

Network News



March 2015

www.pv4j.org

Looking back to think ahead

By Doug King, Network News Editor Emeritus

Manley Olson, one of PVJ's current board members, asked me a few weeks ago if I would look back at some old issues of the Witherspoon Society's *Network News*, from the time when I was editing it, and reflect a bit on some of the issues and concerns that we were dealing with back then, and how they might shed light on our concerns and activities today and in the years ahead.

I'll confess I've found this assignment a lot more challenging than I expected, as I tried to get back in touch with those issues for 20 years ago, and especially as I tried to see how they relate to the world and the church we live in today. But here goes!

I decided to look specifically at our four *Network News* issues from the year 1994 – partly because it's a nice even number, two decades from when I began this little project, and partly because it was the first full year I'd been editing the newsletter. So what were we talking about way back then, and what does it suggest for our current activities?

Well, of course the thing we talked about most was – what else?? – sex. Issues of sex and gender were very much at the forefront of our concerns – and of arguments in the Presbyterian Church – back then. But it's heartening to see how much some things have changed!

Re-Imagining – and what it means to be Woman

One of the major gender-related concerns centered on the ecumenical conference on “Re-Imagining” that had been held in Minneapolis in November, 1993. Elizabeth Dodson Gray, a feminist theologian who was involved in the event, wrote in *Network News* that the cries of outrage that soon arose from the Religious Right (and especially from the *Presbyterian Layman*) really reflected “a fight over the power to name.” This included efforts to define in new ways our understanding of God (not simply as “Father,” for instance) and of humanity (not just male-as-head-of-everything and all that). Such talk was greeted with outrage from the Lay Committee, and from some others as well, including the more moderate *Presbyterian Outlook*. Overtures flooded the 206th General Assembly, which met in June, 1994, in Wichita, calling for various actions to condemn (or to support) Re-Imagining. Remarkably, among all the outrage the Assembly turned into what Houston Hodges described as a “religious experience” of reconciliation. It wasn't perfect peace, but it was greatly helped by many people who gave testimony in committee hearings, and the leadership of John Buchanan in chairing the committee that recommended the peace-making response to all those overtures.

[Author's note: As I wrote this, a commercial came on TV for the Intuit accounting software called QuickBooks, which, they proudly announced, has been "*re-imagined*." Is there a lesson there for us?]

It wasn't perfect peace that was achieved, though. Rod Martin, the outgoing president of the Witherspoon Society, noted in his column that Mary Ann Lundy, who was head of the Women's Division of the Presbyterian Church, had been fired, perhaps paying the price for supporting the Re-Imagining event and being sacrificed as an "offering" for the making of peace in the church. Mary Ann has written a great commentary and the Re-Imagining uproar, which you can find in the December 2014 issue of *Network News*, pp. 4-10. [<http://www.pv4j.org/network-news/network-news-december-2014.pdf>] And of course attacks continued for years in the *Layman*. (But I notice that that shrill voice of the Right is no longer going to be published in print form. Having achieved some "success" in getting a number of congregations to leave the PCUSA, they seem to be redefining their slimmed-down mission.)

So, twenty years after a great struggle in the Presbyterian Church over what it means to be a woman (and perhaps most difficult for some: who's to decide), where are we? My sense is that the basic question has been pretty clearly answered among our Presbyterian church family: Our understandings of male and female may be a little less rigid than they were, partly due to the thinking that has been going on in our churches, and even more because of the powerful currents of change in our whole culture.

Same-sex unions

The same thing might be said of our evolving understandings of relationships between same-sex couples. The whole Presbyterian Church was committed to study the issue, by actions taken in the 1993 Assembly, but the 1994 GA decided to act anyway, passing an overture that would define the blessing of same-sex unions by Presbyterian ministers as "not permitted." But then a move to require that marriage be between one man and one woman, which would have placed another barrier against ordination of LGBT persons, was rejected by the Assembly, so there was still a little room for continued discussion on ordination.

Ordination

Jeff Doane, a pastor in Chicago and a future president of the Witherspoon Society, commented at the end of his report on this issue: "Will the day ever come when we will be able to claim God's all-inclusive love as a Presbyterian Church? Fortunately, prophetic patience appears to undergird the continuing efforts of lesbian, gay, and bisexual leaders, and their straight supporters. Through continued study, there is the opportunity for learning, for growth, and hopefully for much more light which God's Word and Spirit have to shed on this issue." And indeed, Jeff's hopes for the breaking forth of More Light have been and are being fulfilled beyond what some of us dared to hope for back then.

Through the last twenty years change *has* happened, both in official policies and in personal understandings and relationships. Many people of various orientations and life-styles have contributed profoundly to these changes, through their deeply personal and courageous

testimony, and their working together in organizations such as More Light Presbyterians, Covenant Network, and others.

Environmental Justice

“Caring for creation” was a strong theme in the first issue of 1994 for *Network News*, with Bill Gibson reporting on an important conference held in Washington in October, 1993, which highlighted the spiritual roots of concern for the creation. The Biblical call to do justice, he urges, must be expanded to include respect and care for the world of nature as well as human beings. This is the only way our world – and thus our human existence – will survive. It is, he says, “God’s project for our time.”

Dieter Hessel, who was at the time Director of an ecumenical Program on Ecology, Justice and Faith, developed in more detail the need for an ethic for eco-justice, for instance by re-interpreting the vital Christian teaching on salvation to include the whole created cosmos, not just humanity.

These concerns for the creation were another matter that gained consideration at the 1994 General Assembly, especially through overtures that called for the broadening of the annual Peacemaking Offering to include “Environmental Justice” as well. Witherspoon supported that effort, but the Assembly refused to risk reducing the offering funds available for the peacemaking program by dividing them with an expanded environmental justice program.

A number of local environmental justice actions were reported in *Network News* during 1994, but the care of the creation had yet to gain major standing in the PCUSA agenda. And now, twenty years later? The office for Environmental Ministries produces study materials which reflect the church’s policies, while Presbyterians for Earth Care, a network dedicated to environmental wholeness with social justice, seeks to provide a prophetic voice for substantive change in the church and in the world. I hope some of you who are more involved today will tell us what’s happening now!

Peacemaking

Through the four issues of *Network News* from 1994, it looks like the major concern of peacemaking was the holy war within the Presbyterian Church, as the *Layman* and others reacted with righteous outrage to the creative theological thinking of the Re-Imagining conference and the discussions that ensued. When the General Assembly reached a resolution of sorts, it was greeted by many observers as itself an act of peacemaking, imperfect and probably temporary though it was likely to be.

But there were other concerns, too. Overtures were sent to the Assembly calling for action to close the Army’s School of the Americas in Ft. Benning, Georgia, which was training numerous military personnel from countries in Latin America, many of whom became involved in serious human rights abuses when they returned to their own countries. Another overture called on the U.S. government to end all support to the government and military of Indonesia, to pressure them to stop their hostility to the movement for the self-determination of the former Portuguese

province of East Timor. Witherspoon, along with the Presbyterian Peace Fellowship, supported both of these efforts.

The Peace Fellowship's Peace Breakfast heard Fr. Roy Bourgeois, leader of the S.O.A. Watch, who defined the central issue with School of the Americas as the reality of the human suffering caused by soldiers trained by the U.S. military in S.O.A. program, who were returning to their own countries to use their skills to torture and kill their own people.

William Thompson address

At each General Assembly, the Witherspoon Society presented its Andrew Murray Award to a particularly effective leader in the Presbyterian Church. The award at the 1994 Assembly was presented to William P. Thompson, who had recently retired after long service as the Stated Clerk of the denomination. In his address accepting the award, Bill Thompson talked about John Witherspoon, the founder of Princeton University in New Jersey – or the College of New Jersey as it was then called. Witherspoon was a major leader in the beginnings of the Presbyterian Church, and the only minister to serve in the Continental Congress.

In May, 1776, Witherspoon preached on the growing struggle against British. In that struggle, he emphasized the need for a set of virtues familiar to Calvinists of his time: “orderliness, industry, thrift, and obedience to God in a time of crisis.”

Thompson went on:

In my judgement, the situation today in society and in this church must properly be characterized as a “time of crisis.” Public issues are seldom discussed on their merits. Instead of orderly public discourse, the protagonists resort to name-calling and defamation of their opponent's character. To my ear, the most raucous participants today are from the “radical right.”

Well, how much have things changed in 20 years? In our church, the atmosphere may be a bit less conflicted than in the days after Re-Imagining. But in our society? (I'm writing this in mid-December, as the uproar rages following the release of the Senate report on the CIA use of torture during the years following 9-11.) Does PVJ need to speak up on this issue today?

Interfaith Alliance

One item reported in the Summer 1994 issue, beyond all the General Assembly actions, was the founding of a new organization which Bill Thompson mentioned in his luncheon address. Leaders from various main-line religious groups had come together to form The Interfaith Alliance, with the aim of resisting efforts by the radical right “to insist that one set of religious beliefs and morals must be shared by all Americans.” That group continues its efforts twenty years later, currently by criticizing the Supreme Court's Hobby Lobby decision allowing some small corporations to refuse to provide health insurance support for certain forms of birth control, thereby placing themselves outside the provisions of the Affordable Care Act on the basis of their religious beliefs. They are also urging people to support the bipartisan Student

Non-Discrimination Act as a way to resist the growing problem of bullying and harassment in our schools.

In a time of increasing religious diversity – and sometimes religious conflict as well – this seems to be a matter that calls for much more attention. As we see more and more of our church members move toward “spirituality” rather than traditional religious beliefs and rituals, it may be important for groups like PVJ to think seriously about how our denomination and our congregations can best accommodate this new broadening of religious experience. Or must traditional “Christian evangelism” be our only response?

Local actions

Looking back to twenty years ago, I’m struck by how each issue of *Network News* presents a few reports of local activities, simply reflecting what some of our members and friends were doing in various parts of the country, in congregations or local groups – or even presbyteries! – to spread awareness of issues and motivate people to act on them. Just a few examples:

Leslie Reindl reports on the Peacemaking Committee of Twin Cities Area Presbytery joining with the Minnesota Council of Churches, and other church groups, to support the Mdewakanton Dakota Indian nation in its protests against a plan by an area power company to create a new above-ground storage site for the radioactive waste from its nuclear power plant, located just a half-mile from their tribal community. [Winter 1994, p. 18.] Over a period of months, various efforts to get wider support for the protests against nuclear waste storage failed to make progress. But at least people were working, talking together, striving for justice! [Spring, 1994, p. 19.]

And also – even twenty years ago – some of us were concerned about health care reform! Bob Forsberg reported from San Francisco that Northern California Presbyterians for Peace and Justice gathered a broad group of organizations together, including Catholic Charities, the Jewish Public Affairs Committee, American Friends Service Committee and others, to support a ballot initiative for a California Health Security Act. [Spring 1994, p. 20.]

“Caring for Creation” was growing as a theme of concern and action, especially in Central Florida Presbytery, where Howard Sugiuchi and John Jackson took part in numerous events, including a weekend experience at an environmental camp, cluster workshops in four areas of the presbytery, planning Earth Day activities in churches and on campuses, and much more. [Winter 1994, pp. 14-15.] John Jackson is still at it – producing a weekly e-mail post called “Everything Is Connected,” with delightful and provocative bits of poetry, news, reflections, and humor. A good mix! You can contact him to get on his list, at findjohnj@aol.com.

Why mention these local odds and ends from the past? I’m simply struck to see that a number of Witherspoon members, as Presbyterians committed to peace and justice, were reaching out to their friends and neighbors to organize actions on various local issues. And I wonder whether the same thing is going on these days. I’d love to hear from you about what you and your colleagues are doing! Please send a note to douging2@aol.com, and I’ll try to share your reports here.

That All May Freely Serve invites you to:

Rock Stars and Prophets: Generations of Justice and Love

April 8 – 11, Stony Point Center, Stony Point NY



Please join us as we gather with more than 40 early leaders of our progressive More Light movement, including:

Alice Anderson, Lisa Bove, Bob Brashear, Bruce Billman, Beth Buckingham-Brown, Ralph Carter, Susan Craig and Bear Ride, David Cockroft, Susan DeGeorge and Kathy Dean, Tricia Dykers Koenig, Marvin Ellison, Cleve Evans, Judith Foster, Cliff Frasier, Chris Glaser, Jack Hartwein-Sanchez, Keith Hershberger, Dick Hasbany and Craig Machado, Ralph Jones, Barbara Kellam-Scott, Laurene Lafontaine, Lisa Larges, Susan Leo, Gerri Mead and Gail Russell, Babs Miller, Katie Morrison, Mark Palermo, Bob Patenaude, Mardee Rightmyer and Julie Green, Carol Seaton, Byron Shafer, Barry Smith, Dan Smith, Jackie and Jim Spahr, Janie Spahr, Erin Swenson, Sonnie Swenston-Forbes, Susan Thomas, Diana Vezmar-Bailey, Georgeann Wilcoxson, and more – including current leadership and friends in the progressive movement.

So, be with us, as we convene to be together, to remember those we have lost, to assemble generations of leadership, and to celebrate these remarkable times. We invite you to be part of this time to record our history, while charting a course for the times ahead. Our movement had much of its beginning in 1974, when the Rev. David Sindt raised a sign at the 1974 General Assembly that asked: “Is anybody else out there gay?”

You may know the story: David, ordained in 1965, had been denied approval by the Presbytery of Chicago in 1973 for his call to serve Lincoln Park Presbyterian Church as an assistant minister to the gay community. Several years later, that presbytery would also refuse to certify his specialized ministry with the Presbyterian Gay Caucus. In those difficult days, few could have imagined what was being stirred into motion:

Presbyterian Gay Caucus (1974); Presbyterians for Gay Concerns (1977); More Light Churches (starting 1978); Presbyterians for Lesbian/Gay Concerns (1980); Lazarus Project (1977); Spectrum (1982); Ministry of Light (1982); Presbyterian Act-Up (1987); Presbyterian AIDS Network (PHEWA) (1988); More Light Churches Network (1992); That All May Freely Serve and Regions (1993); Presbyterian Parents of Gays and Lesbians (1994); Shower of Stoles Project (1995); Covenant Network of Presbyterians (1997); Hesed (1997); Stonecatchers (1997); Semper Reformanda; Presbyterian Welcome (1997); More Light Presbyterians and Chapters (1998);

Presbyterian Promise; Witherspoon Society/Voices of Sophia/Presbyterian Voices for Justice (1973/1994/2011); Parity (2015)

All these organizations and more would follow. Within this great “cloud of witness” we come together, starting Wednesday evening, April 8, and leaving Stony Point after lunch on Saturday, April 11.

Our schedule for “Rock Stars and Prophets: Generations of Justice and Love” will include morning and afternoon panels, based on spans of years from the 1970s to the early 90s. There will be ample time to gather informally for individual and small group conversations, for these are an important part of our time together.

Worship will be designed to recall how we prayed and worshiped over the years, as we relied upon our faith and one another in the face of adversity.

We will remember those who have gone before, asking people who knew them to share their stories. And with each step of the way, we will be recording our time together to create a living archive, cherishing and preserving the memories of our friends and our work.

And, being blessed with such a group as this, we will pray and look into the future, visioning what needs to be done to become the church and a witness for which we are surely poised.

It is time to be together. Please join us for this historic reunion, of which you, too, are a part. If you have any questions, please call Ray Bagnuolo, That All May Freely Serve, at 914-217-4173 or email ray@tamfs.org

More information and registration at: www.rockstarsandprophets.org

“As a rock star, I have two instincts, I want to have fun, and I want to change the world. I have a chance to do both.” - Bono



Presbyterian Voices for Justice



@PresbyVoices

Realities of Reconciliation

by Donna Riley , PV4J Coordinating Team

As the PCUSA takes up ratification of two historic measures — the Belhar Confession (Amendment 14-1) and the recognition of marriage as a commitment between two persons (Amendment 14-F) — there will be talk of unity and reconciliation, two central themes of Belhar. While Belhar was written in the context of the struggle against Apartheid in South Africa, the timing of its consideration within the PCUSA causes us to reflect on unity and reconciliation not only around race and class, but also around sexual orientation and gender identity. Belhar was first sent to presbyteries for ratification in 2010, alongside the proposal to remove G-6.0106b from the Book of Order and allow ordination of LGBTQ+ folks. Now it is taken up alongside an amendment to the Book of Order recognizing marriage between two persons, rather than only between a man and a woman.



Reconciliation is not new to Presbyterians as it is a central theme of the Confession of 1967. What does the work of reconciliation demand? A closer look at both of these confessions provides important insight as we continue to move forward together in the struggle for justice.

Belhar notes that

“unity can be established only in freedom and not under constraint.... we reject any doctrine which professes that this spiritual unity is truly being maintained in the bond of peace while believers of the same confession are in effect alienated from one another for the sake of diversity and in despair of reconciliation.”

This confession holds the mirror up to mainline protestant churches in the US, where more than 50 years after Martin Luther King remarked “it is appalling that the most segregated hour of Christian America is eleven o’clock on Sunday morning,” still only 7.4% of mainline churches are multiracial (with at least 20 percent of members coming from racial groups different from the congregation’s majority race). This is more than double the abysmal 2-3% estimate from the late 1990s, but it is clear that much of our church continues in alienation and despairs of reconciliation.

Those of us who survived the years of “unity in diversity” dialogue in the mid-90s recall how, in the name of unity, many lesbian and gay ordained folks (and a few bi+ and trans* too) came out to tell our stories, only to find, as did the Rev. Martha Juillerat, that we were in fact not free to tell our stories and subsequently had to set aside our ordinations. LGBTQ+ people were frequently rebuked for causing division in the church when we sought to remove the ban on LGBTQ+ ordination. We were told (even and especially by some of our professed allies) that we must wait, in the name of unity. As we move forward, we must not pretend that we have unity just because being out no longer costs us our ordinations. Our church still despairs of

reconciliation in the face of continuing homophobia, biphobia, and transphobia in our congregations and in our constitution.

According to Belhar,

“the church must witness against and strive against any form of injustice.... must witness against all the powerful and privileged who selfishly seek their own interests Therefore, we reject any ideology which would legitimate forms of injustice and any doctrine which is unwilling to resist such an ideology in the name of the gospel.”

The work of reconciliation is not about making nicey nice with the oppressors, even though this is often what privilege expects. Rather to reconcile is to reject hegemonic ideologies and crucially, to reject doctrines that *fail to resist* injustice. If we consider, for example, neoliberalism as an ideology that legitimates economic injustice on a local and global scale, not only are we called to reject this ideology that exploits the poor to profit the rich, but we *also* must reject doctrines that do not *resist* neoliberalism. We are called to get off the fence and stand for justice. As Abbie Hoffman put it, “If you are a bystander, you are not innocent.”

The Confession of 1967, like Belhar, seems fully aware of the work involved in reconciliation:

“The church, guided by the Spirit, **humbled by its own complicity** and instructed by all attainable knowledge....labors for the abolition of all racial discrimination and ministers to those injured by it. Congregations, individuals, or groups of Christians who exclude, dominate, **or patronize** their fellowmen [sic], **however subtly**, resist the Spirit of God and bring contempt on the faith which they profess.” [emphasis mine]

The Church is complicit in racism. It is one thing to know this, and an entirely different thing that it is acknowledged explicitly in our Book of Confessions. To patronize others is to bring contempt on the faith we profess. This is no hand wavy “yeah yeah we promise not to discriminate” kind of statement. This is a serious reckoning, calling white people and the Church in particular to account. And it continues:

“Enslaving poverty in a world of abundance is an intolerable violation of God’s good creation..... A church that is indifferent to poverty, or evades responsibility in economic affairs, or is open to one social class only, or expects gratitude for its beneficence makes a mockery of reconciliation and offers no acceptable worship to God.”

There is no room for the church of *noblesse oblige*. Reconciliation demands repentance and reflexivity, a deep awareness of power that actively resists privilege. It is not enough for the relatively rich to give money to the poor, counting wealth as God’s blessing and a cause for self-congratulatory generosity. There can be no sense of superiority in giving, and no expected proper response.

And yet so many of our churches remain stratified by class and race, like our neighborhoods and communities. I once attended a downtown church that invited homeless people to receive a meal after worship on Sundays. However, as a visitor I was prohibited from attending this meal, and was instead shown the pew where a former US President once sat, and taken to the fellowship

area where juice and coffee and cookies were provided, but not to the homeless, who were on another floor entirely.

We need desperately to revisit the Confession of 1967. We need to study, adopt, and internalize Belhar. We have much to learn from the experience of churches in the global South, resisting racism in another time and place, and working for unity and reconciliation there, then, and still.

What will reconciliation look like for LGBTQ+ people in the PCUSA? Churches and individuals must do more than tolerate us, more than look the other way while some congregations and presbyteries ordain us. We must do more than allow our ministers to marry same-gender couples while still declaring heterosexual marriages normative. Reconciliation requires we resist heterosexual and cis-gender privilege wherever we may find it. And that is yet a long way off for the PCUSA. But the Belhar Confession reminds us we can be hopeful:

that God's lifegiving Word and Spirit has conquered the powers of sin and death, and therefore also of irreconciliation and hatred, bitterness and enmity, that God's lifegiving Word and Spirit will enable the church to live in a new obedience which can open new possibilities of life for society and the world.



Donna Riley

Or in the words of the Confession of 1967

“Already God's reign is present as a ferment in the world, stirring hope in [humankind] and preparing the world to receive its ultimate judgment and redemption.”

Amen.

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You can join online and pay by credit card, at <http://www.pv4j.org/join-us.html>

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Please make your check payable to *Presbyterian Voices for Justice*, and send to:

**David Oliver-Holder
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P.O. Box 1454
Bayfield, Wisconsin 54814**

Advocacy Training Weekend 2015

April 17–20, 2015 in Washington, D.C.

Information | [Speakers](#) | [Workshops](#)



“Breaking the Chains: Mass Incarceration and Systems of Exploitation”

Compassion Peace and Justice Training Day - April 17

Ecumenical Advocacy Days

April 17-20

[Advocacy Training flyer](#)

Everywhere people are facing severe human rights violations for political and economic gain.

- The United States holding nearly a quarter of the world’s prisoners.
- Young children forced to work in mineral mines in the Congo.
- African Farmers forced off their land as part of corporate land grabbing.
- Low-income people in the United States whose education has been systemically neglected

How can we the church turn these tragedies into triumphs? Come to Advocacy Training Weekend to take a long hard look at these issues and seek solutions that are theologically and biblically based. Training will kickoff April 17, 2015 with **Compassion, Peace and Justice Training Day**, a special pre-conference for Presbyterians. Learning will continue with our ecumenical sisters and brothers during Ecumenical Advocacy Days the remainder of the weekend.

“As people of Hope, we are reminded that Jesus’ radical message was one of liberation for all and restoration of right relationships. Through prayer, worship, advocacy training, networking and mobilization with other Christians, we will face the reality of mass incarceration and corporate exploitation, and call for national policies that bring liberation both to the prisoner and to a world in need of restoration – all culminating with EAD’s Congressional Lobby Day on Capitol Hill.”

Here are two workshop descriptions to whet your appetite:

Presbyterians respond to the mass incarceration crisis CPJ Training Day workshop offers grassroots strategies for change

By Presbyterian News Service

PCJN and PHEWA leadership believe one effective response to the current mass incarceration crisis is a strong grassroots movement that will challenge mass incarceration on a variety of levels. Gail Tyree, a PCJN network founder and current member of its leadership team, along with the Rev. Dr. Bob Brashear, a PHEWA Board member, will be co-leading a workshop on April 17, at Compassion, Peace, and Justice (CPJ) Training Day in Washington, D.C. “Grassroots Responses to the Mass Incarceration Crisis” will introduce participants to criminal justice issues as well as effective strategies for the faith community to address them.

HOW TO BECOME A WELCOMING CHURCH TO RETURNING CITIZENS

What is a welcoming church? What is the role for churches in the lives of returning citizens and their families? When does this process start? How do you know if your church is being successful? These are just a few questions to open us up in dialog to continue into a discussion. We will build a tool box together. This workshop will be offered at CPJ Training Day by George Kerr, Co-Moderator of our Presbyterian AIDS Network (PAN) and Katitia Pitts, Executive Director, Calvary Healthcare, and Greater Mt. Calvary Holy Church.

[Learn more about EAD](#)

The mission of Presbyterian Voices for Justice

We are a playful and passionate community of women and men in the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) who are called to proclaim the Gospel vision of God’s extravagant love and justice in church and society.

We seek the wisdom of the Spirit for following Christ’s example and for living into the hope of sustained gender equality, racial reconciliation, full human rights for LGBT persons, economic justice, environmental wholeness, an end to war and all forms of violence, and a justice-loving shalom over all the earth.

We commit to risking the transformation of our own selves and our organization to live into this vision, even as we invite both church and society to meet this challenge.

Notice To Visitors

by Donna Riley, PV4J Coordinating Team



Visiting [my parents' church](#) at Christmas – or really anytime – is a problem for me. Let's just say [it's complicated](#). There is too much history, too much spiritual violence that I have witnessed and experienced in my time there. I cannot shake the full-body feel of distinct unwelcome in the space, with the people, and in the liturgy. My coping strategy of attending other, more welcoming churches has become more difficult over the years; my parents seem to understand less and less why I would go to a church other than theirs, even as I become less and less willing to do so.

Earlier in December I attended a retreat with members of one of my “families of choice” on the occasion of one friend’s birthday. We spent a day of creative reflection at the North American Cultural Laboratory in Highland Lake, NY, thinking about work we do in our own lives for social justice, and how we can live more fully into that hope. On the bathroom wall something caught my eye: Henry Miller’s “[Notice to visitors](#),” which he posted on the front door of his Big Sur Home in the 1940s. It is playful and irreverent, welcoming and engaging yet honestly clear in setting the boundaries essential to his continuing his creative practice. I know little about Henry Miller, other than that he wrote overtly (hetero)sexual books that were banned in the US and that he was a lover of bisexual Anais Nin. Queer perhaps in the political sense. But I was particularly surprised that he offered this closing to his notice:

Let us do our best, even if it gets us nowhere. In the midst of darkness there is light. “I am the light of the world,” said Jesus. He said a mouthful. Light, more light!

At the time I mused at Miller’s behest for “more light” and especially wondered why I had never seen, or perhaps never noticed, reference to this quote in any MLP writings over the years. I wondered about the relationship between his desire for more light and ours. But what resonated most for me in the context of the retreat was that first bit: Let us do our best, even if it gets us nowhere. This is often the reality of social justice work – since our work in the PCUSA formally began in 1974, how many General Assemblies, how many Sunday School conversations, how many presbytery meetings did we attend, only to witness little perceptible change!

And for all the change MLP has ultimately achieved in recent years, my parents’ church appears unaffected. Its “notice to visitors” is some kind of unspoken Ozzy and Harriet code of white, straight, well-to-do with a thick frosting of denial, which becomes less and less tolerable to me as society and even the PCUSA move on. This year I found the pressure to attend my parents’ church turned up by an invitation to our family to light the Christ candle Christmas Eve. I agreed to go, and to participate by leading a responsive reading based on John 1. Before the service, we went to the vestry and spoke with the pastor. He did not remember me, which was sadly a relief

to me. A dysfunctional church family that echoes my own, outness so readily denied or forgotten, for appearances' sake. I figured I'd better not remind him. I tried not to dwell on it but then I saw the children's ministries director who lied to us when our youth choir director died of AIDS complications in 1984. I cannot escape the haunting reminders. I stood there in the chancel reading from John 1, my queer body inhabiting the space where homosexuality had been condemned in the wake of the 1991 General Assembly, my very existence an act of resistance. It should not be this way after so much has changed in the national denomination, but it is as if nothing happened here.

But then there was the gift of this very queer text I had before me to read. The Word, once introduced to me as Biblical "proof" of the Trinity in confirmation class, at the time only raised more questions than it answered. I had the opportunity to consider the text from a very different perspective when I took a class on Gnosticism in college and compared John to the non-canonical Gospel of Thomas. We asked what is the relationship between the Logos (Word) in John, Sophia (Wisdom) in Proverbs, and Gnosis (Knowledge), for which the Gnostics are named? How does John's "I am the Light of the World," compare with the Gospel of Thomas's "It is I who am the light which is above them all. It is I who am the all." I remember thinking at the time that Jesus "comes out" with these "I am" statements throughout John, revealing himself to a world that doesn't get it. In the Gospel of Thomas, this is a matter of life and death: "if you bring forth what is within you; what is within you will save you. If you do not bring forth what is within you, what is within you will destroy you."

The gifts of the text from John kept coming. Proclaiming "the light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it" evoked my retreat with my family of choice and Henry Miller's Notice to Visitors. And so I read the mysterious words of John 1 with the full force of these layers of meaning built over the years in different communities. I knew these meanings were not shared by this church family, and the gulf is not likely to be closed. I could do my best, even if it gets us (k)nowhere. Light, More Light!



In order to save money and trees we want to develop an effective electronic communications network with our members. Please send your current e-mail address to our membership coordinator manitou2@charter.net

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