

Presbyterian Welcome

friends • fellowship • family

Summer 2007 Newsletter

We are starting a new tradition for our newsletter and will now have reflections on a theme with announcements for our upcoming programs. We hope you enjoy this change and that you are blessed by these words! The theological theme for this issue: Fellowship.



Nearly Missed Presbyterian Welcome Fellowship

Derrick McQueen

"While looking at my feet at a hole in my sneaker, an old tin can by the side of the road--I nearly missed a rainbow, I nearly missed a sunset, I nearly missed a shooting star going by."

In 1970, the song "Nearly Missed" changed my life. It was a song on one of the first albums I ever owned. And yes, I do mean a vinyl record. It was the first ever album/book produced by Sesame Street. This song has been on my mind recently as I think about what I nearly missed in my life. When I first decided to apply to seminary I wasn't sure where God was leading me or, for that matter, why I was being led there. I walked through the doors of Union Theological Seminary knowing that I was in the right place but confused and asking that age old question, "What next?" Growing up Baptist and then becoming Presbyterian I was very confused about why God would place me in an impossible situation. Here I am, called to ministry but affiliated with two denominations that exclude people based on whether one is L, G, B, T, Q, or just plain Queer. God called me when I was twelve, and I've been running from that call ever since. I wonder how I could be called to service when the very church I embrace professes and aims to keep me out unless I stay "in."

But I've learned much about being a Presbyterian. If nothing else, I have learned to wait and pray for discernment. We do that when we search for pastors, when we call

our elders and our deacons, when we endorse ministries of outreach. Our process allows the Spirit to join us while we wait. Our humanity in all its glory and its faults is what we struggle against. We want to be right according to our own experience. Discernment means our humanity takes a back seat to the voice and direction of God. So I did not leave the Presbyterian Church. I waited. And then one day, someone invited me to an event sponsored by a group called Presbyterian Welcome. As I stopped looking down at the ground and lifted my head, I saw the rainbow. It wasn't a rainbow flag, but a rainbow nonetheless. To me that rainbow doesn't just symbolize sexuality. It cries out for freedom from oppression—sexual, racial, economic, gender, and the list goes on. As long as one is oppressed, so are we all.

You see, Presbyterian Welcome is not just about the ordination of LBGTO and Queer folk. Presbyterian Welcome is about creating freedom in worship and a relationship with Christ for all. A church I belonged to had a Mission Statement that embodied this ideal: "God is calling us to learn and live what it means to be Christ to our Neighbor." The Vision and Values Statements are even bolder in claiming conviction to bring that to fruition. I have experienced exclusion in some form or another all of my life because of the color of my skin.

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A couple of months ago my partner and I adopted two 8-week old tuxedo kittens. One is long haired and the other short haired. When we brought them home we started the task of finding appropriate names for them. As we were thinking, their color inspired me to think about YIN and YANG. And immediately we both agreed that these were the perfect names for them. But, which is YIN and which is YANG? We did not review the characteristics of these two concepts before assigning the names, and so randomly the long haired kitten was named YIN and the short haired kitten was named YANG. Later I went online to read about Yin and Yang and learned quite a bit.

(Chinese philosophy) the two fundamental principles, one negative, dark, passive, cold, wet, and feminine (yin) and the other (yang) positive, bright, active, dry, hot and masculine. The interactions and balance of these forces in people and nature influence their behavior and fate.

This last sentence brings me to the very essence of our meeting. We are here, in this place gathered to celebrate PRIDE month, which is a celebration of GOD'S diverse creation. When we say "diverse," we could be referring to different religions or faith traditions, or different ethnicities, different genders, ages, cultures, backgrounds, sexual orientations, sexual or gender expressions, etc. And we can also say that the interaction and balance of these differences in people and nature influence our lives. You see when we are together in fellowship, we inspire each other, we support each other, we hold each other, and we influence each other. I don't necessarily think that fellowship happens when everyone has the same interests or ideals. I see it more as an interaction of different people together in a congenial atmosphere, and that interaction produces something important and magical.

What could our fellowship possibly produce in us?

1. Yin and yang do not exclude each other.
Everything has its opposite: although this is never absolute - only relative. No one thing is completely yin or completely yang. Each contains the seed of its opposite. For example, winter can turn into summer; "what goes up, must come down". Let us affirm and celebrate our differences knowing that we are all interconnected and that we need each other.
2. Yin and yang are interdependent.
One cannot exist without the other. For example, day cannot exist without night. Light cannot exist without darkness. Life cannot exist without death.

3. Yin and yang can be further subdivided into yin and yang.
Any yin or yang aspect can be further subdivided into yin and yang. For example, temperature can be seen as either hot or cold. However, hot can be further divided into warm or scorching; cold into cool or icy. Within each spectrum, there is a smaller spectrum; every beginning is a moment in time, and has a beginning and end, just as every hour has a beginning and end.
4. Yin and yang consume and support each other.
Yin and yang are usually held in balance: as one increases, the other decreases. However, imbalances can occur. There are four possible imbalances: excess yin, excess yang, yin deficiency and yang deficiency. They can again be seen as a pair: by excess of yin there is a yang deficiency and vice versa. The imbalance is also a relative factor: the excess of yang "forces" yin to be more "concentrated".
5. Yin and yang can transform into one another.
At a particular stage, yin can transform into yang and vice versa. For example, night changes into day; warmth cools; life changes to death. However this transformation is relative too. Night and day coexist on Earth at the same time when shown from space.
6. Part of yin is in yang and part of yang is in yin.
The dots in each serve:
 1. as a reminder that there are always traces of one in the other.
For example, there is always light within the dark (e.g., the stars at night); these qualities are never completely one or the other.
 2. as a reminder that extreme yang at some point transforms instantly into yin, and vice versa, or that the labels yin and yang are conditioned by an observer's point of view. For example, the hardest stone is easiest to break. This can show that absolute discrimination between the two is artificial.

In affirming the yin and yang in all of us, we find the passion to understand that our work as faith communities of gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender people advocating for equality and justice is a balance between our spirituality and our advocacy and political/prophetic that we must work to engage in from the pulpit. In the Hebrew Scriptures, prophets many times spoke against the political establishment, and

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Nearly Missed (continued from front page)

The scars and the pain of this reality fuel my passion for the social justice ministry of inclusion. Oppression in all its forms will always rule instead of the ways of God until we recognize how damaging it is to force an individual to existentially self-identify.

I've just returned from a retreat where, for the first time in my life, the church served my total need as a child of God. At Presbyterian Welcome's retreat for those questioning or on the path to ordination, every single person looked right through me, embracing every label assigned to me and truly seeing my soul. And I was loved as Christian and Presbyterian. My eyes well up now as I remember the transforming tears as we shared communion at Table in true glory that the body and blood was for us. I remember taking a walk one morning just after sunrise. I kept my eyes to the ground to follow the path as I meditated with Christ beside me. On my return I lifted my eyes and saw the hills, I saw where my help comes from. What peace to be freed from the persecution of society and the church to clearly see God.

In the song "Nearly Missed" there is another phrase that I like and it says, "Lookin' down at the ground means you know where you're going. No head up in the clouds to lead you astray. But you can't ever have any kinda dream that way." Well, on that retreat I lifted up my head, saw my help coming from the Lord, and clearly recognized the dream of all freely serving in my home, the Presbyterian Church. Will I be ordained? Will the church have me? To these questions I have no answer. I can, however, say with conviction that I have truly experienced a Presbyterian Welcome.

Derrick McQueen is on the Board of Presbyterian Welcome and is a student at Union Theological Seminary. He is a member of St. James Presbyterian Church.

Yin & Yang (continued from page 2)

this caused much tension, and placed putting their own lives in jeopardy and danger. Today those opposing justice and equality for all, use religious leaders to support their bigotry. We have the prophetic responsibility to say NO MORE! We support and celebrate ALL GOD'S CREATION. Yin can not say to Yang "I do not need you or want you". We can not say to one another "because we are different or have different faith traditions, we don't need each other". Yin and Yang is balance, perfect harmony! One is not better than other one. One is not more important than the other one. We all need each other. The other day I heard the Rev. Mieke Vandersall saying that we [referring to us people of faith in the LGBT movement] should pray and worship together more often! We all get together for rallies, protests, public demonstrations and advocacy, but we need more of this! Because it is here that we get the spiritual renewal and strengthening of God's Spirit to continue to do the rest with the element of faith moving us along.

Let us have a dot of prophecy in the spiritual and nurturing aspect of our ministry as a reminder that we need to say what the Spirit gives us to say in the name of justice. Let us have a dot of spirituality and prayer in our political work as a reminder that we are acting out of our conviction and understanding of God as a God of love and justice!

The Rev. Dámaris Ortega is the Coordinator of Pride in the Pulpit, a program of the Empire State Pride Agenda.

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Announcements

- Our Website is new!
Bookmark it at Presbyterian at www.presbyterianwelcome.org. This fall we have a new intern joining us from Union Theological Seminary who will continue to make our website current and user-friendly.
- The 3rd annual GLBTQ Inquirers and Candidates retreat just took place and once again was a tremendous success. We had 20 participants that spanned all generational and theological boundaries. Presbyterian Welcome joins in thanking the many co-sponsoring organizations. We encourage you to read about the experiences first-hand by going to the blog that participants kept at www.blogspot.bookofdis-order.org.
- Announcing the 4th Annual GLBTQ Inquirers and Candidates Retreat! July 17–20 in Rural Indiana. Email mieke@presbyterianwelcome.org for an application and help us spread the word!

Presbyterian Welcome Fall Programming

- Transgender people are getting much more attention in the media these days than in the past. We presently have three out transgender individuals who are pursuing ordained ministry in the Presbyterian Church (USA). Many congregations are comfortable with lesbian and gay folks, but not necessarily with transgender people, even though they are a vibrant, present, active and yet silent part of our community. It is time to break this silence, which we will do this fall with a series of educational workshops and discussions. Stay tuned.
- Presbyterian Welcome will co-sponsor, with Planned Parenthood of New York City, a program on “Talking With Your Children About Sex.” Details forthcoming.
- Presbyterian Welcome Worship and Communion Service: Celebrating Family. With Derrick McQueen, Presbyterian Welcome Board Member, Preaching. Tuesday, October 23, 6:30 PM, Second Presbyterian Church (95th Street and Central Park West). Join us!
- The Board of Directors has nominated our Faithful Servant for the year. We are pleased to announce that Takako Terino will be celebrated for her committed service to GLBT people, especially in the Presbyterian Church. We will also celebrate a Public Servant this year—but that is a surprise! We will gather the evening of November 27 at Rutgers Presbyterian Church. Mark your calendars!

Of the retreat for LGBTQ Inquires and Candidates for Ministry of Word and Sacrament, one of the participants said to me, "It was a really positive experience for me, and just about everything about it was new to me. I had never been around so many queer folks, never been a part of a group of people all called to ministry – I had never even been to summer camp."

I laughed at her reference to summer camp, but she was right. For me the retreat was like all the redemptive parts of camp. We didn't make lanyards out of leather cord, or baskets out of birch bark, there weren't any pranks or practical jokes – nobody's underwear was hung on a pole and nobody's bed was short-sheeted – nobody failed the swimming safety test, -- there wasn't one, and there weren't any really big bugs. There was a lot of laughter, lots of time to talk with each other, walks in the woods, a cook-out, late evening hours spent around the badly tuned piano singing old hymns, and even s'mores over a campfire. What's more, there was Bible study, there was worship, and there was prayer.

You might have expected something different with a group of transgender, gay, lesbian and bisexual candidates and inquirers all called to serve a church which has refused to openly welcome their gifts. You might have expected that there would have been a lot of time spent strategizing about how to negotiate through the very thorny candidacy process, with discrete discussions about church politics and the art of compromise. You might have guessed that there would have been a lot of attention given to some of the finer points of Presbyterian polity and judicatory procedures. These being Presbyterian candidates and inquirers, you might have expected that they would have structured their time together in to a series of meetings, with defined agendas and measurable outcomes. These being LGBTQ candidates and inquirers you might have expected that there would be a certain amount of bitterness, frustration, anger and anxiety expressed throughout the weekend.

Well, maybe those are some of the things I expected, but the weekend didn't unfold that way at all. Mostly it was Bible study, worship, prayer, laughter, conversation, and time to rest. And it was

one of the most powerful experiences I've had in a very long time. What's more, I think everyone left with a deeper confidence about making their way through the candidacy process, with a greater sense of peace about discerning their own calls, and with the absolute certainty that they would have help and support along the way. Maybe we would have come away with the same sense of confidence, peace and community if we had spent our time in meetings and strategy sessions, but somehow I don't think so.

There are a few churches I know of, some of them are even Presbyterian, that devote a whole lot of time to worship, prayer, Bible study and fellowship, and very little to business and decision making. These churches have discovered the inverse relationship between worship and administration – that the more time you give to worship, the less time you'll need to take care of business. These faith communities have discovered that decisions come easier, tensions are eased more quickly, conflicts are resolved more readily the more that time and focus are given to worship, prayer, Bible study, laughter and conversation. Most of us know instinctively that this is true, but most of us, perhaps myself especially, are still reluctant to do something so bold as structure our meeting agendas with, say, 90 minutes given to worship and fellowship, and 15 for finalizing decisions.

Studying Scripture, spending time in prayer, beginning and ending each day with worship, singing together, and enjoying one another's company were the simple ingredients that made up the weekend for the 20 of us who came together as queer Presbyterians seeking to follow a call to ministry. Worship, prayer, laughter, conversation were what formed us in to community and gave us clarity, purpose and renewed energy for the work ahead of us. As we work together to transform our church, maybe we'll find that the more we devote our time and energy to worship and prayer, the easier and more effective our work will be. Maybe this can be our gift to each other. Maybe this can be our gift to the church.

Lisa is the incoming Minister Director of That All May Freely Serve National. She has been a Candidate for Ministry since 1985, for 22 years.

The Fear in Fellowship

“Thou shalt love thy neighbor as thyself”

Meg Harper

Living in New York City involves a constant internal dialogue of negotiation as we encounter people on the street or in the subway every day in need of help. My own dialogue is generally pretty brief, as I hand out change in some irrational amount; of course never enough to really make much of a difference to my own bank account or to the person to whom I am giving. I am often struck by the generosity of people on the subway who clearly have less than I do. They are the ones who pull \$ out of their pockets and give with a smile. The story I want to tell you is slightly different, but involves a similar principle—holding on to one’s own agenda as opposed to opening up to any disturbance that may cause one to change course, even for a moment. The larger questions I raise concern what Jesus was asking us to do with his radical instruction, “thou shalt love thy neighbor as thyself”. How far are we to go? What kinds of “boundary lines” do we need to cross to live out his message and teaching? Is it out of reach to even consider attempting to “walk in his footsteps”? What is the fear that makes it so difficult to recognize need, let alone to act?

The Saturday after Good Friday, Holy Saturday, I found myself going the “wrong way” on the Q Train. I slipped into the train at the last minute, not realizing it was going uptown from 14th Street. I was heading home to Brooklyn and had been traveling for the last two hours on public transportation contentedly reading. Absorption in my book led to taking this train going uptown. I was comfortably seated when I noticed a man lying on the floor. He had clearly been there for a while, with his clothes in disarray, but there was no obvious conclusion to reach about his situation unless one checked

closer. This time, without much delay, I did just that. I say this time, because of course, how many times has it happened before? For me, it has happened one too many times. The last time was several years ago, on an N train to Brooklyn, when I did nothing. The shadow of that experience has haunted me, suggesting that I think about the consequences of doing nothing, doing something.

I knelt down to where I could see the man’s face and to see if he had a health issue. He didn’t respond to my voice or my touch. “He’s a drunk, forget about it.” That was what I began hearing from various voices as people moved to give me room. Actually, I was asking for their help. “Can someone help me get this man upright?” I asked in an even but urgent tone. The train was now approaching 34th Street, and people moved to the door to exit, some laughing, others clearly relieved to be leaving.

This was Holy Saturday, the day after Good Friday when we had listened for three hours to sermons on the Last Words of Christ. I had felt so overwhelmed, so extremely sad. How could I not at least attempt to do something? The fact was, I needed help and none appeared forthcoming. The man did not appear to be ill, but he definitely needed help. No one was responding to my plea. Instead, now between 34th and 42nd with some slowing down due to traffic, the faces of my fellow passengers seemed to take on strange contortions as they explained away their own reticence to help

As we reached 42nd Street, many people got out. By now, I realized that this Q train would stop at 57th, and I would have a chance to

get to the conductor’s car before it started up again, heading downtown. Two young women made some suggestions, clearly wanting to do something, but uncomfortable and remaining at a distance. The more time that passed, the more suggestions I heard of what I could do to help this person.

After I found the conductor, and the EMS took the man off the train, I took a Q train downtown, heading home to Brooklyn, reflecting on this strange experience. The resonance of the refusal to help a stranger, with both me and the man still on the floor, was filling me with questions about my own behavior and the larger issues of love, compassion, boundaries, the fear of fellowship. I had done practically nothing, but it was something. It took much less of my time than the telling of it here. I was trying to imagine what the experience had felt like to my fellow passengers. I was recalling the time when I did nothing, thinking about how much of a jolt it takes to get me out of my rhythm, my absorption, my agenda, to respond to something that might make no apparent difference in the world.

I am haunted by the reluctance I still have to engage in “acts of kindness” which might involve more than time and money. I remain with the same questions- How does one take the fear out of fellowship? How do we awaken ourselves to cross boundary lines? Perhaps one can grow incrementally closer to opening up the barriers of resistance by facing them with prayer. A Zen proverb that I try to live with may also be of help: “No Expectations, No Blame, Do Something.”

Meg Harper is the Administrative Assistant for Presbyterian Welcome and is a Deacon at First Presbyterian Church in the City of New York.

Our Mission

Presbyterian Welcome, a validated ministry, is a community of congregations and individuals in the New York area. Our mission is to build up and repair the Body of Christ by working for the full inclusion of all disciples, without regard to sexual orientation and gender identity.

In being a resource for the church we aim to:

- Provide leadership and education for the exploration of human sexuality in a theological framework;
- Reform the Church constitution to remove barriers to inclusion;
- Raise awareness, encourage discipleship and promote welcome in local congregations;
- Witness to God's faithfulness for those who face difficulty in responding to God's call;
- Join in partnerships with like-minded organizations to accomplish these goals.

Our 18 Supporting Congregations

- The Brick Presbyterian
- Broadway Presbyterian
- Central Presbyterian
- First Presbyterian, Brooklyn
- The First Presbyterian Church in the City of New York
- The Church of Gethsemane
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