



Winter, 2005

The Covenant Connection

A Newsletter of the Covenant Network of Presbyterians (Vol 8, #4)

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Sixteen Presbyteries send Overtures on Ordination Standards to 217th General Assembly

As 2005 drew to a close, Chicago Presbytery became the sixteenth presbytery to petition the 217th General Assembly seeking the removal of categorical barriers for ordination.

Some commentators have suggested that the Theological Task Force asked presbyteries to stop their regular process of addressing concerns to the G.A. via overtures. However, that misreads their report. The Task Force recommends that the General Assembly adopt a new Authoritative Interpretation about ordination standards and roles of governing bodies and, if they do so, to allow the church two years to see how it works before taking other actions on ordination. The General Assembly will, as always, have the responsibility of deciding how to weigh the various proposals before it.

For advice on possible overtures in your presbytery, feel free to contact National Organizer Tricia Dykers Koenig at (216) 658-1770 or at triciadk@covenantnetwork.org or Southeast Regional Coordinator Lou East at (336) 324-2525 or loueast@covenantnetwork.org.

Rogers' New Book Seeks to Heal the Church

Dr. Jack Rogers' profoundly challenging new book, *Jesus, The Bible, and Homosexuality: Explode the Myths, Heal the Church* will be published in March of 2006 by Westminster John Knox Press. Rogers, Professor of Theology Emeritus at San Francisco Theological Seminary and Moderator of the 213th General Assembly, spent seven years reviewing the literature on both sides of the issue, including many original church documents.

"I want to heal the church," Dr. Rogers says, "I believe that Jesus and the Bible call us to treat all of our members equally." A video of an early version of one chapter, "What the Bible Says and Doesn't Say about Homosexuality," is available through the Covenant Network Web Store at www.covenantnetwork.org/store.htm.

2006 Covenant Network Conferences Planned

Covenant Network members will stay connected in 2006. On May 12th and 13th, Dr. Jack Rogers will keynote the second **Southeast Regional Covenant Network Conference** at Westminster Presbyterian Church in Charlottesville, VA. The popular week-long session, **A Church For Our Time**, will again take place from July 31st – Aug 6th at Ghost Ranch in Abiquiu, New Mexico. From November 9th to the 11th, Presbyterians will consider the meaning of ordination at the 2006 **Covenant Conference**, "Called to Serve," at the Broad Street Presbyterian Church in Columbus, Ohio. More information on all these events will be available in future newsletters and at our website.

We seek the gift of unity among all who confess the name of Jesus Christ as Lord. Unity is Christ's prayer for those who would follow him, "so that the world might believe." We hope to maintain communion fellowship with all whose lives are guided by the Christian creeds and by the confessions of Reformed faith. We pledge to strengthen our ties to those who are at risk of being excluded by recent legislative actions of our church. We also want to live in unity with those whose views are different from ours. From the *Call to Covenant Community*. Please read in its entirety at covenantnetwork.org/call2cc.html.

Kathleen Norris

Discipleship As Mystery

Keynote Address

Both liberals and conservatives need to be extremely wary of deciding just who God has called to discipleship.

Understanding “discipleship as mystery” may be essential to understanding what it means to be the body of Christ today. The very word “disciple,” from a Latin word meaning to “learn” – clues us in to mystery, because to learn is to enter unfamiliar territory, to go we know not where. After all, isn’t that how we enter into our most important relationships – our friendships, marriages, and partnerships? We may think we have our eyes open, but the rest is mystery: we have no idea where this person, this relationship, will take us. We can even promise, “in sickness and in health,” or “until death do us part,” but we do not know how those phrases will incarnate themselves in our lives.

Even to recognize that we are in the presence of mystery is good news. It certainly puts us in good company. As the theologian Karl Rahner pointed out in one of the sermons he preached to his rural congregation, even the disciples who were with Jesus did not understand what Jesus was telling them, or even who he was. The important thing is that they remained with him, nonetheless. As Rahner says, “Mystery uncomprehended stands between them and the Lord, yet does not separate them...they realize that though they may not understand the mystery, God and God’s loyal grace are only to be found where that mystery is.”

As for us, and our discipleship, Rahner offers this challenge: “Would it not be folly to expect everything to be intelligible, or to refuse to accept more than we can understand?” but all too often, that is exactly what we try to do, in response to God’s call. We want to be with other disciples who think the way we do, who share our concerns, and our politics. But God has other things in store

A man who knew more than I ever will about discipleship, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, begins his remarkable little book about Christian Community, *Life Together* by noting that “Jesus Christ lived in the midst of his enemies...surrounded by evildoers and mockers,” and “at the end, all his disciples deserted him.” This

leads Bonhoeffer to conclude that, for us to be in the Kingdom of God IS to be in the midst of our enemies. If we surround ourselves only with our friends and reject all those who oppose us, we are not Christ’s disciples at all. We may be looking for a political party or a trade union, but we are not building up the body of Christ.

If we see discipleship in these terms, the Christian church in America is in pretty bad shape. There’s a distressing tendency among conservative Christians to become more and more narrow theologically, and to invite to the table only those who can agree to these ever-more constricting terms. This way of thinking has schism built into it, because at each step of the process there will be those who question, and if they are simply labeled as heretics, they’ll drop by the wayside. These conservative Christians often try to limit their encounters with anyone outside the fold – they’ll consult a list of Christian plumbers, beauticians and doctors, for example, rather than use the Yellow Pages. They are also likely to exclude people who are openly gay or married to people from another religious background – diversity, to them is a fearful concept.

Conservatives make an easy target, but equally distressing to me, are liberal Christians, who proclaim themselves to be open to diversity, but actually subvert the meaning of the word. Because what they really mean by diversity is anything except political diversity. They don’t quite know how to accept members who are Republicans, for example, or who are in the military. What this means, in Hawaii, where all the branches of the military services have a large presence, is that some of our so-called “open” congregations have told military families that they are not welcome. And that is evil.

Both liberals and conservatives need to be extremely wary of deciding just who God has called to discipleship. If they won’t back down from their hard, ideological positions, I’ll call for a pox on both their houses. How obscene it is to allow ideology to trump baptism; which is, of course, is the foundational ecumenical force that unites all Christians, no exceptions.

Rather than allow the mystery of discipleship, it seems that we will do almost anything to avoid making the humble admission that we don’t get to decide who, if anyone, is beyond redemption. That is up to God, and all we Christians can do is refuse to turn away, but instead to offer anyone, any sinner, an open ear. If this seems to dangerous, or even incomprehensible – it only



Kathleen Norris with John Buchanan in the Cloister Walk at Idlewild Church

continued on next page

2005 Covenant Network Conference Focuses on Discipleship

Poets, ethicists, preachers, teachers, academics, and even international lawyers took turns at the 2005



Covenant Network Conference examining the question: how do we – as individuals and as a community – give our lives back to God in grateful response to God's generous gift of Grace and life? The conference, hosted by Idlewild Presbyterian Church in Memphis, Tennessee, took place over three days in early November.

Five hundred conference attendees listened to presentations emphasizing the material and physical location of spiritual disciplines in the human body and the use of tangible symbols of



bread and water in the sacraments of baptism and communion. The importance of relationship and community was lifted up as deeply valued. The struggles of marriage, friendship and found families were claimed as faith formational.

Worship services were rich with music and liturgy that praised God and proclaimed God's grace. Musical offerings ranged from the Stillman College Choir on Thursday night, to the Idlewild Children's choir on Saturday and included offerings from the Adult choir throughout the conference.



A refrain lifted from our Call to Covenant Community wove through all the worship services at the Covenant Conference: "The Good News of the Gospel is that all those who are near and those who were far off are invited." With permission from the composer, Thomas Pavlechko, we invite your congregation to use it during Easter, Pentecost, Advent or in ordinary time.



The full text of presentations and sermons are available on the covenant network website at www.covenantnetwork.org/newsermpap.html.

Audiotapes of all the presentations are available at the on-line Covenant Network store, www.covenantnetwork.org/store.htm.



Norris *Continued from page 2*

means that we have a lot more to learn about becoming disciples. As Karl Rahner insists, we must be ready for "the incomprehensible to lay hold on us, for only then shall we be open to God the infinite..."

It is Christ, after all, who brings us together, often despite ourselves, Christ who has the power to make one body out of people who never would have chosen, on their own, to come together. But the mystery of discipleship teaches us that God can come to any of us at any time, even to a cold and smelly manger, in a cruel time, in an insignificant town in a mighty empire. Our task, as disciples, is to not refuse the love we find there. And to keep on "falling" in love because in falling we learn to trust. We learn to trust, not only each other, but a God whose promise endure, and do not fall.



So we come back to our questions.

What are you looking for? If Mary – or others – are not serving as you think they should, what is that to you? I wonder if many of our difficulties in the Presbyterian Church today arise because we have forgotten the experience of grace in the exercise of judgment.

There is danger here not only for those in the church who would exclude others. Can I say it gently? I believe there is also danger for those of us who would be excluded.

Some of us may become so focused on our hurt and anger and sense of betrayal that our entire life of faith revolves around our claim to better treatment. What are we looking for? If people mistreat us, what is that to us? Will we take our eyes off Jesus Christ?

The biggest risk I see, in all our controversies in the Presbyterian Church, is the risk that some may lose their faith entirely. We may lose our focus on Jesus Christ. I work hard on these issues because when I contacted the New York City spokesperson for a gay Presbyterian group many years ago, he bitterly told me that he was no longer a Christian at all. And sometimes I can understand that. I look at the church, at our adversaries in the debate, and all I see is fear, denial, and rancor. I see an inward turning, an unwillingness to consider the world as, at least, I think it really is. I see arrogance, rather than humility, exclusion rather than embrace. And I wonder who would want to be part of all that.

I remember getting on an elevator at General Assembly several years ago, in Columbus Ohio. An older gentleman got on with me, and we began to chat easily. We felt an immediate

warmth toward each other because we knew that we shared a mutual commitment to Jesus Christ. But suddenly he started to look at me differently. He hesitated, and said “I feel like I know you from somewhere.” I watched as his expression darkened, then froze, and he said, “You’re the fellow in that video” – the one we were circulating in favor of ordination reform. Suddenly the air was thick with hostility. He turned to face the door, and didn’t say another word as we went down the last eight floors.

On bad days, when I see some on the other side of our debates – people who claim to have a faith so much deeper and more substantial than mine – I wonder if Christ really does have the power to bring grace into our lives. If this is

what Christianity produces, can Christianity really be true?

You see the danger in looking to others . . . instead of to Jesus Christ.

Much has changed. The warm church family I knew in my childhood is long gone. Once I was surrounded by loving grandmotherly types who gave me hugs, encouraged me to excel, showered me with an extravagance of unearned love – a love that modeled what I thought the church was called to be. Today I see little grandmotherly ladies, and I know there are at least even odds that their gentle smiles and twinkling eyes disguise a deep animosity. Where once I had a warm feeling whenever I passed a Presbyterian church, I now make a mental calculation about how likely they are to welcome “my kind.”

The faces in the church have changed for me – all but one. “Jesus Christ is the same yesterday and today and forever.” As the writer of Hebrews tells us, “We have this hope, a sure and steadfast anchor of the soul.” “Let us run with perseverance the race that is set before us, looking to Jesus the pioneer and perfecter of our faith.” Runners who look to each other, instead of the goal, are distracted. They risk colliding with others on the track, or may stumble and fall. We must run the course set before us with our eyes on Jesus Christ alone.

That brings me to the last thought I’d like to share with you this evening. When things appear most dark, when we’re most discouraged, or in doubt, when we’ve lost our way or believe the church has lost its way and taken us with it, perhaps it becomes difficult to see Jesus, or even want to look for him. Scripture promises us that, in those times, Jesus comes looking for us.

That’s the comfort we have when things seem most dark. That’s the very thing that makes discipleship possible, because let’s face it, we’re really not made of very stern stuff. We become discouraged, we start to doubt, we decide that we have better things to do, and then Jesus comes looking for us. If we’re hurting, Jesus comes to us in the Spirit with sighs too deep for words, and hugs us close as a parent comforts a hurt and crying child. If we’re doubting, Jesus finds us and invites us to put our hand in his side, to explore his wounds and believe again. If we’re just fed up, discouraged with the prospects for success, Jesus comes to us with the witness of his entire ministry and reminds us that a single, solitary man changed the world.

Jesus asks each one of us, every day, What are you looking for? If you’re unhappy about

continued on page 7

Doug Nave

What Are You Looking For?

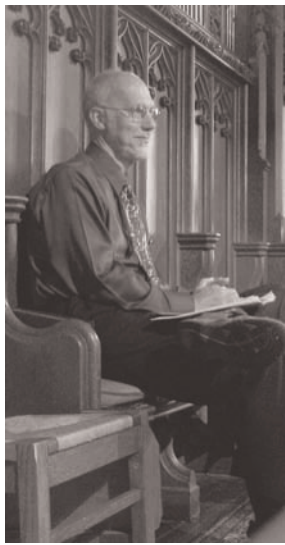
John 1:35-39

John 21:20-23

Sermon

You see the danger in looking to others . . . instead of to Jesus Christ.





Larry Rasmussen

The Public Face of Discipleship

Plenary Address

We draw upon the dimensions of “righteousness,” a key term of the Hebrew Bible. Righteousness is deeply personal and, at the same time, the Way expected of a People of God across the whole of their life together. Righteousness includes character structure and social structure, personality and public policy, piety and socio-environmental justice. Its reach is deep inside, to what the Hebrews called the “bowels” (compassion is a gut reaction), the Latins called “heart,” Christians following Augustine called “will,” and we might call “soul.”

Righteousness goes to what makes us the particular persons we are, morally and spiritually, and asks how that critical formation happens. Yet its reach is also about how lives are publicly ordered by the institutions that comprise “society”—how the economy is structured, governance organized, (homeland) security provided, sexuality and family life shaped and regulated, how race, class, gender, and culture fall out in the public order. These are matters of what the Hebrew Bible deems binding “covenants.” The prophets measure no less than Israel’s faithfulness to God by covenantal compliance; by, if you will, Israel’s

collective discipleship. Righteousness means that discipleship is deeply personal and communal piety or it is nothing: no formative exercises and practices, no discipleship. At the same time its domain is the whole of earthly life or it is not discipleship: no pathways into all the nooks and crannies of life, institutional life included, no discipleship, either. Walking the Way, then, is a journey inward tethered to a journey outward, and never the one without the other.

The steady markers of the Way of discipleship, the reason the Way is not chaos or simple waywardness, are located in the same reality; namely, the practices of discipleship, its disciplines. These practices, done over and again across eons and ages, are strikingly also the furnishings for the necessary improvisation discipleship requires in different settings and circumstances, when new things appear upon the earth. In this splendid paradox, conserving allows reforming and reforming conserves. Imagination plays nimbly, creatively, with well-rooted legacies. But whether hoary with age or improvisatory, these practices supply a moral pattern and provide a moral guidance system even when the practices

themselves are not explicitly moral or ethical in tone or formulation.

Indeed, apart from these practices, Christian moral discernment really has few markers at all, and little real substance. Without formative practices, what is



called Christian judgment is little more than an opinion poll of those who happen to be on the membership roles at the time. This is not discipleship. This is judgment devoid of the disciplines that create the alternative path of the Way. This is judgment devoid of that which crafts the Christian life like the work of a fine potter, gardener, carpenter, teacher, or caregiver, none of whom invented their craft or mastered it at first, second, or third outing.

Presbyterians and Lutherans and others schooled in the tradition of faith-as-belief and revelation as creedal knowledge need to pay particular

Righteousness means that discipleship is deeply personal and communal piety or it is nothing: no formative exercises and practices, no discipleship.

continued on page 7



Margaret
Aymer

When the Wind Blows

Acts 10

Sermon

The witness of the Acts of the Apostles is this: without so much as an “if you please,” the disruptive wind of the Spirit of God begins to blow – and to blow exactly where it should not have been blowing – on the Gentile Cornelius and his whole family.

The hurricane season of 2005 has given a whole new force to the cliché “the winds of change.” And as I consider today’s passage from the Acts of the Apostles, I cannot help but raise a question, a question I hope we all will consider together today: What will we do? Christians, what will we do, when the wind blows?

Sisters and brothers, the testimony of the tenth chapter of Acts is very much like this: When the wind blows, when the spirit of the Triune God starts to move, everyone in its path is going to be affected. And so it is for Cornelius and so it is for Peter.

Cornelius, you recall, is a centurion, a Gentile leader of the 200 to 600 soldiers of the Italian cohort. And Cornelius is stationed by an international empire in a foreign land, on a peacekeeping mission. Who would think that such a man would be affected by the blowing of the Holy Spirit?

And yet, the angel of the Lord appears to Cornelius in a vision. The angel of the Lord called Cornelius by name. The angel of the Lord tells Cornelius that God has heard his Gentile prayers.

And even more scandalously, the Spirit of the Living God begins to blow, and God chooses to blow that Spirit right through the Gentile life of Cornelius and his family. Hear me, Christians: there is no heavenly debate, no litmus test; the Spirit does not wait with decency and order for Peter to stop preaching. The witness of the Acts of the Apostles is this: without so much as an “if you please,” the disruptive wind of the Spirit of God begins to blow – and to blow exactly where it should not have been blowing – on the Gentile Cornelius and his whole family.

And meanwhile there is Peter – Simon Peter, leader of the Twelve, the Rock. Remember, friends, who Peter is. Peter is the one who first recognizes that Jesus is the Christ. Peter, Simon Peter, stands at the very center of the new Christian faith. And Peter as a faithful Christian knows and claims his biblical heritage.

So it is no surprise that, on a rooftop in Joppa, Peter resists a vision that must have seemed to him a test at best and a fight with the very forces of evil at worst. A vessel comes down from heaven full of unclean animals, and a voice says, “Kill and eat.” And Peter is

completely justified in saying, No.

But when the wind blows, devout, Bible-believing Peter ends up in Caesarea. When the wind blows, Peter who is so careful not to do anything unclean ends up in Cornelius’s house. When the wind blows, Peter finds himself confessing, I truly understand that God shows no partiality. When the wind blows, Peter knocks down the barrier between Cornelius and baptism.

Siblings in Christ, when the wind blows – when the Spirit of the Living God blows – no one, not Cornelius, not even Simon “the Rock” Peter of the Twelve, remains unaffected. And so the question we must ask ourselves today is this: if we truly believe that God comes in three persons, that along with God who creates and Jesus the Christ, a co-equal and important person of God is the transgressive, disruptive, creative Holy Spirit – then what will we do, when the wind blows?



To their credit, Cornelius and Peter both change. They both choose to be reformed by the blowing of the Spirit. And Peter, the Rock? The Acts of the Apostles testifies that Peter became an advocate for the full inclusion of self-affirming, unrepentant,

practicing uncircumcised Gentiles into the church of Jesus Christ. Peter began to argue that the only criterion for full membership was the presence of the Spirit of the Living God. For Peter, this was Reformation Sunday – a reformation of his understanding of clean and unclean, a reformation of his assertion of what God is able to do: a reformation caused by the transgressive, creative, disruptive, life-giving presence of the power of the Spirit of the Living God.

Christians, this is not some Bible story. The Spirit is blowing, if we will listen. No one in her path will escape, regardless of where they stand or in what pew they sit. The Spirit is blowing to break down our carefully constructed defenses – to force us to reconsider whom we call unclean. For if the Spirit calls them clean, no one – not gays, not lesbians, not bisexuals, not transgendered people, not straight people, not conservative people, not progressive people – not black people, not Latino people, not Asian people,

continued on next page

Rasmussen *Continued from page 5*

attention to how discipleship practices do their formation work. Beliefs mean nothing apart from practices. What sense would it make to have a richly articulated theology of baptism if the faith community never gathered around the font, never made the vows, and never took week-by-week responsibility for the life of the child? Apart from their practices, beliefs, creeds, and theology are utterly empty.

But we must go further. Practices shape belief and give rise to theology and creed. They are the “doing” that provokes reflection and gives rise to meanings that can reorder our ways. As the practices change and develop, so, too, does the faith.

I provide but one example of the power of practices to shape belief. The African Association of Earthkeeping Churches in Zimbabwe is a network of 2 million Shona farmers whose churches are African-initiated churches. Chiefly for reasons of survival, their expression of Christian faith became focused on “earthkeeping”—reforestation, prevention of further erosion, improved soils, animal husbandry, village nurseries. The cycles of the life of these farming peoples were all gathered up into the church year—tree-planting, seedtime and harvest became liturgical events, etc. Planting trees was

Aymer *Continued from page 6*

not first-nation people, not immigrant people, not native-born people -- no one, no one may we call unclean.

And then what will we do? Will we still point fingers at those “rigid fundamentalists” or those “unbelieving liberals”? Will we still speak about those “unrepentant self-affirming practicing homosexuals” or the “unchristian forces of the religious right”? Or will we gaze into these waters, these waters of baptism, these waters troubled at the beginning of all creation by the blowing of that same Spirit – and will we see our neighbors, our opponents, ourselves as God sees us – as fully and completely in the image of God?

Christians, the wind is blowing. Blowing through overtures and demonstrations. Blowing through task forces and deliberations. And when the wind blows, and when our defenses fall, and when we finally see each other as we really are – the baptized, beloved of Jesus Christ – what will we do?

What will you do, what will I do. . . when the wind blows?

done as part of a very long eucharist service carried out on the prepared soil, and was linked to the Tree of Life.

Earthkeeping, via improvisation on core practices, became the shape of these farmers’ Christianity. “What did we used to believe?” asked the professor. “We used to believe that Jesus Christ died for our sins.” “What do we now believe?” “We now believe that Jesus Christ died for all creation.” Earthkeeping practices yielded new theology and new dimensions of an old creed about the atoning work of Jesus.

The same kind of transformation happened for both ecclesiology and theology when slavery was finally abolished and the struggle continued in Civil Rights and Human Rights campaigns. It happened again when ordination practices came to include women. And it is happening, and will happen, when baptized “gltb” Christian are joyously draped in ordination stoles at the altar and take vows of marriage at that same altar.

Discipleship practices, including exacting deliberation, live into the new reality and folks go from there, humbly and with tenacity until peace, unity and purity come together.



Nave *Continued from page 4*

how others act in the church, what is that to you? We are finally called to place our trust and hope, not in the Presbyterian Church, or its laws, or other Presbyterians, but in Jesus, the pioneer and perfecter of our faith. Jesus alone can make us disciples, and only Christ can give us community. And when we falter, as we all do, we can rely on his comfort and assurance – the loving parent who picks us up, dusts us off, gives us a hug, and tells us to try again. Those are the foundations of discipleship as I know them.

Thanks be to God.



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

A Message from our Co-Moderators

December, 2005

Dear Friends,

We were grateful to meet many of you at our recent Covenant Conference in Memphis. "Discipleship in Community" was our theme. That underlying challenge is brought before our whole church by the final report of the Theological Task Force on Peace, Unity and Purity, which commissioners will consider at next summer's General Assembly. As our Executive Committee stated after the report's release, it does "not address all of our hopes for the church – in particular, for its gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender members." We continue to believe that our current ordination standards are "a departure from Presbyterian tradition and Jesus' own teaching and practice." We are grateful to the presbyteries – sixteen at this writing – that have sent overtures calling on the General Assembly to reexamine the harmful and divisive provisions of G-6.0106b.

At the same time, we deeply appreciate the Task Force's careful, balanced, and irenic work and example. Despite being chosen for the range of their views, they reached a very rare unanimity. As our earlier statement noted, "that is an extraordinary agreement and perhaps a sign of God's guidance." (The whole statement is posted at www.covenantnetwork.org/news/ttf/ExComRespttf.htm)

The Task Force members spent the great bulk of their time together seeking a better understanding of the shared basis of our faith in the living God, before focusing on contentious issues. We believe that if Presbyterians across the church will invest a similar effort, studying, praying, and working together, we will discover how much more unites us than divides us. We will find that truth and justice are not mutually exclusive. The Word become flesh is full of both grace and truth. Imbued with that Spirit, the church can prepare for a fruitful and faithful Assembly next summer.



Kimberly C. Richter
Kimberly C. Richter

Jon Walton
Jon Walton