



Spring 2008

The Covenant Connection

A Newsletter of the Covenant Network of Presbyterians (Vol 11, #1)

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A letter from our Co-Moderators

Dear Friends:

As you know, on February 11, 2008 the Permanent Judicial Commission of the General Assembly issued several rulings.

One decision of the PJC was profoundly disappointing. In the case of *Bush v. Pittsburgh Presbytery*, the PJC ruled that the second sentence (including "chastity in singleness") of G.6-0106b is an "essential of Reformed faith and polity," from which behavioral departure is not acceptable for those seeking church office. This ruling lifts one sentence in the Book of Order to a position of authority above all others in the Constitution, including the Book of Confessions of the church. We do not believe that there is any sound theological or legal basis for making such a distinction.

Other features of the *Bush* decision, and all the rulings in two other cases, *Buescher et al. vs. the Presbytery of Olympia* and *Washington et al. vs. the Presbytery of Washington*, were encouraging. They reemphasized local application of ordination standards, in line with the Authoritative Interpretation adopted by the 217th General Assembly, and they ruled unconstitutional attempts of presbyteries and sessions to create their own lists of essential requirements for ordination. Further, they upheld the right of candidates to declare departures of conscience regarding both behavior and belief. These are important confirmations of freedom of conscience and the discerning approach to ordination that the Assembly commended to the whole church.

Despite these important affirmations, the ruling in *Bush* is deeply hurtful. It harms the church as well as the many gifted and called Presbyterians whose service it would deny.

For decades, the church has been locked in a painful and polarizing struggle over issues of ordination. It is particularly disappointing that, having been offered a better way by the 217th General Assembly, the GAPJC now endangers the peace, unity, and purity of the church with this ruling. In inexplicably lifting up one sentence as outside the bounds of discernment, they appear to have disregarded the wisdom of that General Assembly and its clear intention as made explicit in the report of the Theological Task Force. We pledge to do everything we can to help return the church to the path that the PJC decision has partially blocked.

We vigorously disagree with the Permanent Judicial Commission. Strengthened in resolve by the persistence with which God is leading the church toward justice, we will work with new energy in every way for a church as generous and just as God's grace.

Grace and Peace,

Deborah A. Block
Pastor, Immanuel Presbyterian Church
Milwaukee, WI

Jon Walton
Pastor, First Presbyterian Church in
the City of New York



The church we seek to strengthen is built upon the hospitality of Jesus, who said, "Whoever comes to me I will not cast out." The good news of the gospel is that all -- those who are near and those who were far off -- are invited; all are members of the household and citizens of the realm of God. No one has a claim on this invitation and none of us becomes worthy, even by sincere effort to live according to God's will. Grateful for our own inclusion, we carry out the mission of the church to extend God's hospitality to a broken and fearful and lonely world. From the *Call to Covenant Community*. Please read in its entirety at covenantnetwork.org/call2cc.html.

Two Presbyteries Follow the New Process for Discerning and Affirming Call with Candidates Declaring a Departure

“Covenant: God is Faithful Still” 2008 Covenant Conference Nov. 6-8 in Minneapolis

Join us at Westminster Presbyterian Church
for our National Conference

With keynote speakers **Walter Brueggemann** and **William Stacy Johnson** and the gathered Covenant Network family, through powerful experiences of worship, study, and fellowship; we will celebrate “the God who yearns and waits for us”.*

*We are strange conundrums of faithfulness and fickleness.
We cleave to you in all the ways that we are able.*

*We count on you and intend our lives to be lived for you,
and then we find ourselves among your people
who are always seeking elsewhere and otherwise.*

*So we give thanks that you are the God
who yearns and waits for us,
and that our connection to you is always from your side,
and that it is because of your goodness
that neither life nor death*

*nor angels nor principalities
nor heights nor depths
nor anything in creation
can separate us from you.*

*We give you thanks for your faithfulness,
so much more durable than ours. Amen*

*A Prayer by Walter Brueggemann,
[Awed to Heaven, Rooted to Earth](#)

See the Covenant Network website listing of

**Other 2008 Events,
Conferences and Workshops**

This January two Presbyteries experienced the blessings and benefits of our connectional system as they implemented the process outlined in the Authoritative Interpretation (A.I.) of G-6.0108 adopted by the 2006 General Assembly. They permitted candidates for office to declare a conscientious scruple or departure from constitutional standards for office, then determined whether the particular departure “constitutes a failure to adhere to the essentials of Reformed faith and polity.”

On January 15, **San Francisco Presbytery** approved the recommendation of its Committee on Preparation for Ministry to find candidate **Lisa Larges** “ready for examination, with a departure.” On January 26, the **Presbytery of the Twin Cities Area** voted to restore theologian **Paul Capetz** to exercise of the office of Minister of the Word and Sacrament. Dr. Capetz, Associate Professor of Historical Theology at United Theological Seminary and a gay man, had asked to be released from the exercise of ordained ministry in 2000, as a protest against the deeply flawed theology of G-6.0106b.

In each case, Presbyters considered their candidate’s statement of departure and questioned each directly; Lisa and Paul submitted to the process and the authority of their respective Presbyteries. The practices of open-hearted listening, shared worship, and communal discernment commended by the 2006 General Assembly and the Theological Task Force undergirded the processes with mutual forbearance and respect.

San Francisco Presbytery’s CPM reported that “This new process of deep discernment with a candidate considered ready in all respects with a departure proved to be a profoundly moving experience for all the members of CPM. It has nurtured our faith as well as our love and understanding for one another. We commend this process to the Presbytery and pray that you too will experience the Spirit’s movement in our midst.”

In Twin Cities, Interim Executive Presbyter Rev. Sarai Schnucker said, “We are overwhelmed by the grace and love this Presbytery exhibited today. The members of the Presbytery have conducted themselves with respect and restraint, even while handling such a controversial issue We listened to each other and heard each other. In the midst of this time of debate and discernment, there was true worship by the body of Christ as we sang songs and broke bread together.”

Fuller reports can be found on the Covenant Network website, www.covenantnetwork.org.



Lisa Larges



Paul Capetz

Lisa Larges

Lisa's love for God and the church is as clear and indisputable as her belief "that the standards set forth at G-6.0106b do not express essentials of Reformed faith and polity."

From her Statement of Departure:

I am grateful for the Church and its particular expression as the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), for the ways in which it has taught me of the love of God, of the work of salvation in Jesus Christ and of the demands on our lives to love and serve one another and this sweet world. ... I affirm with joy the standards as expressed at G-6.0106a and believe them to be a sufficient expression of both the gifts and the requirements for officers of the church.

I can and I will affirm with joy all the questions for ordination found at W-4.4003. I believe that as a candidate called to serve in this Church as Minister of Word and Sacrament, nothing in my faith or in my manner of life departs from the essentials of Reformed faith and polity.

Finally, insofar as "the decision as to whether a person has departed from essentials of Reformed faith and polity ultimately becomes the responsibility of the governing body in which he or she serves" I hereby submit this statement and seek with you the wisdom God has for us through the power of the Holy Spirit.

The full text is posted at
www.covenantnetwork.org/news/auth_interp/larges_statement.htm

Paul Capetz

Dr. Capetz's statement of departure emphasized that his disagreement with the provision was based on its non-Reformed treatment of required celibacy as a kind of works-righteousness that the Reformers specifically rejected.

...In graduate school ...I began in earnest to study the Protestant Reformation. I vividly recall reading Martin Luther's depiction of his own despair as he struggled to live a celibate lifestyle in the monastery. I saw my situation and my own despair mirrored in his words. Once I understood why Luther, Calvin, and the other Protestant Reformers categorically rejected vows of celibacy as incom-patible with what they believed was the essential tenet of Reformed faith, namely justification by faith alone, I found the key to making sense of my own plight as a gay Protestant. I realized that by requiring of gay persons like me a vow of celibacy as a condition of our moral acceptability as Christians, the contemporary Protestant church had fallen back on its own sword that had originally been used to attack what they identified as distorted in the Roman Catholic doctrine and practice of their day. ... I found my answer in the answer Luther first propounded and which gave the Reformation its start.

For the first time in the history of Protestantism, a vow of celibacy is being required of an entire caste of persons as a condition of their suitability for leadership in the church though the original platform of the Reformation was unambiguously opposed to vows of celibacy as contrary to the nature of the gospel. In its categorical opposition to all expressions of homosexuality, the Protestant church has unintentionally found itself having to deny one of its own essential tenets, namely that vows of celibacy are wrong because they imply works-righteousness before God.

... Not only do I believe that the moral position of the church on the matter of homosexuality is wrong, since it is incapable of making any serious moral distinction between promiscuity and prostitution, on the one hand, and a life-long committed monogamous relation (or "marriage") on the other hand, but I also believe that this fatally flawed moral position has had the ironic side-effect of backing the church into a theological corner where it has been forced to deny implicitly one of its own essential theological tenets.

The full text is posted at
www.covenantnetwork.org/news/auth_interp/capetz_statement.htm

Sharing the documentary film, *For the Bible Tells Me So*

Ross Avilla,
*graduate student in
social psychology at
the University of
California at Davis*

I've been a Christian since I was five, but I'm guessing I've been gay even longer. Growing up, this was a particularly difficult thing to accept. I loved God and deeply cherished His Word; however, while the Bible was filled with messages of love and tolerance which formed the guiding principles of my life, it also openly denounced me as an "abomination". Having been raised in a rural community and taught in a relatively fundamentalist church, I coped by keeping my life as a Christian and my life as a gay man separate. Unfortunately, the more I came to identify myself as a confident and proud gay man, the more Christianity faded from my life.

When I came to the Davis Community Church screening of *For The Bible Tells Me So*, I didn't really know what to expect. The film's progressive Christian take on homosexuality was something completely new to me. It highlighted common misconceptions, which, I confess, even I shared, about the Bible's views on "homosexuality" (a concept that wasn't even around when the Books of the Bible were written) and reviewed some of the current scientific evidence that homosexuality is innate.

I left the church that day with a new-found acceptance of Christianity and a powerful sense that I was lucky enough to finally live in a Christian community that really cared about me, in my entirety. Watching such a film surrounded by so many heterosexual, religiously devoted, but open-minded, Christians was honestly one of the most validating and moving spiritual experiences I've ever known.

**Covenant Network
Chapter, Trinity Presbytery,**
central South Carolina

Several members of this chapter recently saw *For the Bible Tells Me So* at a local theatre. At our next meeting, we discussed the idea of showing the film at churches in the presbytery.

One of our chapter's goals is to generate more open discussion within churches, and the film seemed a good way to initiate conversations. We decided to purchase the film and ask churches in our presbytery to allow us to show it at their facilities. Following the showing, one of our members would moderate an open discussion.

Our plan is that the chapter will sponsor, promote and present the film; the host church will provide the facility. After careful consideration, the session at Shandon Presbyterian (Columbia) has approved our request for a showing. This is an important beginning and we are grateful for the opportunity it offers.

Jim Brown, pastor,
**Market Square
Presbyterian Church,**
Harrisburg, Pennsylvania

Our church hosted a viewing of *For the Bible Tells Me So* on a cold Friday night in January. Our Peacemaking Committee had planned the event in collaboration with Lebanon Valley College Freedom Rings, Common Roads of Harrisburg, the Unitarian Church of Harrisburg and the LGBT Center Coalition.

Just before the appointed hour of 7 o'clock I stood in our narthex along side our mission statement that hangs on the wall "welcoming friend and stranger alike into our diverse and inclusive family of faith regardless of race or class or national origin or sexual orientation or worldly condition of any kind." Across the street several pickets readied to shout out their denunciations.

By the time we were ready to start the film, our pews were filled. Nearly 400 people had come out to witness film director Daniel Karlslake's painful and yet uplifting exploration of family, faith and sexuality.

Daniel's presence touched all who came with a sense of grace and gratitude. Daniel, who grew up in neighboring Camp Hill, was welcomed by former classmates and their parents. After the movie he spoke about how the film came to be and answered questions for at least an hour. The grace note came as he told of his interactions with people like Desmond Tutu and Bishop Gene Robinson, who so willingly aided in bringing this film to life. A palpable sense of gratitude filled our sanctuary as we relished one another's company and gave thanks for the Daniels in our lives who are giving shape to a world and church in which we can say "Welcome!" and mean it.

Contradictory Rulings from the GA Permanent Judicial Commission

On February 11 the General Assembly Permanent Judicial Commission (GAPJC) issued decisions in cases arising from the presbyteries of Pittsburgh, Olympia, and Washington. In all three cases, dealing with the Authoritative Interpretation of G-6.0108 by the 217th General Assembly, the GAPJC ruled that

- Neither the GA nor the GAPJC can change any ordination standard, though they may interpret them.
- The Adopting Act of 1729 provides guidance in understanding the concept of “essentials.”
- Presbyteries and Sessions may not adopt policies that purport to establish essentials of Reformed faith and polity outside of the context of an examination of an individual candidate, nor may they declare that any or all departures from standards will be prohibited.
- Presbyteries and Sessions must conduct meaningful, case-by-case examinations of candidates for ordained office, honoring individuals' freedom of conscience and showing mutual forbearance.
- The decisions of examining bodies may be reviewed, and factual determinations by examining bodies are entitled to deference by reviewing bodies.
- The freedom of conscience guaranteed in G-6.0108 applies only to interpretation of Scripture; yet
- The determination as to whether a candidate has departed from essentials does not depend upon distinguishing between belief and behavior; some behavioral mandates, including refusal to repent of some practices the confessions call sin, may be considered non-essential.

Very confusingly, and in contradiction of the clear intent of the Authoritative Interpretation adopted by the 2006 General Assembly, the PJC also ruled that

- **The only ordination standard from which a governing body may not allow a departure is that of “fidelity within the covenant of marriage between a man and a woman (W-4.9001), or chastity in singleness,” so this “specific” clause is lifted up as functionally essential (until it is removed) - making the most controversial provision in the Constitution of the PCUSA the only predetermined “essential.”**

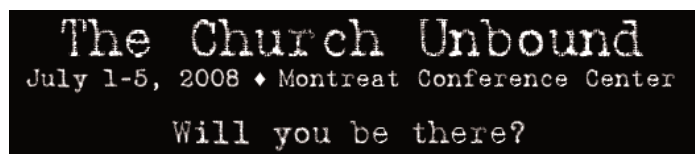
The faithful and prayerful application of the 2006 Authoritative Interpretation by the presbyteries of San Francisco and the Twin Cities Area (reported on page 2) showed the church a “more excellent way” of dealing with differing interpretations of scripture regarding same-sex relationships. The PJC’s apparent disregard of the wisdom of the 2006 General Assembly is troubling. As Co-Moderators Deborah Block and Jon Walton say in their letter on page 1, “Strengthened in resolve by the persistence with which God is leading the church toward justice, we will work with new energy in every way for a church as generous and just as God’s grace.”

The Church Unbound

July 1-5, 2008,

Montreat Conference Center

Co-sponsored by *Presbyterian Outlook*, Cross Cultural Alliance of Ministries, and Montreat Conference Center



When are we going to stop complaining about the Church we see and start becoming the Church we dream of? What is standing in the way? What are you going to do about it? Who else can you work with to make this dream a reality?

Come together with Presbyterians across boundaries of age, gender, culture, race, theology, and other barriers to envision a Church Unbound. Experience speakers who are diverse, provocative, and challenging; workshops that hone skills; small groups that foster relationship-building; energizing worship and Bible study; and real conversations with real people doing ministry in different settings. Check out the roster of leaders on the Montreat website, and note that our own Tricia Dykers Koenig is on the Planning Team.

Register soon because of limited Montreat housing during the week of July 4th. Fee structures are designed to encourage students, spouses, newer ministers, and families. Recreational programs for children of conferees are provided.

For more information and to register: www.montreat.org/current/2008-church-unbound.

Witnessing to God's Own Hope: A Reflection on Romans

Beverly Roberts Gaventa

excerpted and edited from her address
to the 2007 Covenant Conference, "Testimony,"
in Atlanta, Georgia
Complete text at
www.covenantnetwork.org/sermon&papers/gaventa.htm

"All of it [creation] waits eagerly" - the language of Romans 8:19 is colorful - the Greek *apokaradokia* suggesting the stretching out of the neck to look for what is coming. In the paraphrase of J.B. Phillips, the rendering is "creation is on tiptoe." With that phrase, I see a youngster straining to discern when the lights of the train will finally appear, the train that takes her home to her family or brings her beloved into view once again. ... That sort of eagerness characterizes everything that exists as it all together anticipates the future God is even now bringing about.

Creation's eagerness is matched by, and perhaps exceeded by, the eagerness of believers ("not only the creation," Paul writes, "but we ourselves, who have the first fruits of the Spirit, we groan inwardly while we wait..."). Even receiving manifestations of the Spirit does not exempt believers from their eagerness, an eagerness for adoption, for redemption.

Paul goes on in v. 20 to write that "creation was subjected in hope." Along with most but not all students of Paul, I think it is God who subjected creation, so this is a reference to God's response to human rebellion against God. It recalls Genesis 3, and it also recalls Romans 1, where Paul repeatedly claims that God handed humanity over to the enslaving powers of Sin and Death because of humanity's refusal to acknowledge God as God. But what does it mean to say that God did this "in" or "on the basis of" hope? Was God hoping for something? How is it that God hopes? Does God hope for human reformation? Human repentance? While this interpretation might be congenial for certain latter day understandings of God, this seems an odd sort of observation for Paul to make about the almighty God, maker of heaven and earth, the one who raised Jesus from the dead, especially since this letter so relentlessly shows us that human beings cannot simply repent or reform.



If that statement about being subjected in hope isn't puzzling enough, v. 24 complicates things even further: "For in hope we were saved." Given the ambiguities of the Greek, this might mean "by" hope - that is, we were saved by our own hoping. Yet if humanity cannot repent its way out of enslavement, it also cannot hope on its own. But if hope is not human optimism, and if it's not God's hoping for us to repent, and if Paul isn't tossing the word in just for rhetorical effect, then what exactly is it?

... Indulge me as I try out an explanation: at least in this passage, "hope" is itself the first fruit - the first tantalizing little nibble, if you will - of the arrival of God's final triumph. When Paul says that creation was subjected "in hope" or "on the basis of hope," what he means is that God's subjection always had redemption in view. As he puts it in Romans 11:32, "God confined all to sin that [God] might have mercy on all." And when 8:24 declares that we "were saved in hope," it refers to the intervention - the invasion - of the gospel that already takes humanity out of the grasp of Sin. ...

We have the "first fruit of the Spirit," the Spirit already intercedes. As he goes on to say, God has already called human beings, God has already made things right, God has already glorified. Even in the midst of hunger and danger and abandonment, God has already made known God's final triumph, so that God's enemies do not have the last word. ...

As Christians, we do not have to “have” hope in order to get and stay about the work of the church in the world, because God already has hope for us, and because we know that the future is God’s

It is largely irrelevant whether Paul or Phoebe or members of the Covenant Network have hope. Indeed, hope is not about us at all; it is God’s hope, that is, it is God’s future, not ours; and however wondrously and graciously it is for us, it is not about us.

We return to that wonderful Greek word *apokaradokia* or eager longing and the analogy of waiting for a train. That young woman is waiting for the arrival of a train that brings with it her beloved. If you will allow that scene to move forward, I think you will catch something of Paul’s understanding of hope. She knows that the train is coming. She can even see the first bit of light reflecting off the track as it makes the last corner on its way into the station. She stands on that platform, unable to make it come one moment sooner, and unable to delay its arrival for a single second. Much as she has longed for this moment, her longing has not moved one ounce of steel even an inch along the track. Her hope is not optimism, it is no longer even conviction, it is utter certainty of the train’s arrival. That is Paul’s understanding of hope in Romans 8 - utter certainty of God’s future triumph that already lives and breathes in the present time. What will we say, then (as someone is fond of saying)? How on earth (exactly: on earth) does that kind of certainty about God’s future do anything for Christians who exist very much in the Mean Time of the present? Is this just another form of escape from the present world?

For Paul himself, it was certainly not an escape. ... As we call to mind the major subjects addressed in the rest of the letter, we see no signs of escapism and many indications that Paul is well acquainted with the problems of the present time. With the next words of this letter (i.e., at 9:1), he turns to a specific concern

about the real people of Israel, “my own people, my kindred according to the flesh.” ... In chapters 12-15, Paul takes up problems internal to the community of faith. ... And, of course, in chapter 15, Paul explains that he is on the way to Jerusalem with the collection for the poor saints in that city. ... Concerns about money, petty bickering, condescension toward the outside - Paul would be right at home with us. These are problems of the Mean Time.

And ... Paul never mentions his own hopes. ... Instead, he repeatedly locates these concrete challenges in the cosmic landscape of God’s action. He ends Romans 9-11 with a doxology in praise of God’s unfathomable wisdom. He ends the discussion of divisions in 14-15 with a prayer that the “God of hope will fill” the Romans with joy and peace, that they may abound in love. And he ends his comments on the collection with a prayer for God’s deliverance in Jerusalem.

Based on Paul’s own comments in the letter, then, it appears that certainty about God’s future frees us to be and act in this world, not to turn away from it. So, to return one last time to the young woman who is still waiting for her beloved’s arrival, she has not left the train platform. As she stands there, with her palms a little damp now and her pulse racing, confident now that the train is almost in sight, she is free to notice those who wait with her: an elderly couple waiting for their daughter, a child fussing in its father’s arms, a business person impatient for the next stage of the journey. Her joy embraces them all. They wait together. And they care for each other. The elderly couple needs a place to sit. The father may need another pair of hands to manage all the baby’s gear. The business person may welcome a little conversation about something - anything - other than the next appointment.

To translate: as Christians, we do not have to “have” hope in order to get and stay about the work of the church in the world because God already has hope for us. Because we know that the future is God’s, because we have seen that future in the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, we know also that we are free to use all our energy and intelligence and compassion for those who wait alongside us. As Paul might say, we do so because nothing can separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus - not death or life, not powers, not microbes or government policies or fear or division or disease or anything else in all creation. Not even the church. Because we know that, we can live in the present. Not in our own hope, but in God’s hope for us. Not in our own hope, but by the God of hope.

The *Covenant Network Connection* is free to all who request a subscription. To have your name added to our mailing list or to change your address, please contact Karla Lemon at (415) 351 2196 or karlalemon@covenantnetwork.org. You can also make changes on line at www.covenantnetwork.org/



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



Join Covenant Network at the General Assembly in San Jose

Commissioner Convocation Dinner - Friday, June 20, 6:30-8:30 pm

An opportunity for commissioners, advisory delegates and observers to think together how to make a difference in the coming week. Plan to join us in the beautiful glass-domed rotunda of San Jose's City Hall, connect with friends old and new, and hear from our guest speaker **Susan Andrews**, Moderator of the 215th General Assembly and General Presbyterian, Hudson River Presbytery.

Covenant Network Luncheon - Monday, June 23

Hear our founding Co-Moderator **John M. Buchanan** (Moderator of the 208th General Assembly, Editor and Publisher of *The Christian Century*, and Pastor of Fourth Presbyterian Church, Chicago) reflect on our continuing vision of a church that celebrates the welcoming gospel. Also, **Harry Knox**, Director of the Religion and Faith program of the Human Rights Campaign (HRC), will speak about HRC's 2009 Clergy Call initiative.

Volunteer with Covenant Network at GA.

From hospitality to errand-running to supporting commissioners and advisory delegates; from an hour to a day to the whole week and more -- we have numerous opportunities for service that can help you enhance your knowledge of the PCUSA, make new friends, and make a difference in the church's witness. To learn more or to sign up, contact National Organizer Tricia Dykers Koenig 216-658-1770 or, triciadk@covenantnetwork.org.