people sitting in a hotel room
should not be able to dictate
the entire lesbigaytrans agenda

I Speak Because
Sojourner Truth
Harriet Tubman
Malcolm X, and
Frederick Douglass
have taught me the value of struggle

I Speak Because
our community has a right to know
how decisions are made,
and a responsibility
to hold our leaders accountable

I Speak Because
Patrick Kelly
Willi Smith
Joan Fountain
Countee Cullen
Josephine Baker
Mel Boozer, and
Marlon Riggs
could not be here

I Speak so that
my silence will not be interpreted as
complicity,
my concerns not discarded dismissively,
and my thoughts not represented
simplistically

I Speak Because
Coretta Scott King
Cornel West
Jesse Jackson, and
Nelson Mandela
have uplifted me

I Speak Because
my heroes and heroes
and other good people of conscience
have chosen not to speak

I Speak to give voice
to their concerns

I Speak Because,
like Fannie Lou Hamer,
I'm sick and tired
of being sick and tired

I Speak to remind you, and myself, that I
can
hold my lover's hand
in Anacostia or Harlem or South Central
or Oakland
if I choose to,
and I am not always found
in Dupont Circle or Christopher Street or
Santa Monica Boulevard or the Castro

I Speak to Honor
Me'Shell Ndege'Ocello
Ruth Ellis
Jewelle Gomez
Ruth Waters
Carl Bean
E. Lynn Harris
George Bellinger

Marjorie Hill
Carlene Cheatom
Maurice Franklin
Kofi Adoma, and
Peter Gomes
For Blazing A Path
In which I could follow

I Speak Because
not all blacks are straight,
and not all gays are white

I Speak to Honor
Mandy Carter
Nadine Smith
Cleo Manago
Barbara Smith
James Earl Hardy
Phill Wilson
Ron Simmons
Alvin Quamina, and
Kevin McGruder

I Speak so that you will ask
why these people are not on this stage

I Speak to Honor
RuPaul
Sapphire
Bill T. Jones
Ken Reeves
George C. Wolfe
Alice Walker
June Jordan and
Phill Reed

I Speak so that
the presence of people of color
will not be tokenized
and the absence of people of color
will not be trivialized

I Speak to Honor
Sabrina Sojourner
Samuel Delany
Angela Davis
Jaye Davidson
Cheryl Clarke, and
Nona Hendryx

I Speak to Enter These Names
indelibly in the record books
of this gathering

I Speak Because
Audre Lorde warns that
my silence will not protect me
any more from the anti-gay forces
than it will from the anti-black forces

I Speak to stand up
for the millions
of brothas and sistahs
whose area codes do not begin
with 202, 212, 213, or 415

I Speak Because
AIDS is not over,
in America or Africa,
despite what the privileged elite may write,
that people of color are at greater risk
than ever,
and that now is not the time to turn our
backs on this disease

I Speak so that
black gays and lesbians
can create our own organizations
to support our own needs
without having to answer the tired old
question
why are we "separating ourselves?"

I Speak Because your priorities
are not always our priorities,
but all of our priorities are important
and should not be casually dismissed

I Speak Because
affirmative action
and racial profiling
are part of my agenda

I Speak so that
a black family can get a home loan
and a black man can simply get home,
alone, without getting arrested

I Speak Because
I cannot stand the word "queer"
and feel excluded from the word "gay"

I Speak so that black leaders
will not forget us
and gay leaders
will finally learn to work with us

I Speak so that
white gays
and straight blacks
will no longer make decisions
that affect us
without including us

I Speak in a culture
that devalues our love
to say that the act of self-love
is an act of revolution in itself

I Speak to declare
that black men loving black men
is no longer a revolutionary act
but an everyday thing

I Speak to tell you
that I refuse to be
the only black person
in any meeting,
at any time,
at any point
ever again

I Speak so I can get a taxicab
not just when I leave this stage,
but when I leave the White House
or leave your house, after a fabulous
affair,
or any house on any street,
that I will not be judged by the color of
my skin

I speak Because
Alice Walker reminds me
that no person is your friend
who demands your silence
or denies your right to grow

I Speak Because
nobody else can speak for me
but me

I Speak to help
repair the breach
that has divided us
black from white
straight from gay
male from female

I Speak to help
repair the breach
that has excluded the voices
of youth and seniors,
the poor and middle class,
bisexuals, and transgendered people,
people with disabilities,
and all people of color

I Speak with hope
because Dr. King reminds me
that only when it is dark enough
can you see the stars

I Speak so that
Dennis Rodman can wear a wedding
dress,
that Carl Lewis can pose in track shorts
and high heels,
and that Little Richard can simply be
himself

I Speak so that
the famous rappers and runners and
writers
and Hip Hop heroes
on the DL
may one day decide
to speak as well

I Speak so that
all black lesbian, gay, bisexual, and
transgendered teenagers
will one day be allowed
to live peaceably in their own family
homes

I Speak Because
we must broaden the movement
to see the intersection of
race, gender, class, religion, sexuality,
and ethnicity

I Speak not to get
my place at the table
but to demand a whole new table
arrangement
that welcomes all those who have been
excluded

I Speak not to gain privilege
but to challenge the whole concept
of privilege itself

I Speak to Invoke the Lessons of
Rodney King,
Abner Louima,
Amadou Diallo
James Byrd, and
Patrick Dorismond
lest they be forgotten
or thought to pertain strictly
to some other march

I Speak Because
we cannot prevail
against the Prop 22s
if we do not also fight
the Prop 187s and Prop 209s

I Speak Because
June Jordan tells me
that freedom is indivisible
or it is nothing at all
besides sloganeer-ing
and temporary,
short-sighted,
and short-lived
advancement for a few

I Speak to Say, unequivocally, once and
for all,
that blacks and gays are not the same,
that racism is not the same as homopho-
bia,
and that the civil rights struggles are
not identical

I Speak Because
it matters not
which group is most oppressed,
or which was first oppressed,
or whether they are identically op-
pressed.
What matters is that no group or class of
people
should be oppressed

I Speak to remind you
that this march will soon be forgotten
if we do not take action
in our own lives
in our own communities

I Speak in the hope
that this gathering
will not become
just another circuit party
and that real people
may learn real lessons here

I Speak to shine the light
in Internet chat rooms,
online clubs,
glbpoc listserves,
and lgbt email chains

I Speak Because
the personal is political
every time we are not ashamed,
to go beyond our boundaries,
to express our love,
to come out,
to volunteer,
to make a donation,
to write a letter,
to forward an email,
to register to vote,
or simply to speak

Finally, I Speak to offer a choice
between fear and love

I Speak Because
fear is negativity,
scarcity,
and
falsity

I Speak Because
love is positivity,
abundance,
and
truth

I Speak Because
fear is unnatural and learned
and love is natural and innate

I Speak so that
my faith may be used as a tool for love,
and not a weapon of hate

I Speak Because
I refuse to worship
at the altar
of religious bigotry
and self-righteous piety

I Speak to Pray
for Pat Robertson and Jerry Falwell
that they may learn
the true meaning of unconditional love

I Speak so that
one more black gay man or woman may
find the courage
to rise up in church today and challenge
a minister
who spews out the vicious bile of
religious-based homophobia

I Speak so that
Angie and Debbie
and Alveda and Reggie
may one day understand
that God is love
and love is for everyone

I Speak Because
I have no power to make these dreams
happen
unless someone, somewhere hears these
words as her own
and decides to act

I Speak
as a proud African-American
same-gender-loving
Christian-identified man
unashamed of who I am
unwilling to be divided into identity
camps, and
unbowed by the demons of hatred that
would incite me
to fear instead of love.

I Speak Because Audre Lorde tells me,
"When I dare to be powerful,
to use my strength in the service of my
vision,
then it becomes less and less important
whether I am afraid."

I Speak Today
As One Proud Black Gay Man ▼

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Keith Boykin is the author of *Respecting the Soul: Daily Reflections for Black Lesbians and Gays*, and *One More River to Cross: Black and Gay in America*. A *Harvard-educated lawyer*, he is an adjunct professor of government at American University and former special assistant to President Clinton. Thanks to former Open Hands advisory committee member Allen Harris for alerting us to this speech, and thanks to Keith Boykin for giving us permission to print it.





A Letter from Jimmy Creech

On November 17, 1999, in Grand Island, Nebraska, a jury in a church trial convicted Jimmy Creech of "disobedience to the Order and Discipline of the United Methodist Church" for co-officiating a holy union for two men on April 24, 1999. The penalty imposed by the jury was the withdrawal of his credentials as an ordained elder in the United Methodist Church. Attending in solidarity with Jimmy were representatives of the Methodist Federation for Social Action, the Reconciling Congregation Program, Affirmation, and In All Things Charity. In addition, 120 members of Soulforce, an interfaith coalition, were present to make a strong witness that the trial was an act of spiritual violence against lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender persons. This letter was written two weeks later.

While I still need time to assess the significance and consequences of the guilty verdict and the penalty, both for me personally and for the movement toward justice and community of which all of us are a part, there are a few things I am clear about and want to share with you now.

First, I am immensely grateful for the support you gave to me and for the witness that you made in various ways around the country on behalf of justice and to affirm the dignity of lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender persons. I wish I had some adequate and personal way to say to each of you, "Thank you!" Your support strengthened and empowered me. I never felt alone. I was always clear that I was only one small part of a larger faithful community journeying together in this movement of God in history. You are for me the sign of our Easter faith, confirming our hope that justice, compassion and truth will prevail over bigotry, injustice and death.

The trial brought to an end a twenty-nine year relationship that I have had with the United Methodist Church as an ordained minister. The ordination that was taken from me by the jury was given to me by the United Methodist Church. It belonged to the church and the church had a right to take it back. It was not mine to claim; it is not an entitlement. That is the basic meaning of ordained ministry.

However, the ordination that preceded it and cannot be reclaimed by the United Methodist Church is the one that came with my baptism, and the one confirmed by my call to ministry. These belong to me still, and no institution, jury or person has the authority or power to take them away. I will continue to honor and live out this ordination in all that I do.

This is not to say that what the church revoked was unimportant to me. There is nothing I love more than being a pastor of a congregation. I know that I cannot be a United Methodist pastor now. I will not dwell on it, but be assured that I grieve what has been taken from me.

But I grieve more for those who are being rejected, oppressed and persecuted by the United Methodist Church because of who they are and because of whom they love. The ordination that has been taken from me is one that the United Methodist Church has routinely denied and withdrawn from gay people long before it was officially required to do so in 1984. Many gifted persons called by God have been denied ordination because of their sexual orientation. Others have been denied fellowship, if not membership in the UMC. Many have been spiritually and psychologically abused by vicious judgment and condemnation. I am only a casualty of the church's bigotry against bisexual, lesbian, gay and transgender persons. *They* are the true victims and martyrs. I have been punished only for what I've done. They are punished for who they are and whom they love. The difference is profound. My loss and pain is trifling in comparison.

I also grieve for the United Methodist Church. It has wounded and crippled itself with bigotry, legalism and fear. Until these impediments are purged from its soul, the United Methodist Church cannot speak authentically of God's love in Jesus Christ. Every act and testimony toward that end will be smudged with the evil of its prejudice and persecution of gay people. We may be witnessing its death, at least the death of the church we have loved and served. We can mourn the church that dies; but, we cannot hold on to it and keep it alive if its soul is dead. Instead, we must look for the new reality of God's presence in the world, the new expression and experience of Christ's body.

I believe it is important to understand my trial, along with Greg [Dell]'s trial [See the Spring 1999 issue, Vol. 14, No. 4.] and the judicial process against the Sacramento 68 in the California-Nevada Annual Conference [Since dropped; see Winter 1999 issue, Vol. 14, No. 3.], as resistance within our denomination to the movement of God toward Jesus' vision of an inclusive and just community. The trial resisted but did not end the movement. Rather, it helped to bring clarity and definition to it. It was not axial, but only another movement in the redemptive process of God. It could be seen as a defeat, the UMC's further fall from grace, or it can be seen as a painful event that opens up new possibilities for change toward the new thing God is doing. I believe it is the latter. I believe there is no way that God's movement toward justice, freedom, dignity and community can be successfully resisted and denied.

I don't feel defeated. I am now among the laity of the United Methodist Church, called to the same ministry I've always been called to honor, called to "resist evil, injustice, and oppression in whatever forms they present themselves." Called "according to the grace given to [me, to] remain [a] faithful member of Christ's holy church and serve as Christ's representative in the world." It makes no sense to me to leave one habitation of the Christian church for another, just so I can have the institutional favor and privilege of ordination. When I was ordained, it was my privilege to serve the laity. It is now my honor to serve with the laity.

In practical terms, I intend to become a member of a local United Methodist Church. I intend to complete the book I've started. It will include the 2000 General Conference, so I have

at least another year of work on it ahead of me. I will continue to accept speaking invitations. And, I intend to support the work of Soulforce, the Coalition (MFSA, RCP, IATC and Affirmation) in its effort to affect change at the General Conference, and to support the Reconciling United Methodists in North Carolina. And as time passes, I know God will call me to other ministries I've not imagined.

God bless you! The journey continues, and we continue together! ▼

Jimmy Creech was an ordained United Methodist minister for twenty-nine years, serving churches in North Carolina and Nebraska. Readers may contact him at 412 South Boylan Ave., Raleigh, NC 27603-1910; telephone: 919-755-3558; fax: 919-835-2182.



Reflections on the Second Jimmy Creech Trial

Marilyn Alexander

"...For his eye is on the sparrow and I know he watches me...I sing because I'm happy, I sing because I'm free, for his eye is on the sparrow and I know he watches me."

To say that the guilty verdict and the final penalty in the trial of Jimmy Creech came as a surprise is not quite accurate. Nor is it descriptive to say that we were prepared because we could have almost certainly guessed the outcome. With all our knowledge of the worst case scenarios, we are still a people of hope and faith, both in God and in the essence of who we are as a church. So when the verdict was spoken and especially when the punishment was rendered, it was a shock to the heart and soul. We live with a veneer of trust that we are moving towards a more just and loving church. If we did not have this faith, we would not still be here. It is times like these though, when the reality of the ignorance and bigotry of the church is so stark, that we feel the blow throughout our body and soul. The naked truth rocks us to the core.

The trial moved beyond a mere assessment of whether or not Jimmy disobeyed the church law (though certainly that was the nuts and bolts of it). It wasn't even about the institution of marriage (though truly the wedding of two men was the catalyst). As we moved through the day, starting from our arrival at Trinity UMC around 8:15 a.m., huddling in the cool morning air outside while we waited for the completion of the jury selection going on inside the church, we were reminded that this trial was sending a message to the world about the integrity of the church's message to seek love and justice. Already the Soulforce group had held their peaceful, nonviolent protest, had been arrested, and was returning with the powerful feelings of their action. As one retired United Methodist clergyman told me, "When the bishops stood in front of us and told us to move, I could feel everyone pull

even closer together. It was an amazing feeling." They wanted the trial participants to know the lengths that they would go to object to the trial, to the point of literally standing in the way of their brothers and sisters in the faith and to say, "No more."

Fred Phelps and his bunch from Kansas were on hand with the usual "cheerful" placards but they were kept outside the main perimeter so they were merely background noise. The same few protesters from the night before were closer. There was something ironic about the sign that one held in her left hand that said something about homosexuality being an abomination while she smoked a cigarette with her right hand. In addition, there was a large media presence. At one point I looked down the sidewalk to see the Visitor Parking signs surrounded by numerous camera tripods temporarily abandoned (and parked there) by news teams. Each of these images were reminders that the church was also on trial, whether it be in the court of public opinion or in the hearts and minds of the gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender community.

The trial itself moved very rapidly. We were seated in the sanctuary by 10:00 a.m. and dismissed just after 11:30 with instruction we would not hear back from the jury before 1:15 p.m. By nearly 1:30 we had heard the verdict. It then took until just before 4:00 before the penalty was announced. During that last stretch of time, we sat in the sanctuary and wondered, waited and weighed. Finally someone had the good sense to start leading us in singing hymns. The words tumbled over me, preoccupied my mind for a time but did not stick.

What did catch my attention (and that of all those around) was the flight of a small sparrow. Into the lofty ceiling, down by the organ pipes, across to the other side and out towards the back—fast and furiously it flew. Just for a moment the bird caught our imagination—even our hunger for a sign of what was to come. Very soon after that, the jury returned, the penalty was announced, a visibly grieving bishop said a word of prayer, and we followed Jimmy out into the Nebraska sunshine and the gaze of a crowd of cameras and microphones.

All along the way, Jimmy spoke eloquently, with passion and compassion. He kept the focus on the church's choice of whether or not to embrace its calling to show God's love and to treat each person as one of sacred worth. To the very end, he also kept the spiritual, emotional and physical pain of gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgendered people and their families at the forefront.

On the altar table inside the sanctuary lay a commonly seen autumn harvest spread of a miniature hay bale, corn husks and tiny gourds and pumpkins. The table was barely visible behind the trial setting where the bishop presided, the jury was seated, and the witness stand located, but it was still there. It kept me wondering what the church would glean from this trial, what we will reap from the seeds sown here in Grand Island, Nebraska. In the short term, I see only rotten fruit growing out of today's seeds of ignorance and arrogance, but I have to believe that this day did not bring the last word in the struggle for an inclusive church. In the (oh so long) long run, we must dig up today's seeds of hope and faith and replant them in fertile soil. We must use them in such a way as to grow new life into the church. We must let our anger and

sadness fuel our future actions. Yes, we must grieve, but we must also keep moving down the row—planting, watering, weeding, even fertilizing. And we can sing, in low and high voices, “I sing because I’m happy, I sing because I’m free, for his eye is on the sparrow and I know he watches me.” ▼



Marilyn Alexander is the interim Coordinator of the Reconciling Congregation Program and interim Executive Publisher of Open Hands. With James Preston, she authored We Were Baptized Too—Claiming God’s Grace for Lesbians and Gays (Westminster John Knox Press, 1996).



Law vs. Truth

David Cooper

I keep finding myself returning to it, the printed on green, security-clad—*Not valid unless machine numbered and signed with multicolor ribbon on the reverse side*—symbol of your passing.

CERTIFICATE OF DEATH, Issued by Marion County Health Department, Indiana State Department of Health—it states. Looks official. Must be legal. Having lived with you four and a half years, I look for facts. The name is correct as is sex, time of death, date of death, social security number, age: 34—so young! Date of birth—yes, correct; birthplace: *Columbus, Indiana*—correct, but fails to mention “Athens of the Midwest”—oh well, we can let that pass. Skip to box 16: Marital Status (Specify): *Single*. Lie!

I have made so many journeys to hospitals, mopped the sweat from your head when you were delirious, scrubbed you in the shower at home when your arm had to be encased in plastic to protect the ganciclovir IV. How dare they state “Single?” Isn’t legality about truth? Was it not my ear that shared your innermost secrets and confessions? Didn’t you first tell me the things you couldn’t even tell your father or mother? Weren’t those my arms that cradled you when you were ill and embraced you with joyous love during the good days? Isn’t it the heart of your spouse that now lies shattered and in ruins as it aches for simple recognition?

What were those rings we exchanged and solemn vows? Death parted us, but not nearly as much as the State of Indiana or the Marion County Health Department.

Shreds of truth are to be found on this official waste of paper. “*White*.” Yes, your skin was white, especially on the day that you transcended this small planet. White it was also, the day the oncologist announced “liver tumor” and “cancerous” and “small chance.” It doesn’t document your bravery, though. True enough, you, the “*decedent*,” were not a U.S. Veteran. You killed no one, but you did bleed many times. How you dreaded the constant blood tests required to keep an HIV-ridden body going. Even with macular degeneration of the eyes, you saw the grim object poised to strike your vein. Brave, too, you were when you decided upon intensive che-

motherapy in order to preserve a slim chance of our continuing life together.

Immediate cause of death: *respiratory failure*. Approximate interval between onset and death: *2 weeks*. Both of these statements may be true (I did not count the days), but my God, what a long two weeks. Two weeks of wearing latex gloves and gowns and masks (except when understanding nurses were on duty) as I sat in the chair beside your bed, holding your hand, assuring you that what we had nothing could destroy or telling you of how sincerely I believed that we would be together again, but in a more benevolent world. A world without prejudice—what a thing for which to dream!

Running down hospital back corridors with you in the bed, being transported in the night from coronary intensive care back to oncology, helping with your oxygen because the nurses and orderlies couldn’t possibly do all things at once, I never dreamed that some day I would be left with this green, legal lie. Or maybe I should be generous and call it a half-truth since there is some fact?

If your husband or wife dies (it will happen some day), how would you feel to read in the official record that your only role was to be identified in box 20: Informant’s name (type/print)? How would you feel the next time you sing patriotic words like “home of the brave and the land of the free” when your love, bravery, and freedom was denied in that “home”?

Imagine for one moment how it feels to want to write for your church newsletter your thanks to all of those who were so kind during the final illness and passing of your _____. What is the word that fills in that blank? You are only the “informant” according to that legal document.

Feel the sting as well-intentioned people tell you they are sorry about the passing of your “friend”! Yes, he was my best friend, but oh, what a half-truth! How much more a spouse he was than the woman a legal document said I was married to for nineteen years! How much more a soulmate than the person who bore those two wonderful products of our genetic material.

Why is it so necessary and just to pass laws in defense of marriage? I have never wished to deny two people the right to marry. Are there only a limited number of legal certificates waiting to be filled out granting legal sanction to what God has joined together? Will the gays and lesbians be the first in line and take all existing blank certificates and thereby deny to heterosexual persons the right to make legal what their hearts tell them is the truth? If you don’t want to allow us the dignity of being married, for God’s sake invent something. Call it what you will. Allow it not to offend or threaten your sensibilities, but give us some legality.

A female nurse came to me one night in the hospital. She said “I want to say ‘thank you.’ I have never seen a husband or wife as devoted to the other as you have been to him.” I said, “Thank you.” As the tears rolled down my cheek, I had an inkling that some day I would merely be an “informant.”

Do something, please. Don’t do it for me. Do it for you. Whenever any of us is treated as less than fully human, we are all dehumanized. Don’t let there be another Matthew Shepard (or the other hundreds whom you cannot name). Don’t cause

kids to commit suicide because you can't fully accept them. Please don't leave another soul staring at a green sheet of legally wasted paper realizing that he or she is merely an informant. ▼



David L. Cooper (l.) describes himself as "a United Methodist of many years," a member of Broadway United Methodist Church in Indianapolis. He and Steve (r.) were united in a marriage ceremony celebrated by the Rev.

Howard Warren on Dave's 51st birthday, less than a week before Steve died in 1999.

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Let Us Be Impatient With Prejudice

William Sloane Coffin

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An old adage reads, "Good things come in small packages." Vermont is clear proof. Ever since the Vermont Supreme Court decision of December 20, the eyes of the nation are upon our state. Many Americans consider the court's decision a legal milestone and a cultural turning point. But also, not surprisingly, Montpelier is being flooded with thousands of out-of-state letters filled with inflammatory rhetoric and spurious homophobic assertions, many of them written by Christians who use the Bible much as a drunk does a lamppost—more for support than for illumination.

I am reminded of the wise conclusion of William Penn: "To be ferocious in religion is to be ferociously irreligious."

Readers will remember the court ruled that the common benefits and protection that flow from marriages under Vermont law must be extended to same-sex couples but left it to the Legislature to craft a remedy for the discrimination the court had deemed unconstitutional. On the day following the ruling, an editorial in the *Rutland Herald* suggested that "the two obvious remedies are to broaden the definition of marriage to include same-sex couples, or to create another form of legally sanctioned domestic partnership that guarantees the same benefits."

It occurs to me that all Vermonters should take time out from the clamor of life to become for a while as reflective as possible. Thoughtful conversations need to take place in every family, in every church, temple and mosque, in every field, factory and office. Our representatives in Montpelier must hear from us, but only the most carefully thought out reasons for our positions. To be avoided at all costs is the solace of opinion without the pain of thought.

For example, many letters sent our legislators enjoin them to remember "the sanctity of traditional marriage." Yet few traditions have changed more over the years than marital ones. For centuries, parents knew best—marriages were arranged.

For an even longer period of time, husbands had all property rights including their wives and daughters themselves. Until very recently interracial marriages often were forbidden, and Bible readers should recall that the early biblical practice of polygamy, although later abandoned, is nowhere in the Bible explicitly forbidden.

In short, with so many traditions, we need both to recover and to recover from them. All of which is not to take away from the sanctity of marriage, for few things are more sacred than an avowed commitment between two people to an intimate, lifelong relationship.

People who say "same-sex marriage makes me uncomfortable" should probably remind themselves that comfort has nothing to do with the issue and that, often as not, change is discomfoting. I think those of us who are straight people really need to sit down quietly and compare our own discomfort with the discomfort of gays and lesbians who for years have been excluded, isolated, silenced, abused and even killed.

The argument that gays threaten to destroy heterosexual marriage is an assertion only, not an argument. If anyone destroys marriage, it's married people, not gays.

Finally, I think we need to examine carefully the position shared by many thoughtful folk who are anxious that whatever the legislators in Montpelier do "it must be everything as good as marriage."

In 1896 in *Plessy vs. Ferguson*, the U.S. Supreme Court found "separate but equal" to be constitutional in educating black and white children. But in 1954 the court ruled that "separate" inevitably meant unequal. Would not the same inequality prove true were civil marriage reserved for straight couples only while gay and lesbian unions were designated otherwise? Further, if for all of us marriage is a profound symbol, and for some of us a sacred one, what right have straight people to deny it to gays and lesbians for whom it is altogether as meaningful?

I think gays are right in insisting that marriage by any other name just isn't marriage. And isn't it ironic that Vermont law today recognizes gay and lesbian families, but has yet to legalize the marriages which generally precede the formation of families?

By recalling "our common humanity" the state's Supreme Court reminded us that all human relationships be judged by their inner worth, not by their outward appearance. That being the case, I believe the state should not hesitate to offer gays and lesbians the same civil marriage available to straight couples. Certainly the legal matter of extending rights would be vastly simplified if the marriage language were uniform.

As a male I consider myself at best a recovering chauvinist. As a white person I am a recovering racist, and as a straight person a recovering heterosexist. To women, African-Americans, gays and lesbians, I am deeply grateful for stretching my mind, deepening my heart, and convincing me that no human being should ever be patient with prejudice at the expense of its victims. ▼

William Sloane Coffin is a resident of Strafford, Vermont. An author and activist, he has served as chaplain of Yale University and pastor of Riverside Church in New York City.



Conflict Resolution

DeEtte Beghtol

The structured conversation model developed by the Public Conversations Project at the Family Institute of Cambridge, Massachusetts was originally developed for discussing abortion. But more recently it has been used for dialogue around GLBT folks.

The developers of the model were skilled in working with families in crisis. They adapted what they had learned from helping families talk about difficult personal issues to conversations on divisive public issues. They recognized that on highly charged issues, "Each side considers its own position to be so vital, and that of the adversary to be so dangerous, that neither seems mindful of the costs of the battle." Does this sound familiar?

Public Conversations Project's basic premise is that people on opposite sides of an emotionally charged issue need a highly structured setting in order to really listen to each other. Where people are "stuck" in old patterns of talking about an issue, the facilitators seek to bring understanding by introducing new ways of talking to "the other side." The facilitators of the conversation groups carefully select participants for small groups of 4 to 8 people, evenly divided between "pros" and "cons." Most of the groups have been composed of participants who are not the "headliners," the leaders who have a lot at stake in remaining true to their public positions. People less concerned with saving face can be more open to express doubts and consider the validity of an opposing idea.

The facilitators do much pre-meeting contact: individual interviews with each participant, phone calls, a confirming letter, careful communications to establish trust in the facilitators. The goals of the facilitators are to provide a safe context in which people with different views can explore the values and concerns underlying the public debate. In the communications to participants, facilitators emphasize their interest in each person's unique personal views and invite her/him to consider their uncertainties as well as their certainties. Participants are invited to consider what they would genuinely like to learn from those who do not share their ideas and beliefs.

The original model began with sharing a meal together at which the hot topic is off limits. Participants are asked not to reveal what their "party line" is, thus allowed to see each other first as human beings. After dinner participants are seated in a circle alternating a "pro person" and a "con person," so that each person is physically located next to an opponent, not opposite. It's easier to see the humanity of your "enemy" if you are sitting next to him/her without a barrier of a table between you. It's easier to express your own vulnerability when the person next to you is also vulnerable.

The facilitators ask participants to put aside their urges to persuade and to use the time together to ask questions about which they are truly curious. The group accepts guidelines about confidentiality, not interrupting, and using considerate language. The first question posed by the facilitators focuses on drawing out personal stories, allowing participants to hear human emotion and pain and connect on a deeper level. An exercise sometimes used is to ask participants to list on newsprint the negative stereotypes they think others hold about them. This gets at the stereotypes without either side feeling like they are being attacked by the people present. The group who created the list identifies which stereotypes are most inaccurate, which are inaccurate but understandable, and which are the most painful.

Later questions by the facilitators ask participants to share their basic core beliefs on the issue and then their uncertainties or dilemmas. After this foundation of trust has been established, participants can ask questions of each other, keeping in mind the guideline about curiosity not persuasion. Any participant can decline to answer a question. This establishes a non-coercive atmosphere where people can ask questions without anyone feeling put on the spot. "Participants have direct exchanges with one another only after they have had the opportunity to be heard, without fear of rebuttal, attack or interruption." The session ends with questions posed by the facilitators to help people reflect and learn positive lessons from the dialogue.

Public Conversations Project has used variations of this model in two dialogues about GLBT inclusion in the church. The first began with leaders of the Massachusetts chapter of Episcopalians United and a local bishop. The group of eight people was balanced in terms of sexual orientation, clergy/lay, and gender, and was racially diverse. The dialogue was highly structured at first, placed a premium on asking questions that would surface new information, and created patterns of interaction that fostered receptive listening and intentional/thoughtful speaking.

As a part of the dialogue process the participants decided that they needed to better understand each other's approaches to scripture. Specific passages were selected by the participants and one whole session was spent on understanding each other's interpretations. After four sessions, including a day-long meeting, the group produced a consensus statement and a resource book that outlines the dialogue process in detail. Both can be obtained by contacting the Public Conversations Project, 46 Kondazian St, Watertown, MA 02472 or 617-923-1216 or asubak@publicconversations.org. Recently Public Conversations also facilitated a four-day dialogue for ten Anglican bishops at the Holy Cross Monastery in West Park, NY. This conversation was convened by the Archbishop of Canterbury and organized by Bishop Frank Griswold.

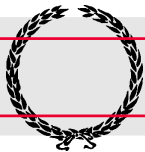
A variation of Public Conversations' original model was used by the Portland, Oregon group People of Faith Against Bigotry with a small group formed after Measure 9, the statewide ballot measure designed to restrict civil rights of GLBT people. After participation in several sessions with this group, one of the participants from a fundamentalist Christian church

told the group that she had been asked to gather signatures on petitions for another similar anti-gay ballot measure. She refused to do it because she had come to know and respect the gay and lesbian people in the group. Dialogues may not change the core beliefs of participants, but they certainly make mutual respect and tolerance more likely.

A structure that encourages telling personal stories and speaking from the heart in a confidential atmosphere is basic to such dialogue. Participants need to see their opponents first as human beings—as children of God—and not primarily as proponents of ideas or positions. Thus the dialogue becomes multi-faceted, reflecting the complex bundle of ideas and feelings we are. The result is that after the experience, participants, even those who risk little, see the issues and their own positions in less simplistic ways. To use a Quaker phrase, “that of God” in each of us responds to our brother or sister no matter how much we may disagree on an issue. If there is hope for reconciliation or mutual acceptance of differences between us, it needs to begin with such dialogue. ▼



DeEtte Wald Beghtol, a former Presbyterian, is bidenominational: a member of both a UCC and a United Methodist congregation. She is a mediator and trainer in private practice and works for a community mediation service. She thanks Laura Chasin, from Public Conversations Project, for information for this article.



CAMPUS

Pacific School of Religion Opens Center for Lesbian and Gay Studies

Jane Austin

Pacific School of Religion (PSR) in Berkeley, California, has announced the establishment of the PSR Center for Lesbian and Gay Studies in Religion and Ministry, a new Center offering educational resources, advocacy, and a progressive public voice on issues of sexual orientation and religion. Supported by a generous grant of \$950,000 from the E. Rhodes and Leona B. Carpenter Foundation, the Center will open its doors in July 2000.

The center will undertake research and scholarship which explores the theological, ethical, spiritual, biblical, psychological, social, and historical dimensions of sexual orientation; develop and share resources and information on these

issues with congregations, denominations, and the general public; develop curricula to prepare seminary students to provide leadership on these issues in their faith communities; and coordinate its efforts with existing gay and lesbian denominational caucuses. The center will encourage the formation of partnerships with other schools offering studies in gay and lesbian issues and with gay and lesbian caucuses within the American Academy of Religion and the Society of Biblical Literature.

Calling the center “an integral part of the educational mission of PSR,” the school’s president, William McKinney, said, “It will witness to the Christian belief in justice for all people and challenge the injustice of institutional homophobia and the prejudice surrounding different sexual orientations.”

Dr. Mary A. Tolbert, PSR’s George H. Atkinson Professor of Biblical Studies, will be director of the new center.

“Through the generous support of the Carpenter Foundation,” Tolbert says, “we have a unique opportunity to bring the resources of contemporary theological education and scholarship to bear on the present intolerant and even inhumane treatment afforded to lesbians and gay men in both church and state. From ballot initiatives to potential splits in major Protestant denominations, the inclusion or exclusion of lesbians and gay men from full civic or ecclesiastical participation has become a touchstone for defining the political and religious identity of many people worldwide.

“While these debates are often full of passion and drama, they are just as often lacking in information, accuracy, careful theological reflection, or the visible representation of persons from the gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender communities. The overall mission of the new Center is to intervene forcefully and positively in these debates by providing up-to-date information, thoughtful research, effective education for leadership, and a voice of advocacy for those who have been silenced or made invisible simply because of who God created them to be.”

Pacific School of Religion is a multi-denominational seminary of the United Church of Christ with strong ties to the United Methodist Church, the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) and the Universal Fellowship of Metropolitan Community Churches. From its origins in 1866, PSR has educated ministers for the changing needs of Christian churches in a diverse world, informed by a commitment to inclusivity and justice. PSR is also part of an ecumenical academic consortium, the Graduate Theological Union (GTU).

The school has had a long-standing commitment to justice for gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgendered people. It graduated its first openly gay student in 1971, opened its married student housing to same-sex couples in the early 1980’s, and provides domestic partner benefits to gay and lesbian faculty and staff. Openly gay faculty, students, staff and Board of Trustee members make significant and distinctive contributions to all levels of the community. ▼

Jane Austin is the Communications Director of the Pacific School of Religion. For more information, contact the center at clgs@psr.edu or 510/849 8206.


Diversity Diversity Diversity

Marsha Stevens



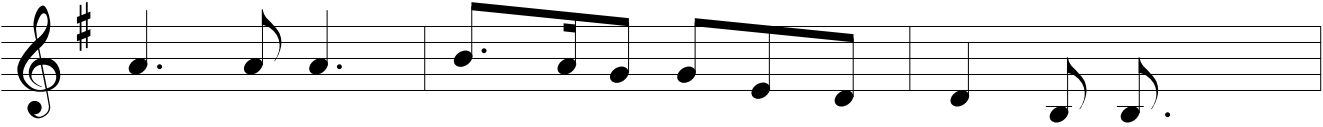
Sustaining
the Spirit

Chorus G C Amin




Each of us in our di - ver - si - ty, Brings to the cho - rus a

D G Emin




har - mo - ny, You bring us in where we're meant to be,

C D G G/B



blend - ing at last in the sym - pho - ny, You make the mu - sic and

C D G C D G *3rd time to CODA*



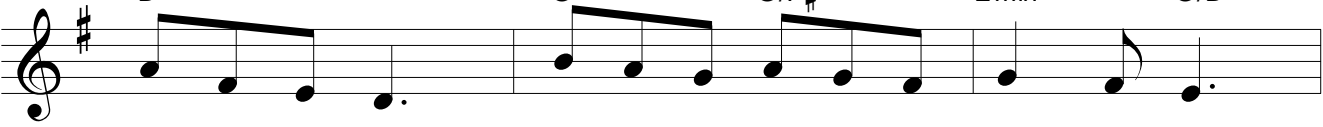
we sing a - long, ma - ny the sing - ers but one is the song.

Verse G D G C



1. Trum - pets of sol - stice that change our days, tim - pa - ni o - cean that
2. Warm moth - er earth with her lul - la - by, full is the moon in the

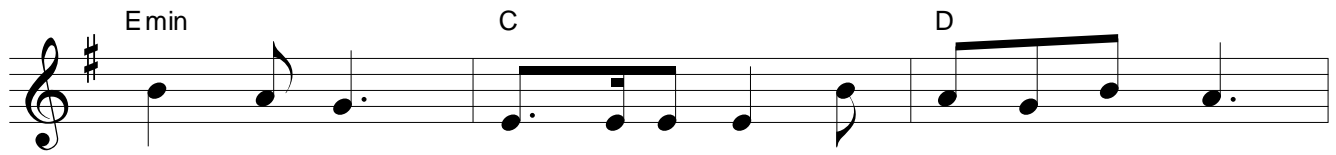
D G G/F# Emin G/D



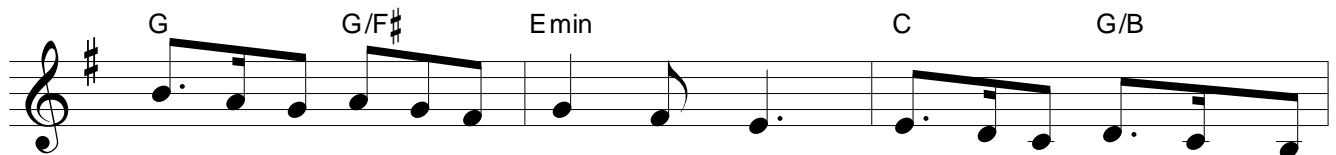
crash - es and plays, Sweet vi - o - lins in the wil - low's sigh,
or - ches - tra sky, Great spi - rit wind cros - ses harp and lyre,



Pic - co - lo sound of the birds that fly, Fierce is our Moth-er's de -
you have com - posed in this glow - ing fire, Stur - dy of bod - y or



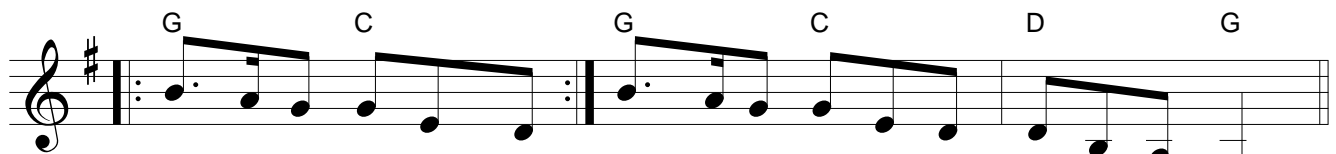
fense a - bove, safe is the touch of this Fath - er's love,
frail of limb, each smile a note in cre - a - tion's hymn,



Chant of the ag - ed and chil - dren's rhyme, ten - der the heart - beat that's
Great the cres - cen - do of col - or's verse, no one is bet - ter and



keep - ing time. You make the mu - sic and we sing a - long,
no one is worse.



ma - ny the sing - ers ma - ny the sing - ers but one is the song!

Marsha Stevens is the author of the folk hymn, "For Those Tears I Died." Christian Century magazine has called her, "Conservative Christianity's worst nightmare—a Bible-believing, God-fearing, Jesus-loving lesbian Christian." She has given permission for OpenHands readers to copy this song in its entirety (please include title and author with every copy) and all of her songs may be copied under CCLI guidelines.



Order from her website (www.BalmMinistries.com) or on amazon.com, CDnow.com, or by mail at P.O. Box 1981, Costa Mesa, CA 92628 (714)641-8968. Free downloads from each album available at MP3.com Booking information: contact Beth Coombs at (425)775-9579 (Pacific Time).



Welcoming Communities



AFFIRMING CONGREGATION PROGRAMME

Southminster-Steinhauer United Church
Edmonton, Alberta

A 200-member congregation located in southwest Edmonton, this congregation became the first officially Affirming Congregation in the province of Alberta in January 1999. Founded in the 1960s, Southminster-Steinhauer has always placed social justice at the heart of its ministry. For decades, the church worshiped in school gyms and held meetings in members' homes in order to dedicate money to mission rather than a building. Recently, in an effort to be more visible and vital in the community, the congregation voted both to embark on a \$1.4 million building campaign and become an Affirming congregation! Both efforts have been successful, and the church looks forward to expanding its witness for peace and justice when it moves into a permanent home in November 2000.



OPEN & AFFIRMING MINISTRIES

Chalice Christian Church
(Disciples of Christ)
San Mateo, CA

Named after the symbol of the denomination, Chalice Christian Church emphasizes the importance of Communion in the congregation's life and the radical yet reconciling nature of Christ's table. A newly recognized congregation in the Northern California-Nevada Region, this community came into existence as a result of a church split related to the use of inclusive language in worship. Such commitments led the congregation to decide to publicly proclaim itself "Open and Affirming." This three-year-old congregation is committed to active witness and service in the wider community through community organizing as well as hands-on service projects.

First Christian Church (Disciples of Christ)
Boulder, Colorado

Established in 1878, First Christian Church has always valued independent thinking and encouraged its members to participate in activities which would bring justice to the larger community. When the present building was erected, one of its first ministries was the creation of a low income senior adult facility nearby. On November 8, 1998 the congregation voted to identify itself as an Open & Affirming congregation. Pastor Terry Zimmerman affirms, "Our decision to become 'officially' O&A brings new opportunities and challenges to our members, but if our future is anything like our past, we have many wonderful, creative, fulfilling and purposeful days ahead of us!" As leaders of the Open & Affirming Task Force, the Rev. Glenn Johnson, a retired pastor, and his wife, Louise, were a strong impetus behind this wonderful achievement.



OPEN AND AFFIRMING

Christ Congregation, UCC
Princeton, New Jersey

The 100 members of this dually affiliated (UCC and American Baptist) church are a mixture of people who find unity in their desire to hear and express the good news of the gospel. The congregation has welcomed numerous young families with children, which means an expanding Sunday School! Outreach includes a Prison Visitation and Support program to federal prisoners and a recent party for kids from "Rainbow House" which provides housing for mothers with HIV/AIDS and their children. The congregation declares its ONA commitment in its bulletin each Sunday, is sponsoring an "out" seminary student for ordination, and continues to discuss other ways to keep ONA a part of the church's witness.

Rincon Congregational Church, UCC
Tucson, Arizona

Again in 1999, this 585-member city church lived out its commitment to compassion and hospitality through its annual Mardi Gras festival, which celebrates both the light and shadow sides of spirituality. Monies raised by the event were divided between the LGBT Center (especially its domestic violence program) and Casa de los Niños which provides care for children in abusive situations. Church members participate in "Outober Fest," the area gay pride celebration (held in October when it's not so hot!), and "Rainbow Services," Saturday night worship done in cooperation with other welcoming congregations. The church's youth program focuses on music and culture, and this season's holiday presentation was a "Celtic Christmas."



RECONCILING IN CHRIST

Mount Olive Lutheran Church
Minneapolis, Minnesota

Mount Olive is an urban congregation of 470 members, and the October vote to become RIC was unanimous, due to a strong community of gay and lesbian people which has been growing over the last 15 years. "Every Sunday someone is here because of it," said Rev. Bill Heisley, senior pastor. The church will continue to advertise in the local press in order to reach out to the GLBT community.

St. Stephen's Lutheran Church
Tallahassee, Florida

With 200 active members, St. Stephen's is the only integrated Lutheran church in the area. Church members became interested in the Reconciling in Christ program through their involvement with a local organization which cares for people with HIV/AIDS. The church has had at least one family join the congregation since its November vote to become RIC, and plans to continue its outreach into the gay and lesbian community.



Movement News

RCP Disappointed But Not Defeated

The refusal of the United Methodist Church General Conference (meeting May 2-12 in Cleveland) to change its policies on gays and lesbians will not deter the Reconciling Congregation Program, its board members have declared. [See also "They Know Not What They Do" on page 13.] More than 4000 letters favoring the goals of the reconciling movement were written to the gathering; 16,500 Reconciling United Methodists have been enrolled; 600 volunteers lobbied for change; more than 200 persons of color signed a new statement of support; 125 parents registered as part of the Parent's Network; more than 200 stoles were collected for the Shower of Stoles Project; more than 900 attended a Saturday rally; 800 gathered for worship on Sunday; 2000 participated in multi-cultural Communion services; and 220 persons were arrested in a Soulforce demonstration led by the Rev. Mel White and a separate action of those who protested the vote that retained the language in the UMC Discipline that calls homosexuality "incompatible" with Christian faith. RCP interim executive director Marilyn Alexander, among those arrested in the second action, said, "It has become increasingly clear that the system has been seized by those whose hearts are hardened against us. We kept faith with the system, trusted the process—but business as usual could not continue—the system has failed us and failed the larger church." Rev. Dr. Gayle Felton, RCP board chair, acknowledged that, despite the setback, those who participated in the RCP presence at General Conference "were blessed with rich experiences of God's grace" and urged "Don't allow yourself to be pushed out by those who would be happy to see you go!"

Presbyterian "Supreme Court" Rules Favorably

Meeting in Baltimore Maryland May 19-22, the Permanent Judicial Commission of the Presbyterian Church U.S. ruled that Presbyterian ministers may perform same-sex union services as long as they are not treated as marriages, because nothing in the church constitution specifically forbids it. In a separate case, the court ruled that a church session may accept a gay man as a candidate for ministry, even while a ban on ordination of openly gay ministers, elders, and deacons remains in place. A third case of a congregation in Burlington, Vermont, welcoming lesbians and gays as full church members, including opportunity for ordination as elders and deacons, was deferred until July. All three cases came from the Synod of the Northeast, and are the first to challenge a controversial 1997 amendment that allows ordination only of married heterosexuals or celibate singles.

Southern Lutherans Become Reconciling; Milwaukee Lutherans Affirm Gay Blessings, and a New Resource of Welcome

Meeting in Nashville for an annual assembly Memorial Day weekend, the Southeastern Synod of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America passed a historic statement of welcome to gay and lesbian people and their families. The statement, which passed by an estimated 2/3 majority, makes the Lutherans the first Protestant denomination in the South to pass such a statement at the regional level. On the same weekend the Southwest Texas Synod of the ELCA passed a similar statement. Synod assemblies are composed of pastors and lay representatives of every congregation in that synod. They represent the highest legislative authority at the synod level.

The "Resolution of Welcome" acknowledges that some gay and lesbian Christians and their families have left the church because they have not felt welcome in the past. It also states that other gay and lesbian people have been active and faithful members of the Lutheran church since the beginning of the synod itself. The Southeastern Synod is composed of ELCA congregations in Georgia, Alabama, Mississippi and Tennessee. Southwest Texas includes San Antonio and the area south to the Mexican border. Bob Gibeling of Atlanta, Program Executive for Lutherans Concerned/North America, served as floor leader for the resolution effort at the Southeastern Synod Assembly.

Earlier, on May 5, a synod of the ELCA approved the blessing of same-gender relationships by pastors in that synod, a historic first in the United States. By a vote of 141-103, the Greater Milwaukee Synod passed a resolution which "recognizes and affirms the blessing of such committed same-gender relationships by pastors of this synod after counseling of the couple seeking such a blessing." The Greater Milwaukee Synod has been designated as Reconciling in Christ for several years. The vote on recognition of gay and lesbian relationships came after rejecting a move to study the issue further. More than 400 clergy and lay delegates make up the synod's annual assembly, which is its highest legislative body. There are 141 congregations and 100,000 members in the Greater Milwaukee Synod. Southeast Michigan Synod of the ELCA passed an almost identical resolution by a clear majority on May 20.

Lutherans Concerned leaders are recommending use of a landmark new gay and lesbian ministry resource written and produced by the ELCA. The 40-page document, called "Congregational Hospitality to Gay and Lesbian People," is now available from the Division for Outreach, which wrote and produced it. Its contents include helpful ideas for congregations who want to be more welcoming to gay and lesbian people. The hospitality resource is being distributed by the ELCA to all congregations which relate to the Division for Outreach. These are primarily new congregations and congregations undergoing a renewal of their mission and ministry. Copies are available for a \$3 mailing cost donation from the Division for Outreach, Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, 8765 West Higgins Road, Chicago, IL 60631. For more information call 800-638-3522, ext. 2614.



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