

Presbyterian Welcome



Spring Newsletter
2009

Commentary posted online at www.pres-outlook.org

(For more information on the history and basics of Amendment B, go to www.presbyterianwelcome.org)

I was five when I was baptized. I don't know why they waited, but one Sunday my parents took me and my little brother to the local Presbyterian Church. I vividly remember standing in front of the congregation, excited, knowing something very special was happening but entirely unsure of what it was. An elder from the Session gave us each a tiny embroidered rainbow as a reminder of God's Covenant. It still hangs in my childhood room in my parents' home.

I think back to that day and know that my parents, my pastor, and the congregation wanted the best for both of us; lives of grace and knowledge that in Christ we would find life abundant. I think back to that day and give thanks to God for it, for the strength that it still gives me, and for all that my home congregation taught me, for the ways that they showed me how to be a Christian and to discern God's direction for my life. I think back to that day and doubt that anyone was thinking about what my sexual orientation would turn out to be, or my brother's for that matter. Christ's love and seal on our lives was definitive, claimed, and expressed. I would come to stand before that congregation many more times—to light the Christ Candle on Christmas Eve, to be Confirmed, to lead prayers and vesper services, to preach on Youth Sunday, to be ordained a Deacon.

I was baptized around the time that the debates about the ordination of faithful gay and lesbian Presbyterians began. My family was oblivious to those debates. No one that day

had any idea the church would spend more than the next thirty years wrestling with this issue. No one had any idea that the children they were baptizing would grow up and identify themselves differently: one as a lesbian, the other as a heterosexual. No one had any idea the impact the church's debate would have on my life and call to ordained ministry.

And no one could possibly have predicted the swell inside my heart that would come at our 218th General Assembly this past June. Everyone I talked to felt that that GA had caught the wind of the Spirit and something very exciting was taking place. I felt again the enormous trust and pride that I knew as a child. It was challenging—it always is—and rewarding. The conversation felt different, as did the exchange and the connections with people, and what the Assembly chose to do. It felt like the decades of debate and discernment and, yes, rancor and division, were coming to fruition. I had the hope that as a church we could listen to what the Assembly did—the spirit of it even more than the votes. I wondered: Could we, the presbyteries and congregations back home, away from the glow, be as open as they were?

The meeting in San Jose inspired in me anew the quest to really live out Christian fellowship in a deeper way. I want to know you. And I want you to know me. I want to hear your faith journey and to tell you mine.

I have faithfully accepted the votes of the GA over the years. I have worked, prayed, talked

with others, and leaned heavily upon the Holy Spirit to get through years when I felt certain decisions like heavy weights on the backs of my lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgendered brothers and sisters in Christ. And I will continue to do so. I have come to expect the same of you. Every time we have before us a vote from the GA, we have the opportunity to listen, pray, and act.

At times I have felt like quitting.

When I see people with enormous gifts of the Spirit tamped down, I cry. When I counsel people with clear gifts for a life as clergy as they cry and wonder in disbelief at how they are excluded, I am frustrated. And when I say goodbye to yet another person whose call to serve is too great to be put on hold as they leave our denomination, I get angry.

But I left San Jose with great hope—hope that the lives of all those who have put their ministerial gifts on hold could let go and take flight now. Hope that those who have comforted their sons and daughters, brothers and sisters, mentors and students, friends and partners, when they have found their call thwarted by the church, could now rejoice with them that the church would let them answer that call. Hope that in the debates and arguments and reasons and justifications offered up that everyone—everyone—would understand that we are dealing with real people in real lives and that every hand raised in yea or nay would really know the very real lives that rest in the balance. ●

by The Rev. Mieke Vandersall

The Ol' Ark's A-Moverin'

by Paul Mowry

"The Ol' Ark's A-Moverin', a-moverin', a-moverin'; The ol' ark's a-moverin' and I'm going home..." My mom would break into the refrain from this 1939 gospel song whenever big changes were appearing in someone's life. Well, she's singing now!

The Western North Carolina Presbytery (WNC), just voted in support of the current proposed constitutional amendment to allow partnered gay clergy. It was surprising, significant, and substantial. This turnaround comes after more than a decade of support for the church's policy that requires ministers "to live either in fidelity within the covenant of marriage between a man and a woman, or chastity in singleness."

In 2001, WNC voted against a constitutional amendment by 100-166. They made

history on January 31, 2009, by voting in favor of the new amendment that allows partnered gay clergy 144-108, a 57% margin.

In another turnaround, Lake Huron Presbytery also changed its voting record, voting for equality by 57%. Members of the Presbytery voted 43-32 in favor of the new amendment, a significant change from its 2001 vote of 42-64

The excitement so many felt at the General Assembly in San Jose last year—that the church was living into a new era of its vision, mission and call—are feeling the Spirit moving again. Even the conservative Presbyterian publication, *The Layman*, is predicting that if other presbyteries that kept the status quo by 30 or fewer votes in 2001 also decide to change in favor of

the new wording, the hurdle for Lesbian and Gay people seeking ordination will be removed by an overall vote of 96-77. Many Presbyteries will vote by the end of February but the final decision will be announced shortly after May 18.

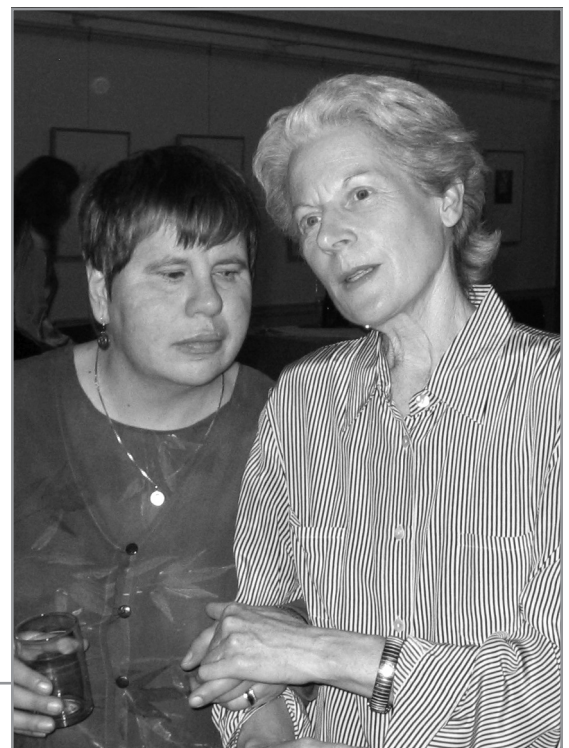
Pack your bags, Mom. A lifetime Presbyterian since her baptism in 1921, she considers herself a Presbyterian-in-Exile, having tired after thirty-some years of the church's lack of acceptance. She may well be "going home" any day now!

Since this has been written, votes continue to be cast and other presbyteries have "switched" since 2001, including East Tennessee and Cimmarron.

Keep track of the voting by visiting www.presbyterianwelcome.org and www.1000conversations.org.

After four years of faithful service to Presbyterian Welcome, Meg Harper has transitioned out of her role as our Administrative Assistant to pursue her study and teaching of tai chi. While Meg's steady and kind presence at Presbyterian Welcome can never be replaced, our very able and smart Director of Communications, Meagan Manis, has taken over her responsibilities. Meg came to us and has helped to stabilize the office, a steady and consistent voice, always passionate about our work and ready to help in any way possible. We give thanks for Meg's presence and will miss her.

Photo: Lisa Larges (left) and Meg Harper





Presbyterian Welcome's Board of Directors

Join us in worship!

Monday, March 9, 2009 • 6:30 PM

First Presbyterian Church in the City of New York

12 West 12th Street and 5th Avenue

Preaching: Lisa Larges from *That All May Freely Serve*

For more information:

www.presbyterianwelcome.org • 917-441-8638

Crawling Through Thorns

by John Sam Jones

I grew up during the 60s and 70s in a small town nestled between the Irish Sea and the Rhinog mountains in Wales. My family have lived in that community for many generations; hard-working, Welsh-speaking, and solidly Presbyterian. The town was a summer holiday resort that had seen better days, but life still seemed spit into two; the three-month-long season and nine months when nothing much happened. Both my parents were second children. When they were growing up education had to be paid for and in poor families it was only the first child who was afforded the opportunity. My father was apprenticed to an electrician at 15 and my mother went 'into service'—working as a maid.

Realizing that I was a homosexual at the age of 11 or 12 wasn't easy. In the late 1960s in Britain, homosexuality was barely talked about—unless in hushed tones and with distaste. All I knew about homosexuals what I'd read in newspaper reports—about men being arrested for improper behavior, and the word 'homosexual' was always accompanied by words like unstable, alcoholic, sinful, sick, criminal... Through my adolescence I yearned to be different—to ne 'normal'. All of this yearning was hidden; homosexuality caused me such feelings of shame and guilt that I became intensely secretive.

The clash of religion, culture and sexuality in my sense of identity became intense by the time I was 18 and I suffered depression and an eventual breakdown. As the only alternative to suicide, a journey of more honest self-discovery began.

Thirty years later, *Crawling Through Thorns* describes that journey—from Wales to California - in the terrain where the powerful forces of sexuality, faith, religion and culture collide. The Welsh Book Council has described the novel in this way:

'...a book that refuses to be pigeon-holed: it reads like memoir, is presented as fiction ('but a true story, nevertheless') and offers a critique of society's changing attitudes towards the gay community from the 1960s to the present day. It is a brave and often shocking book, whose flashback structure generously softens the pain... *Crawling through Thorns* is the story not just of a personal quest for honesty and openness, but also of a society having to confront its fears and prejudices. Highlighting the difference between the toxic shame delivered upon the oppressed and the real shame that should be felt by the oppressors, it is a challenging and compulsive read—often harrowing but ultimately uplifting.'



Crawling Through Thorns is now available in the United States and Canada and I trust that it will offer a valuable resource during this time of 'Conversations'.

John Sam Jones
Llandecwyn, Wales.
January 2009.

Crawling Through Thorns
Parthian Books
ISBN 978-1-905762-36-1
Also available on Amazon

Vision of Presbyterian Welcome

As followers of Christ, convinced by Scripture and the Reformed tradition, we envision a world as inclusive as God's grace and a church where God's call to service is affirmed in all persons.

Mission of Presbyterian Welcome

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 20 Supporting Congregations

The Presbyterian Church of Astoria
The Brick Presbyterian Church
Broadway Presbyterian Church
Central Presbyterian Church
Fifth Avenue Presbyterian Church
First Presbyterian Church of Brooklyn
The First Presbyterian Church in the City of New York
The Church of Gethsemane
Jan Hus Presbyterian Church
Lafayette Avenue Presbyterian Church
Nauraushaun Presbyterian Church
Palisades Presbyterian Church
Riverdale Presbyterian Church
Rutgers Presbyterian Church
Second Presbyterian Church
St. James Presbyterian Church
South Presbyterian Church
Union Church of Bay Ridge
Trinity Presbyterian Church
West Park Presbyterian Church

Presbyterian
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