

A House of Prayer for All People

‘More Light’
Sunday

Isaiah 56:1-8 1 John 4:16b-21
College Hill Presbyterian Church, Tulsa

Rev. Todd B. Freeman
October 12, 2008

Back in 1969 (39 years ago), the pastor of a Presbyterian church in Dallas was going to be out of town one particular Sunday and needed to find another preacher to fill the pulpit. He had a particular person in mind, a fellow pastor in the same presbytery, and asked the Worship Committee to extend the invitation.

The church elder who was serving as the moderator of the Worship Committee refused to offer the invitation after he learned about the person his pastor wanted him to ask. He refused because the other pastor was black.

A special Session meeting was called to discuss the situation. After a heated exchange, they voted that the Worship Committee should indeed extend the invitation to the black Presbyterian pastor. The moderator again refused and resigned from the Session, as did a couple of other Elders.

The controversy quickly spread throughout the congregation. The end result was that this church, which formed in 1893, was split, and a good number of members left the church. Interestingly, it was those who held to a strict position of racial segregation who left the church. This resulted in a congregation that was fairly in agreement about progressive (or liberal) perspectives on social justice issues.

In the process of dealing with issues of race and equal rights, they also began to focus on other social issues, including those that came forth from the feminist movement of the late 60's and early 70s, as well as peace issues surrounding the Vietnam War.

Within a decade after that major event in the life of this congregation they, along with the rest of our denomination, were facing another major issue – **whether or not to ordain openly gay or lesbian persons as elders, deacons, or ministers.**

As a natural progression of their social justice work, it was a fairly easy decision for this congregation, back in 1979, to join a newly formed network of theologically and socially progressive Presbyterian churches in what would later be called the More Light Churches Network.

They discerned, along with only a handful of other Presbyterian congregations at the time, that as part of their mission and ministry efforts they

would stand in solidarity as advocates for the rights of gay and lesbian persons, including their right to hold leadership positions within the church.

That congregation in Dallas is Bethany Presbyterian Church, and I served as their pastor from 1997-2006. This past summer they celebrated their 29th year as a More Light Presbyterian congregation.

Even before arriving here at College Hill in March of this year, I learned that the history of this congregation involved a similar calling to work for social justice and the equal rights of others in both our church and society. Beginning about a decade ago, this congregation, after a couple of years of intentional study and prayerful discernment, declared itself part of the More Light Presbyterian movement. Though a painful decision for some, it too was a relatively logical extension of this congregation's sense of identity and mission.

The point is that bucking the status quo and making a conscious decision to break from such long held cultural and church traditions does not come in a vacuum for any congregation.

Not everyone here this day, however, was part of the process that led College Hill to declare itself a More Light congregation. So some of you may have some questions. Like, **What is 'more light' and where did this term come from?** The answer to that is embedded in this morning's Call to Worship.

The phrase 'yet more light' originated in a sermon in 1620 by the Rev. John Robinson, an English Puritan. In sending the Pilgrims off to the colonies in the New World, he stated the belief that God does not reveal God's whole truth to any one person in any one point in history, and that we must continually be open to hearing the new things God is saying to us through the Word. This, of course, fit very well with the Presbyterian mantra that the church should be reformed and always reforming in light of God's Word.

A group of Presbyterians advocating for the rights of gays and lesbians in the late 1970s used this statement from John Robinson, that "God hath yet more light and truth to break forth from God's Word," to encourage individual congregations to adopt their own 'more light' statement, declaring themselves to be an open and inclusive church..

This group formed in 1978 in response to that year's General Assembly issued an Authoritative Interpretation that "self-affirming, practicing homosexuals" would not be allowed to be ordained and installed as deacons, elders, or ministers in the Presbyterian Church. This organization, along with others (like the much later group called the Covenant Network of Presbyterian Churches), has worked tirelessly to change our denomination's official policy of exclusion. The current **mission statement for the national organization of More Light Presbyterians** is as follows:

Following the risen Christ, and seeking to make the Church a true community of hospitality, the mission of More Light Presbyterians is to work for the full participation of lesbian, gay, bisexual and

transgender people of faith in the life, ministry and witness of the Presbyterian Church (USA).

Presbyterian congregations, including this one, become 'more light' for a variety of reasons. For some this is a **moral and ethical issue**; for others it is **deeply personal**. For some, it is a matter of **being faithful to the Gospel**, being a welcoming church that allows no barriers to membership and service that are not essential to faith. For others it is a **justice concern**, a stand for inclusion and equality. For many it is a **pastoral care concern** for lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender adults and youth and their families and friends.

Each congregation, each session, pastor and church staff, must discern their own paths and know with certainty "why" they want and need to take this step of faith. While College Hill is clearly not a single-issue church, it is important to continue to reflect upon our identity and calling, including in this particular area of our ministry.

Thankfully, being a welcoming and inclusive congregation continues to be a major theological and ethical focus for us. That is why we are affirming today our desire to continue the struggle to learn more about human sexuality and its implications on the lives of our members and friends, our families, and on the life and mission of our denomination.

So where does our denomination currently stand on this issue? This past summer, to the surprise of many, the General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church (USA) voted once again to send out an amendment to our 175 presbyteries across the country to delete the exclusive law in our church's constitution, the **Book of Order**, known as **G-6.0106b** (formerly known as Amendment B or the Fidelity & Chastity Amendment). It was officially adopted in 1997. That law currently states that:

Those who are called to office in the church are to lead a life in obedience to Scripture and in conformity to the historic confessional standards of the church. Among these standards is the requirement to live either in fidelity within the covenant of marriage between a man and a woman (W-4.9001), or chastity in singleness. Persons refusing to repent of any self-acknowledged practice which the confessions call sin shall not be ordained and/or installed as deacons, elders or ministers of the Word and Sacrament.

This is the third attempt since 1997 to remove this exclusive language from our constitution. The first two attempts in 1998 and 2001 failed. The proposed revision seeks to tie qualification for ordination not to sexuality issues, but to "their assent to the constitutional questions for ordination and installation," and their pledge "to live lives obedient to Jesus Christ," and "fidelity to the standards of the Church."

This proposed change of our constitution seeks to return the denomination to our historical practice of allowing each local governing body charged with examination to establish a candidate's sincere efforts to adhere to these standards. In other words, **it places the emphasis on the vows that every deacon, elder, and minister must take, and rightly places the responsibility for determining fitness for office on the examining governing body.** For example, it is the Session of each church that is responsible for determining who can be ordained and installed as an Elder. The presbytery does this for ministers.

Each of the presbyteries throughout the country will vote on this proposed amendment before mid-May of 2009. Eastern Oklahoma Presbytery will be voting on this during our upcoming meeting in November. It is increasingly difficult to predict how this presbytery will vote, or to guess how the vote will turn out nationally. But there is a chance!

But I am among those who believe that **justice delayed is justice denied.** The theme of this year's national More Light Presbyterian efforts to change our constitution is "It's About Time." I agree!

- It's about time for all disciples of Jesus Christ to take a stand for those who are still denied full participation in our Church, whom God loves and calls to faith and ministry.
- It's about time to end the task forces, studies, judicial cases, constitutional interpretations, and other abuses that continue the discriminatory policies of our denomination.
- It's about time to lay aside our fears: Fear of the unknown, fear of schism, fear of those who are different. For as we heard in this morning's Epistle reading from **1 John 4: 16,18: "God is love...there is no fear in love, but perfect love casts out fear."**
- It's about time to do the right thing, to delete G-6.0106b that has created so much strife in our beloved church.
- It's about time to trust in God's wildly inclusive love, and remove the boundaries we have set around God's free, unmerited grace.
- It's about time to make our entire denomination a welcoming community, where everyone has an equal place at God's table.
- It's about time to fulfill the words declared in **Isaiah 56:7, "...for my house shall be called a house of prayer for all people."** This wonderful vision of the prophet was his challenge to the children of Israel when they returned to Israel following the exile and began to re-establish their faith community. He reminded them that there are no limits to those whom God wishes to include as God's people. God's love knows no limits. We are called to be the kind of people who eagerly welcome and share that love with all people.

I am 'sinfully proud' (to steal a line from former GA Moderator Marj Carpenter) that **College Hill Presbyterian Church stands as a beacon of light and hope in this presbytery and in this city with our declaration that the church should be a place where all persons can live with openness and integrity to their conscience – where all persons can be the people that God has created them to be.**

I am proud of this congregation's clear, explicit, real, and genuine welcome of all persons. Today we are celebrating that welcome as it extends across boundaries of sexual orientation. Yet we also extend that welcome across boundaries of race, ethnicity, financial status, mental and physical condition, gender, age, or anything else that people use to divide and segregate one another.

This effort, as with all issues of peace and justice, is a continual and sometimes difficult work in progress. Yet it is a mission to which we are committed and energized and guided and empowered by the Spirit of God.

With God's grace, let us indeed become a house of prayer for all people. It's time.

Amen.

Resources:

More Light Presbyterians – www.mlp.org

“More Light on More Light”

“It's About Time: A Kairos Moment for the PCUSA”

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