

A Center at the Center of the Storm

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One hundred and fifty years ago, many Protestant denominations in this country were embroiled in a unity-threatening controversy from which some have only recovered in the last few decades and some will never recover. The issue was slavery, the owning of one human being by another, anchored in racial differences.

The Bible, which recounts the presence of slavery regularly throughout its many books—often with affirmation—was touted by many Christian congregations, clergy and denominational leaders as proof that the institution of slavery was a Christian institution. Only now, over a century later, are some Protestant denominations, like the Southern Baptists, finally apologizing for their support of slavery and, especially, for having proclaimed such blatant racism to be a Christian moral value.

Much has changed but much remains the same. Today, at the start of the 21st century, many Protestant denominations are once again embroiled in a unity-threatening controversy; this time the issue is the status of lesbians and gay men, an issue anchored in differences in sexuality. The Bible in this case provides much less material for the debate, since its clear prohibitions against homoeroticism, unlike its general support of slavery, are limited to three brief references in only two of its sixty-six books (Leviticus [twice] and Romans [once]). Nevertheless, the Bible and the assumed monolithic negativity of the Christian tradition are regarded by many Christian congregations, clergy and denominational leaders as assuring the sinfulness of all homoerotic activity and consequently the moral unworthiness of lesbians and gay men for inclusion in or the full blessings of the Christian community.

Furthermore, some Christian groups—taking their beliefs into the public sphere—have actually led recent political attempts to block access for gay men and lesbians to many rights and protections enjoyed by other citizens in the U.S., such as the right to non-discrimination in housing or employment, the ability to adopt children or serve in the armed services, and the right to marry and have their families covered by social security, health, and other insurance programs. For these Christians, this supposed Christian moral imperative judges gay men and lesbians not only as unworthy of full membership in the Christian community but as equally unworthy of full citizenship in the political community. In fact, the inclusion or exclusion of lesbians and gay men from civic or ecclesiastical participation has become an issue of such symbolic importance that it now constitutes a touchstone for defining the political and religious identity of many people worldwide. The resulting de-humanizing of lesbians and gay men because of their sexuality bears strong resemblances to the de-humanizing of people because of race or ethnicity.

Moreover, in the media and in current public debate on the rights of gay men and lesbians, this particular Christian position has attained prominence as the only Christian viewpoint, which it certainly is not. Allowing only one, mostly negative, Christian position to dominate the current political environment jeopardizes a different Christian moral imperative—the imperative of justice. Like all the children of God, lesbians and gay men deserve to have their voices heard both in the church and in the world; they deserve to be treated with respect and dignity. The case made against them by some in the church demands careful examination on historical, theological, and ethical grounds because, while recent debates are often replete with passion and drama, they have just as often been lacking in information, accuracy, or careful theological reflection.

It is critical to understand that the move to exclude people from full and equal inclusion in the promises of the gospel because of sexual orientation is a profoundly serious decision, which potentially threatens not only denominational unity but also the integrity of the Christian message as a whole.

PSR's Center for Lesbian and Gay Studies in Religion and Ministry was created precisely to raise these issues of justice and theology and bring to bear on this current theological, ecclesiastical and political debate the best resources that contemporary theological education can provide—to be, in other words, a Center at the center of this storm of passionate controversy. The Center proposes to contribute 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 whom God created them to be.

The idea to establish a Center grew out of a series of discussions which began in September 1996 between PSR trustees, faculty, staff, students, alums, and friends, initiated by a deeply concerned PSR trustee, Scott Hafner. These conversations explored several possibilities for responding to the present situation of lesbians and gay men in the church and world but eventually settled on the creation of a Center whose work would include both the support and promulgation of research on issues of sexual orientation and sexuality from the perspective of religion and ministry and also the leadership necessary to develop educational resources for churches and seminaries alike. As these discussions continued, it became clear, moreover, that to do its job with integrity the Center would need to serve well three distinct constituencies: the **church**, the **academy**, and the **gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgendered communities**.

In the Spring of 1997 the initial proposal for such a Center was adopted unanimously, first by the PSR faculty and then by the Board of Trustees. **The proposal defined the work of the Center in terms of four broad goals: research, resourcing, education and leadership, and advocacy and networking.** The first two goals reflect a commitment to produce and encourage careful theological, biblical, ethical, historical, and pastoral research on issues of sexual orientation and sexuality and then to make that research readily available to churches, theological schools, and the general public. The third goal underscores the need for support of lesbian and gay seminarians in their struggle for respect and voice within their own denominations, and also for curriculum development in these areas for all students, so that future pastors will be much better equipped to deal with issues of sexuality. The fourth goal recognizes the need to coordinate efforts with other organizations already working on these issues. It also acknowledges the fact that all research and education is rooted in a particular perspective of interest or advocacy, and that the forms of research and education with the most integrity admit this perspective upfront rather than cloaking their work in a disguise of fake neutrality. The PSR Center passionately affirms the full humanity of all of God's children, including those who happen to be lesbian, gay, bisexual, or transgendered.

In the Spring of 1998, the E. Rhodes and Leona B. Carpenter Foundation agreed to consider a proposal to fund the establishment of a Center for Lesbian and Gay Studies at PSR. Then, as a wonderful advent gift, the Carpenter Foundation informed PSR three days before Christmas, 1999, that they would underwrite the operating expenses of the Center for five years to allow time to raise a permanent endowment. The hopes and labors of so many at PSR—trustees, faculty, students, staff, and alums alike—were brought to fruition. Now, of course, the real work begins.

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