



Spring, 2006

The Covenant Connection

A Newsletter of the Covenant Network of Presbyterians (Vol 9, #1)

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May 2006 SE Regional Covenant Network Conference Features Jack Rogers

Daring to Hope: Preparing for the Church of Tomorrow is the theme for the May, 2006 Southeast Regional Covenant Network Conference hosted by the Presbytery of the James Covenant Network Chapter. The conference will take place over two days beginning with **registration at noon on Friday, May 12th** and ending with worship at 12:30 p.m. on Saturday, May 13th. **Jack Rogers** will speak on his new book, *Jesus, the Bible and Homosexuality*. Frances Taylor Gench of Union Seminary-PCSCE will present the Theological Task Force report. **The Rev. J. Herbert Nelson** of Liberation Community Church, Memphis, TN; and **The Rev. Carrie Rhoads Tuttle**, First Presbyterian Church, Burlington, NC will preach. Please visit www.covenantnetwork.org/confse06/confse-home.htm or call the Covenant Network office to request a brochure and registration form.

The 217th General Assembly will be a Turning Point for the PC(USA)

The 217th General Assembly holds the promise for significant progress in the PC(USA). The Report of the Task Force on the Peace, Unity and Purity of the Church, if adopted in its entirety, would return authority to discern essential qualifications for ordained leadership to presbyteries and sessions. The Task Force Report along with overtures from 22 Presbyteries calling for the removal of G6.0106b will be debated and put to vote June 15-22 in Birmingham, Alabama.

Volunteers are needed to staff the Covenant Network booth, resource or assist committees, and help with event logistics or offer hospitality at CovNet events at the General Assembly. If you are interested and able to attend, please contact National Organizer Tricia Dykers Koenig by phone at (216) 658-1770 or by email at triciadk@covenantnetwork.org. If you are unable to attend, please consider supporting our work at General Assembly with a dedicated and extraordinary contribution of \$50 or more.

New Resource for Biblical Interpretation

In the "season of discernment" to which the Task Force invites the church, the Covenant Network is offering a new collection of essays designed to open conversations, not just win arguments. Twenty-six scholars from nineteen seminaries and colleges have provided short, accessible responses to *Frequently Asked Questions about Sexuality, the Bible, and the Church*. Intended for lay readers, the essays address the biblical and confessional passages most often discussed in debates about sexuality, and also suggest other helpful biblical and theological resources. Copies will be available in April from the Covenant Network office.

Comprehensive New Powerpoint Presentation on the Science of Sexual Orientation Now Available

Hard Wired provides an overview of the science of sexual orientation. It was presented by Doug Nave at the 2005 Covenant Conference in Memphis. Well documented, the presentation is a comprehensive overview of what we know and don't know, about the origins of sexual orientation - including genetic, hormonal, birth order, and other influences.

While *Hard Wired* is available for download or online viewing at www.covenantnetwork.org/hardwired.htm, viewers may wish to request a CD containing the large file either through the E-store at our website or by contacting the Covenant Network office.

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.



Shaping Community

Amy Plantinga Pauw

An excerpt from a presentation at the 2005 Covenant Network Conference

This afternoon we will be looking at the practices of shaping communities. As a Reformed theologian, sooner or later I find myself reading John Calvin. In particular I have been looking at his letters of Ecclesiastical Advice, where he deals with the challenges of shaping Christian community and in particular with qualifications for ministerial leadership. Calvin was a second-generation reformer. The break with the church of Rome, which was not the original intent of sixteenth-century reform movements, was pretty much decided by then. So Calvin's most pressing concern was to figure out what an alternative church order might look like.

The perception of scandalous failings in the established church significantly shaped Calvin's ecclesiology from the beginning. He had to accommodate the conviction that dissent from the visible church in his time was a Christian duty because of the corruption of key Christian practices. Christian practices can become so corrupted that the life and health of the church is imperiled. Thus a Reformed doctrine of the church is rightly marked by a stark recognition of the church's fallibility.

Calvin was wary of extravagant claims for the holiness of clergy. Even church leaders have countless weaknesses and are justified not by their holiness but by God's grace. As the body of Christ in the world, the church is a broken and diseased body, mirroring the ills and divisions of the larger society. Yet even when its practices become corrupted, the church remains a mysteriously powerful channel of God's grace to us.

"I would even be in despair," says Calvin, "if it did not occur to me that the building up of the church is always God's work, and that he will cause it to prosper by his own virtue even if all supports should fail us." As Presbyterians, we have inherited this understanding of the church: a fallible body of believers led by ordinary people, called to faithful discernment about the appropriate form of their communal practices, and resting on God's abundant grace, not their own holiness. We share Calvin's conviction that spiritual practices can get corrupted, and that even good practices need reform as the needs of the church change.

Let's look more closely at Calvin's ecclesiastical advice. He is writing to a Reformed community to make the argument "that celibacy should not be required in a minister." He starts his argument on a conciliatory note. There is certainly "a reasonable basis" for advising celibacy. Marriage can be a distraction from the



A Model of Monogamous Heterosexual Marriage in Genesis?

Jack Rogers

An excerpt from the new book *Jesus, The Bible and Homosexuality*

Many who would like to use Romans 1 to oppose equal rights for people who are homosexual, ground their position in the creation accounts in Genesis 1-2. The argument goes something like this: Homosexual relations are against nature, because they are contrary to the pattern placed within creation. What is that pattern? According to some, like Thomas Schmidt, it is monogamous, heterosexual, marriage. However, Genesis 1-2 contains no reference to homosexuality, or marriage. These chapters were not written to answer the questions that are now being put to them.

As Old Testament scholar Phyllis Bird notes, the laws and traditions that regulated sexual relations and marriage in ancient Israel never referred to the creation texts as models. Genesis 1, she argues, actually describes how humans are like and unlike God. People are made in God's image and likeness, so they are separate

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Lord's work and continence in sexual matters lends "not a little dignity to the holy ministry." Yet Calvin respectfully disagrees with their judgment. "Celibacy has its own disadvantages," Calvin insists, and "these are considerable and not all of one type." He clarifies that he is not yet talking about "the difficulty of sexual continence." Calvin's view is that celibacy and marriage can each present hindrances for ministers, and it is best to assess individual need, rather than making a blanket policy.

Calvin has another argument. "In the second place, I reply that the Lord has provided, best of all, the gifts that properly adorn his ministry, and we see that celibacy is not among them." Calvin is worried that the church's ordination practices have become corrupted.

"What good it (celibacy) has brought I cannot judge," says Calvin. "I always fear that it is

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Amy Plantinga Pauw is the Henry P. Mobley Professor of Doctrinal Theology at Louisville Seminary

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from and superior to other animals. But in their sexuality, they are identified as male and female, not as husband and wife, or even man and woman. Victor Furnish further reminds us that in contrast to all of the ancient Near Eastern deities, Israel's God was regarded as *asexual*. Thus in their sexuality, humankind is *like* every other created species and *unlike* God.

Indeed, Furnish asserts that Genesis 2:23-25 "neither commands nor presumes a 'monogamous' relationship between man and woman and ...it offers no comment on 'marriage' as such." Moreover, Old Testament heroes of the faith certainly did *not* model monogamy, but rather followed the patterns of their culture with multiple wives, concubines, and slaves as sexual partners. The Bible not only approves, but appears to mandate such behavior. However, as Furnish notes, the prescription to "be fruitful and multiply" cannot mean that everyone must marry and reproduce, for the creation stories "take no account whatever of the physically or mentally impaired, the celibate, the impotent — or of those who in modern times have come to be described as 'homosexual.'"

This notion that a model of monogamous, heterosexual marriage is somehow contained in Genesis 1 is simply not true. It appears to be an artificial construct designed to deny the rights of marriage to those who are homosexual. As David Balch, professor of New Testament at Brite Divinity School, observes, where a theology of creation is stressed, as by those opposed to equality for gays and lesbians, "subordination and submission are usually emphasized..." On the

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dangerous for celibacy to be honored extravagantly, for good men may be frightened away from marriage, even when their need of it is urgent." If celibacy is not among the gifts that God has provided to adorn the church's ministry, then it is wrong to consider people who lack this gift as being of less value.

Calvin has one more argument. Even if the church authorities find that encouraging celibacy is not "an obstacle for [them] at present," that is not reason enough to continue this practice. "Austerity" about this matter, he says, "can be a great obstacle to future generations, for whom, as you know, we must take thought." We should take care lest our unduly austere practices exert pressure and tyranny on future generations of Christians who may be living in quite different circumstances.

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other hand, where a theology of redemption, such as Paul offers in Romans 3, is stressed, "freedom, mutuality, and equality are usually emphasized."

I think that the contemporary model of Christian marriage is a good one for heterosexual people:

one man and one woman should marry for life, and, if they choose, bear and care for children. This model is not found in Genesis, however. Moreover, it took Western society many centuries to come to it, and even so, half of the heterosexual people in American society do not follow it. On the other hand, many Christian gay and lesbian people have committed themselves to one life-long partner. Many care for children, and some that I know have adopted children with special needs. They seem to have gotten the point of the contemporary Christian model of marriage and are living it out.

The claim that the image of God is rooted in the male-female relationship leads us away from the Biblical text. When I was on the task force on homosexuality at Pasadena Presbyterian Church, one of our members, a former missionary with a PhD in New Testament, argued in favor of the Barthian view that a person was not fully human unless in a heterosexual marriage. His argument offended various committee members, including a never-married woman who was a former missionary. Our one gay member quietly said, "That sure makes it hard on Jesus."

Biblically Jesus Christ is the image of God (Col.1:15; 2 Cor. 4:4). But the image of God in Jesus was not a consequence of some unique human attribute, like maleness or marital status. It was rather the result of his reflecting the love of God fully in his life. We human beings reflect God's love only sporadically and partially, whereas Jesus showed us God's love consistently and wholly.

The gospel, the good news, is that all people can have a relationship with God through Jesus Christ. We reflect Christ's presence in our lives by showing love for God and each other. Thus, the image of God is not a capacity embodied only in some classes of people but denied to others. To be in God's image is possible for all - black and white, male and female, gay and straight, married and unmarried.



Jack Rogers,
Moderator of the
213th General
Assembly, is
Professor of
Theology Emeritus
at San Francisco
Theological
Seminary.

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Rebuilding after Katrina - Experiencing Christ

Anitra Kitts Rasmussen

Director of Communications,
Covenant Network of Presbyterians

Photos: Cheryl Finch

On January 8, I traveled with four others from the San Francisco Theological Seminary as a Presbyterian Disaster Assistance work team assigned to D'Iberville, Mississippi. Charles Marks, SFTS Chaplain, led our group. Scott Shaefer, Vice President of Administration joined us, and Cheryl Finch, Sharon La Tour, and myself represented the student body. Our journey lasted eight days. What we experienced will last a lifetime.

D'Iberville is a small town located just inland of Biloxi, only a couple of miles north of the casino barges that washed ashore in the twenty foot storm surge. The eastern wall of Hurricane Katrina passed over the town, with sustained winds over 114 miles per hour for six or seven hours. Many twisters were embedded in the storm, over 400 according to one account. St. Martin, a neighboring town, was completely leveled by water and twister. The sustained high winds pushed water inland, first dislodging or destroying barges and casinos along the Biloxi beach and then invading and swamping homes and businesses under twenty feet of water along the shoreline and half that several miles inland. Debris and bodies were washed inland from Biloxi into D'Iberville adding to the damage done by wind and wave locally. The water rose fast; those who did not evacuate either found shelter in their attics or huddled in the wind on their roof tops after swimming out the front door.

The D'Iberville PDA camp, one of eight in the area set up and run by the Presbyterian Disaster Assistance program, was set up in September on a baseball field north of town. We slept in corrugated plastic cardboard tent-like shelters placed out in left field. We took turns preparing breakfast and lunch for the community and volunteers at the D'Iberville Volunteer Center located at another baseball facility about a mile away. During the week we spent in D'Iberville there were over 100 other volunteers from Derry Presbyterian Church, Hershey; PA; Cross Roads Presbyterian Church, Leechburg; PA; Supplee Memorial Presbyterian Church, Maple Grove, PA;

First Presbyterian Church, Charlottesville, VA; and First Presbyterian Church, Sheridan, WY. We were just a few in a long line of congregations that have made the trip to the D'Iberville work site. As of the end of November, 2005, over 3,105 work days have been logged by volunteers at this one site alone.

D'Iberville was hit hard by Hurricane Katrina. According to the D'Iberville Volunteer Center, over half the town's population of 8,000 was left homeless. The citizens of D'Iberville were left to fend for themselves; neither the Red Cross nor the National Guard showed up for days after the storm. "On the second night we heard about a local restaurant giving away all their food since the refrigerators had failed," Irene McIntosh, D'Iberville resident and Volunteer Center Coordinator, recounted while preparing breakfast for volunteers and community members. "So we drove over to the warehouse and gathered up all these plastic grocery bags and filled them with this food. We took two pickup trucks and hooked up some flatbed trailers and hung some lanterns off the trailers and we drove up and down the streets in the dark with a loudspeaker calling out, 'Food, we've got food!' People just came out of the darkness to find us, they just crawled over piles of debris."

From the beginnings of that second night's improvised food distribution, Irene and her neighbor and long-time friend, Ed Cake, now run the D'Iberville Volunteer Center located in the middle of a brand new sports complex. Using a handful of computers and a constant stream of willing Presbyterian volunteers, Irene and Ed identify D'Iberville residents in need of food, clothing, and shelter and assign work teams to go out to residences to help muck out storm damage and then begin repairs. As of the middle of January, the database has over 1700 open records of homes and families in need. Over 400 of those records are roofing related.

Our first day's work was to finish ripping out the bathroom furnishings of a home that saw seven feet of water. It was heart-breaking to enter the mostly gutted home. We could see traces of the love and work the residents had put into their home of fifty years. We found it to be cathartic to pour our anger at the abandonment of these people into the removal of sheetrock, cabinets, tile, and the large cast iron bathtub. Across the





Scott Schaefer, Charles Marks and Anitra Kitts Rasmussen serve breakfast to residents and volunteers

street was a small, non-denominational church. We looked in the windows and saw the contents of the nursery scattered about by the water. A saturated bible lay open on the desk in the water-drenched, mold-infused pastor's office. I couldn't see what page the bible lay open to, the air flowing out the window was too mold infused to linger.

Our second day's work involved clearing the yard of a widow with Parkinson's disease. She watched us with grateful eyes. She was alone in her living room during the storm. "I started singing 'Raindrops Keep Falling on my Head' when the living room roof began to leak," she said. Her house, thankfully, lay above the storm surge. As we dragged the limbs of trees out to the street, the city debris clearing crew swept it up. Free debris pick up was coming to an end within a week after four months of daily pickups.

On the third day our group split up. My colleagues went to a house that saw water damage to the top of their inside ceilings. The owners were home during the storm, as was a neighbor who videotaped the storm first from his living room and then from his attic through a hole he had punched in his roof. We watched the video on one of our last nights in camp. "I never thought I'd see white caps in my back yard," Leah Puzs said in a still unbelieving voice when she narrated her neighbor's video of the destruction to her family's home. During the storm, the family had to swim out of the house to get up on the roof. "We were getting pushed around by the furniture," she told us. "It can hurt you pretty hard when it starts to float."

Because they did not have flood insurance, the only insurance settlement they received was \$2,000 for damage to the roof. Before the storm, houses sold for \$100,000 to \$150,000. Unable to pay for professional contractors, Leah and her family needed volunteers to help pull out damaged walls and begin to rebuild. While we were there we joined Presbyterians from Wyoming and Virginia to replace insulation and hang new sheet rock. We were fortunate to have experienced builders to supervise our work.

One of my jobs was to take a needs assessment survey in a trailer park that saw two mini-tornadoes during the storm. Four months

after the storm we found more than one family still living with blue tarps barely covering open roofs and walls. Several families said they were living with mold, and water saturated furniture, walls, and floors.

On a similar survey the day before, the team from Charlottesville Virginia found a woman whose bedroom was open to the sky and whose water was turned off because the pipes were damaged and leaking. When they first knocked on her door they found someone who could not speak without weeping. Deeply depressed, her hope for a different future seemed lost. Embracing her, the Charlottesville team set to work tearing out the damage and standing in line at the building supply store for new materials. The change in Mary, the owner of the trailer, was immediate and dramatic. Within twenty-four hours she was laughing and working with energy alongside the Virginians. By the time they left her with a roof and restored plumbing, she was preparing to look for work. Much like that first sign of spring - a daffodil that emerges from a January snow drift - Mary had new hope and a desire to live toward a future with joy and energy.

Signs of the Resurrection, the New Creation that God promises us in Christ, were everywhere in the midst of the desolate destruction. These signs were present, in part, because we were present. Presbyterians, Lutherans, Baptists and more all showing up, all grabbing a hammer or a shovel and all making real Christ's loving concern for us in practical and meaningful ways.

"God has been in all the things we have done," Brian Johnson Associate Pastor of First, Sheridan WY said on the last night the group was in camp. "In the community, in the camp, in the people we were sent to be with. It was overwhelming for our folks to help them out and see some hope."

Gary and Lisa Lyon, Co-ministers of Cross Roads Community Presbyterian Church in Leechburg PA concurred. "Emails just started flying around when the storm happened. It wasn't an *if* we were going but a *when* we were going," Gary said. When asked what was the memory they were going to take with them Gary immediately replied, "The blessings we received from the other groups, from the residents of D'Iberville."

"God has been in all the things we have done. In the community, in the camp, in the people we were sent to be with. It was overwhelming for our folks to help them out and see some hope."



Charles Marks tears out a mold-damaged bathroom

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Calvin is not arguing that celibacy is bad. He is worried that celibacy, while a good in itself, can become an idol, a law which Christians used to justify themselves, to proclaim their own righteousness, and to tyrannize others. He sees all kinds of practical problems with it, does not think that God requires it for ministry, and is worried about setting a bad precedent for future generations.

But in reforming the church's practices around ministerial leadership, Calvin was not given a blank slate. Pastoral celibacy had been the accepted western rule for centuries by Calvin's time. Celibacy was exemplified by Jesus himself, advocated by the apostle Paul, and revered as a mark of Christian holiness. It was an established rule in the practice of shaping church communities.

So let's try to imagine the kind of criticism Calvin and other Protestant reformers invited from traditionalists when they challenged this rule of celibacy. "What do you mean that celibacy is not required of all who are called to be ministers? Surely it works the other way around—if you don't have the ability to live a celibate life, you weren't called to be a minister in the first place. An 'urgent need for marriage' is not something we should even be talking about in connection with the pastoral vocation. It points to a moral

deficit. It degrades the whole notion of priestly calling. This only confirms our suspicions about you self-appointed 'reformers'—you are an undisciplined, immoral lot. Look, we welcome undisciplined people with an 'urgent need for marriage' to be baptized members of the church. But if you are a self-acknowledged, unrepentant, practicing heterosexual, there is no place for you in the priesthood."

As I look around the Presbyterian church today I don't see much "absurd admiration" for celibacy anymore. If there is anything that is "honored extravagantly" in our church context, it is heterosexual marriage. In fact, I suspect it has become what celibacy was for the church in Calvin's time.

All the research tells us that what Protestant churches now see as the ideal pastoral candidate is a married man. Just as Calvin worried about the rule of celibacy in the sixteenth century, we must be concerned about the way we treat heterosexual marriage. Do we exhibit "absurd admiration" for it as a mark of ministerial fitness? Do we equate

honoring heterosexual marriage with upholding sexual morality? Do we consider unmarried people of less value, as if they have lost some adornment? Is our honoring of heterosexual marriage frightening good people away from pursuing the calling God has given them?

From our vantage point, the preference for celibacy among the church authorities whom Calvin counseled looks like a way of avoiding a frank discussion of ministers' emotional and physical needs and desires. "We do not know what to do with the relational needs and desires of ministers, so let's just try to keep those who acknowledge them and do not feel they have received the gift of celibacy out of the ministry altogether. It's simpler and less awkward all round." Many church folk today still feel the same way: honest, sober conversation about relational matters is awkward and uncomfortable.

The fact that the larger western society is emotionally stunted and sex-saturated makes honest, sober conversation more, rather than less, difficult. And I think that helps explain the strong Protestant bias toward married clergy. The assumption is that with married ministers, none of these delicate questions have to come up. We of course know better than that. Through painful experience the church has found that neither celibacy nor heterosexual marriage is a guarantee of sexual and emotional health and personal holiness. Questions about relational health and holiness are ones that all Christians must face and wrestle with.



It seems to me that without this kind of conversation, the move to change ordination standards is incoherent. We have to be willing to answer the question the Peace, Unity and Purity task force asks: "How does God's gracious drama of creation, reconciliation, and redemption work itself out in the lives of baptized gay and lesbian persons who are committed to exclusive, covenanted relationships?" As in the case of covenanted heterosexual relationships, we must, in Andrew Sullivan's words, "avoid glamorizing and idealizing the whole venture," recognizing that "uniting sexual longing and emotional commitment is a troubling and troublesome mission" for everyone, gay or straight. But just as Calvin was certain that "many who are otherwise suited for the ministry cannot usefully do without marriage," so we assert that many who are suited for the ministry *can* usefully do without



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heterosexual marriage, including those who are single, divorced, or in exclusive, covenanted same-sex relationships.

In reflecting on these matters, we have to preserve Calvin's insight that both the present needs of the individual and the long term needs of the community must be taken into account.

We should also preserve Calvin's insight that even rules that have served the church well in the past should not be foisted on future generations as non-negotiable. We have to think with sympathetic imagination about the well-being of the future church. It is possible that tomorrow's church may require new rules for its flourishing. Our faithfulness is not to a particular configuration of our common life, but to the promise that God's grace in Jesus Christ will accompany us in the spiritual practice of shaping community.

I see in Calvin an attempt at graceful spiritual practice around the contentious issue of ministerial leadership. He concedes that the weight of church tradition is on his opponents' side; the proposal to accept married clergy was a bold and risky one in that context. Calvin does not pretend that he has it all correct or that church order will never have to be rethought. He is doing his best to put together Scripture's witness and pastoral and personal realities, trusting not in the exemplariness of the church's practices of shaping community, but in the God who meets Christians in their searching and struggling to be faithful. ■

The full text, with footnotes, can be found at www.covenantnetwork.org/sermon&papers/pauw.htm

A Word about Address Changes and Duplicate Copies

In addition to our membership, The Covenant Network mails this newsletter to all Presbyterian clergy and, occasionally, to all clerks of sessions. We do this because we think dialogue between all members of our community, including those who disagree with us, is vital. This means that many of you receive two copies of the newsletter. This is not an accident so much as it is an opportunity. Please consider passing your copy(ies) along to someone you think might need to read it.

If you are a member of the Network and are moving, please send your changes to Rosemary Bledsoe at our San Francisco office or by email to rosemaryb@covenantnetwork.org.

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We need to return to a biblical understanding of God, creation, sin, salvation, and love. Those who rely instead on natural law and biased cultural assumptions, twist and distort the fundamental message of the gospel.

There are somewhere around 3,000 verses in the Bible that express God's concern for the poor and oppressed. In contrast, there are a tiny handful of verses that some people claim condemn homosexuality. None of them, properly interpreted, refer to contemporary Christian people who are homosexual. ■

Order Roger's book, Jesus, The Bible and Homosexuality, from W/JKP at 800 227-2872.

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Three PDA volunteers from San Francisco Theological Seminary: Vice President Scott Schaefer, Seminarian Sharon LaTour and Chaplain Charles Marks

On our last night in camp, new volunteers arrived from several churches in the St. Louis area. Now old hands after seven days in camp, we ran them through the practicalities of how to make coffee and where to find the snack kitchen and the tool tent filled with gifts left behind by previous groups. Then we passed our love and our care for the good people of D'Iberville along to them. Our love? Surely it is Christ's love that remains in place in D'Iberville calling all of us to come and experience God's loving Spirit now creating the New from what was and is no more.

There is much work yet to be done. Please consider forming a work group and coming to help this spring and summer. Please keep PDA in your mission-giving budget. Please petition the federal government to do the right thing in these hard-hit areas. Please keep all of us, those who live in the areas hit by Hurricane Katrina, those who go to work in those areas, and those who support this ministry financially in your prayers. Together, we belong to Christ. Together, we experience Christ's love for us all. ■

A Model of Monogamous Heterosexual Marriage in Genesis?

Rebuilding after Katrina



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

A Message from our Co-Moderators

March, 2006

Dear Friends,

The musician of the 133rd Psalm sings, "How very good and pleasant it is when kindred live together in unity." It is a hopeful vision of the people of God who, like brothers and sisters in a close knit family delight in being together.

This is the kind of unity, peace, and purity that the church would be glad to experience in any age. Are there any signs that we are moving toward that closer harmony that the psalmist celebrates? Obviously such a change in the spirit of the church is one that God alone can bring, and one that is coming slowly but surely. There are, indeed, some hopeful signs.

While some strident voices are calling for division in the church, expressing frustrations with the Report of the Theological Task Force, the Covenant Network has taken a reflective approach urging the whole church to actually read and discuss the recommendations! In those places where serious study and discussion has taken place much good has already been accomplished. Civil and serious conversations are occurring throughout the church as Presbyterians across theological lines find common ground and shared unity. In many places we are talking *with*, not so much *about*, our gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgendered members and doing so in a serious and responsible way. This is also a hopeful sign.

The recommendations of the report fall short of removing G 6.0106b, The goal to which we remain strongly committed, but as we have already seen in presbyteries across the church, they do open up needed theological space and lay the necessary groundwork to move closer to that day. On the first count, the report is disappointing. But on the second, it opens the door to a future that is closer to the justice, unity, and peace which the psalmist celebrates. In the meantime, we will study, work, pray, and act in ways that will speed that day when we live together in harmony and in peace.




Kimberly C. Richter


Jon Walton