

Presbyterian Promise News

Issue Number 21
September 2007

Contents

- ♦ Making Welcome Real
 - ♦ Letty Russell
- ♦ Letty Remembered
- ♦ The Marriage Thing
- ♦ Invoking God's Blessing
 - ♦ Bring Us Together
 - ♦ Calendar
- ♦ Celebration in the Round

Making Welcome Real

A weekend with Michael Adee

It's been a while! Presbyterian Promise was founded, back in 1999, by the efforts of a group of More Light Presbyterians seeking to combine the efforts of their organization with those of That All May Freely Serve. Our ties to TAMFS grew deep and firm but it has been a while since the MLP dimension has been visibly present here in Southern New England.

That will change the last weekend in September. Michael Adee, National Field Organizer for More Light Presbyterians, will be here in Connecticut. See the Calendar for times and places.

His time with us will focus on building community and creating welcoming, vibrant communities in our churches. It will include opportunities for small group discussion as well as worship. Michael brings stories and experiences from all over the country, filtered through his passionate, humorous and gentle style. Your time with him will be filled with learning and inspiration.

Michael has been working in the LGBT community and the HIV-AIDS community since 1988. A human rights/gay activist and an educator, Michael works for the full inclusion of lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender persons in society and in faith communities. He began his work as the National Field Organizer for More Light Presbyterians in 1999.

He has served as a college professor, a hospital and hospice chaplain, bereavement counselor, campus minister, diversity consultant, tennis coach and a teacher/relief worker in Zimbabwe, Africa.

Having been fired from his university teaching job at Northern Kentucky University for starting a LGBT Student Group on campus, he is the only person to have filed a grievance based upon sexual orientation in the history of that university. By bringing this grievance to the federal level, the Office of Civil Rights, US Department of Higher Education, Michael offered a challenge to

the injustice faced by LGBT persons. During this period, Michael became the first openly gay Elder, at Mt. Auburn Presbyterian Church, Cincinnati, and the first openly gay Elder in Ohio. As an out gay athlete, he competed in tennis in the last four Gay Games, most recently in Chicago where he was a silver medalist, and in the World OutGames in Montreal, winning a bronze medal.

Join us in welcoming this passionate and prophetic man to Connecticut.

Dick Hasbany

Letty Russell

1929 – 2007

The news of Letty Russell's death came too soon. Of course, I had been preparing for such news for quite some time. Letty's health had failed so, but she had kept on keeping on. Even as I write, it is hard for me to imagine a world, a Presbyterian Church, a New Haven region, a feminist community, without her.

I first met Letty in the pages of her books, assigned to me by my theology professor, Beverly Harrison, while I was a student at Union Theological Seminary. Letty's writings were required reading for all of us, women and men, as we opened ourselves to this still fairly new thing called feminist theology. It was 1982, and Letty's book, *Becoming Human*, was no less than revolutionary.

I had heard a lot about Letty. She herself was a Union alumnae, and had for many years served a church in one of New York City's poorest neighborhoods. Then, as she would her whole life long, she modeled a way of being church, not just doing church. In our feminist theology classes we would sit in small groups, talk, ask questions, report back what we knew to be true. Those classes,



modeled on Letty's understanding of feminist pedagogy, taught me not only how to talk the talk, but how to walk the talk of a feminist model for the church.

I saw her for the first time at the Re-Imagining conference in Minneapolis... a conference that turned the church on its head and made clear that women's voices in the church were here to stay. After one afternoon plenary conversation, as an act of courage and rebellion, a group of women identifying themselves as lesbians entered the conference hall carrying a huge rainbow flag. They walked under that flag, all the way around the room, inviting any who would stand in solidarity with the LGBT community to join them.

I noticed a gray haired woman walking side by side with the other women, calling me to join them. "That's Letty Russell," I was told. That was all I needed to join the parade.

It would be years later, upon moving to New Haven in 1998, that I would finally meet Letty face to face. We met at Yale Divinity School. It was the day of YDS's convocation, the day before classes would begin. The faculty, in their finest academic robes, line up in the hall outside Marquand Chapel in order to process in. I spotted Letty as she adjusted her robe. My friend, Grace, said, "Maria you need to meet Letty. Now is as good a time as ever."

So, in the midst of the academic procession, Grace introduced me to Letty. "Maria," Letty said, "I heard you moved to town. We have got great work to do together. Come to my class on Thursday afternoon and we will talk."

And I did. Thirteen years out of seminary and I was finally meeting Letty. It was a magical moment, meeting the woman who had so shaped my own identity as a feminist pastor and prophet.

And, Letty did put me to work. Her first challenge to me was to get involved in the work of what is now known as Presbyterian Promise. We held meetings, we dreamed dreams, we talked and envisioned what kind of presence

the Presbytery of Southern New England needed to help bring about justice for the LGBT community.

We were a fledgling group, but with Letty's church in the round style of leadership, we found our voice and our mission. Letty and I served as co-moderators, working with others to invite churches into the conversation, to affirm those who were moving toward inclusivity, to chal-

lenge those who refused.

Our work together did not end with the creation of Presbyterian Promise, of course. There were divinity school students to work with, there were new articles to read, there were Shalom meals to celebrate. With Letty, work never really ends. There is always another challenge, another joy, just ahead.

What Letty has done will be told in memory of her ... again and again. Those of us lucky and blessed enough to have known and loved her, to have been taught by her and to teach at her side, to have eaten at her table, and laughed, plotted and strategized with Letty Russell, must now put on her mantle of justice-making and get back to work. After all, we still have great work to do together.

Maria LaSala

Letty Remembered

Letty Russell was a part of Presbyterian Promise from our beginning. Indeed, she had been working with the Southern New England MLP group even as we were beginning to develop the idea for Presbyterian Promise. Along with Wayne Osborne, she was our first co-moderator. She energized us during those critical first years, and more to the point, kept us on track.

I remember a hot July 3rd picnic at Pat Wales' house in 1999. Wayne presented a draft plan for us, including a mission statement. Letty gently, but firmly, reminded us that God's love is always accompanied by God's justice. The two are inseparable. That's why both are in our present vision statement.

Despite her extensive teaching and travels, Letty made almost every board meeting during the three years she served. She kept us focused, and honest.

She challenged us – and the movement – to be more visible. She asked how we were witnessing, how we were reminding people that people were hurting even as we do our business as usual. I'm afraid we have yet to fully achieve this hope of hers here in PSNE.

In the fall of 2001, the year she "retired" from the Yale Divinity School faculty, she opened her course in "Liberation Theology" to the community. During the first meeting we spent time discussing whether it should be called (A) Queer Theology, or (B) Readings in Liberation Theology (which should be acceptable on academic transcripts), or (C) GLBT Liberation Theology. You choose! The reading list for the course, with some minor additions, is on the Presbyterian Promise website.

In the fall of 2002, Letty, inspired by the travels of Janie, Michael and others, led us on road trips to several

<u>Member Churches</u>
Crossroads Presbyterian Church Waterford CT
First Presbyterian Church Hartford CT
First Presbyterian Church New Haven CT
First Presbyterian Church Stamford CT
Providence Presbyterian Church Providence RI
Wilton Presbyterian Church Wilton CT

of our welcoming and inquiring churches – including Wilton, West Hartford, New Canaan and Providence.

And in the November 2003 Presbyterian Promise News, Letty wrote about marriage, that most tortured institution:

Much theological reflection is needed to transform our liturgies into covenant blessings.... Perhaps this new look will help the wrongs of our present practices become a right. Along the way, ... the witness of the many queer folk to the meaning of partnership may lead us on a path that is a blessing for all!" [The full article is on our website.]

At a press conference after she received the 1999 Women of Faith Award she shared with Janie Spahr and Jane Dempsey Douglass, "Russell said she finds the most hope in the congregations and communities of the church. 'People are often way ahead of the national leaders and organizations,' she said. 'Hope is the strength to make change.'" [General Assembly News, June 20, 1999] That hope and that challenge are still with us!

Ralph Jones

The Marriage Thing

What's left to be said? In this presbytery we have churches in a state (Massachusetts) where the civil definition of marriage includes people of the same sex. We have churches in a state (Connecticut) which does not allow two people of the same sex to marry, but does provide them with Civil Unions. And we have a state (Rhode Island) that so far does neither of the above, but does recognize the marriages that happen in Massachusetts (which is only different in that until recently they only recognized those marriages when they were between people of different sexes).

So a gay couple, married in Massachusetts, would remain married if they visited Rhode Island, but not if they drive through Connecticut. And if they were "Civil Unionized" in Connecticut, would that count in MA or RI? What about Vermont? And what about hospital visitation, or parenting of children or inheritance should those issues arise?

Are you confused? What is marriage, anyway?

- "a gift God has given to all humankind" W-4.9000
- "a civil contract between a man and a woman" W-4.9000
- "A service of worship recognizing a civil marriage and confirming it in the community of faith..." W-4.9006
- Something else
- All of the above

There are at least three definitional perspectives given in our *Book of Order*. Not to mention that among its many characteristics, marriage is very personal. Given that it is also the most interpersonal aspect of human experience, that too, is somewhat strange. Yet when you get into the discussion, there is very little agreement about what marriage is – even among spouses. Let's not mention the Roman Church and the conservative perspectives!

At least this much can be said. If the church were to be true to its assertion (of long standing) that marriage is a civil contract, it would follow that when the state permits marriage between people of the same sex then the church should also. That would go a long way toward reducing the injustice in G-6.0106b. The choices would then be, equally for all, marriage or celibacy.

Then there's the question, in a country where church and state are supposed to be separate, why clergy are empowered to act as civil servants, recording some of the most numerous and most complicated of legal contracts. Perhaps there is justice in the "European" system where civil marriage is established separately from religious observance.

Polity

Janie Spahr has been through a trial in Redwoods Presbytery because she has performed weddings of people of the same sex. She won the case before her Presbytery's Permanent Judicial Commission, but lost the appeal to the Synod Commission. The case will likely now go to the General Assembly PJC.

Janie has argued that the church cannot prohibit the recognition of the relationships which God has given people and that it is part of her ministerial responsibility to lead the worship recognizing these realities. The marriages were performed in places where same sex marriage was recognized.

What Next?

At some point, the PC USA should change its *Book of Order* to reflect the justice and love in the partnership of two people of whatever gender. The question is how to bring this about. Do people of faith wait to follow changes in civil law? Do we hope that the issue is joined through church discipline – the church's courts? Do we, or some other presbytery, overture for a change in our polity? How should that read?

Much prayer, discussion and compassionate listening are needed to answer these and the many other related questions. But the issue will not go away. Indeed, it is already joined here in the Presbytery of Southern New England.

Ralph Jones

Invoking God's Blessing

[This interview with Professor Wayne Meeks was the basis for an article which appeared in Christian Network Journal, which has now ceased publication.]

Question: The topic of gay marriage is really comprised of two separate issues. First is whether to grant full and equal civil rights to same-sex couples (civil unions) and the second is whether to grant spiritual/biblical blessing to that union (gay marriage). One is a state (civil) issue and the other is a church (spiritual) issue, but the two have become tangled together as one in the midst of this debate. What is, in light of this co-mingling of civil and religious domains, the appropriate Christian response to the question of whether homosexuals should be allowed to marry?

Wayne: Christians should be thanking God that loving couples, whether gay, lesbian, or straight, are still eager to make the kind of commitment that marriage entails – despite many pressures in our society to the contrary.

There are good and bad reasons why the two issues you rightly distinguish are all mixed up in the current debate. The good reason is that our deepest beliefs about what is real and what is right are bound to influence our actions in the civil state, and rightly so. The bad reason is that we all harbor the notion that the world would be better if everyone else were just like us (a really silly notion, when we stop to think about it), and when we can't persuade everybody else that we're right, we try to coerce them.

More and more of our citizens are convinced that the same legal and economic rights and privileges that society accords to married heterosexual couples should also, as a matter of simple justice, be accorded to same-sex couples. I agree, and I believe that eventually this viewpoint will prevail. In time, then, assuming that our society remains ultimately committed to democratic process, I expect that same-sex civil unions will be legally recognized throughout the U. S. I think that is a good thing. Despite the difficulties that attend every marriage and the abuses to which marriage is sometimes subject, I still believe it to be a good and important institution – too good to be restricted to those of us who happen to be heterosexual.

The state, of course, cannot legislate whether religious communities must approve every form of relationship that is legal, although it can and should prevent religious communities from extending their peculiar convictions into the civic domain in ways that result in injustices or harm to others – as in the case of racial discrimination, for example, or the abuse of children.

We are left, then, with the question whether Christian churches ought to approve and even to perform marriages

between persons of the same sex. Here opinions are going to diverge quite sharply, for the several Christian denominations have evolved quite varied practices of decision-making and quite different modes of authority. As a conservative Christian of the Reformed tradition, I personally believe that those churches which wish to be faithful to the strongest and best of our own tradition, including those ways of hearing God speak God's word through scripture which we have learned from that tradition, ought thankfully to welcome couples of the same sex who come determined to enter the bonds of holy matrimony. Through their liturgical offices, the churches should invoke God's blessing on those couples' vows of union.

*Wayne A. Meeks
Woolsey Professor Emeritus of Biblical Studies
Department of Religious Studies Yale University*

Bring Us Together

Presbyterian Promise works to Nurture the Movement

A few weeks ago Presbyterian Promise, in partnership with Plowshares Institute, submitted its first-ever grant proposal. It went to the Carpenter Foundation, whose varied interests include projects related to theological education and the furthering of LGBT persons' rights. We requested funding to support a facilitated strategy summit that will bring together leaders from the Presbyterian LGBT advocacy groups. The goal is to nurture our groups' common vision and respectful cooperation as a next step in developing nuanced, short and long term strategies for the 2008 General Assembly and beyond. We believe that moving the 2.5 million member PC USA in the direction of acceptance and inclusion is possible and the impact of doing so is significant.

The idea of a facilitated summit is simple, profoundly timely, and necessary for our movement. Our hope is to bring together leaders of That All May Freely Serve, More Light Presbyterians, and the Covenant Network of Presbyterians. We will invite our progressive ally, the Witherpoon Society, to the table too. As friends working in our separate organizations in the inclusion movement, we have shared deep personal affection and have agreed that we must end the mistreatment and exclusion of faithful, qualified LGBT people from the full life and witness of this church. As individuals and organizations, though, we have not agreed on how to do this. Furthermore, we have not always been gentle with each other. In retrospect it seems that we may have missed discerning how our approaches were complementary rather than opposed to each other, and we may have missed opportunities to be more effective.

Our founding principles tell us that Jesus is Lord of the conscience. That is the foundation of our individual faith and the test of our personal integrity. It is in light of the personal encounter with Christ and consequent convictions that we bring all we know and are as individuals to community encounters for the discernment and embodiment of God's grace and will. The tension between conscience and community living is probably common to all people, but it is central to who we are as Presbyterians. What a challenge it is to bring our deepest knowledge of Christ to the discussions of human need and to temper (to compromise!) our certainties with compassion, love and forbearance. Perhaps we experience intensity and certainty as human; compassion, forbearance, and love seem to come as gifts of grace. It's our challenge as Presbyterians, and our heritage, to cherish and prayerfully labor for compassion, forbearance, and love as well as for the intensity. All this is to say that the focused facilitation provided by Plowshares Institute is central to the proposed summit. One of the lessons we've learned here in the Reconciling Dialogue Project is that third party facilitation can enable the parties to nurture not only some sophisticated skills, but also the trust, compassion, and forbearance needed to develop together a vision and strategy for the long-term.

The past year or so, the context in which our summit will happen, has been a mixed experience for LGBT people in Christ's church. The Synod of the Pacific's Permanent Judicial Commission used a narrow interpretation of faithfulness and a limited concept of pastoring when they ruled recently on Janie Spahr's officiating at two same-gender marriage ceremonies. The decision was especially disappointing after the prophetic ruling of the Presbytery of the Redwood's PJC – a ruling that seemed to understand and support the centrality of life-affirming and pastoral Christian ministry.

On a more positive note though, our General Assembly's equivalent body in the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (ELCA) voted to encourage its bishops to refrain from and demonstrate restraint in the discipline of ministers in committed, same-gender relationships. The ELCA's policy prohibiting loving and committed, same-gender relationships does remain in effect. Nonetheless, Emily Eastwood, Executive Director of the advocacy group Lutherans Concerned, was pleased: "We see this decision as interim. Full inclusion and acceptance is still down the road, but the dam of discrimination has been broken. This is a great day for LGBT clergy who will walk into their pulpits tomorrow knowing perhaps for the first time that this church values their gifts for ministry more than the policy that would exclude them."

Our minds and hearts know that the ELCA's position really doesn't make much sense. Exclusion and the injus-

tice are still the policy. Our consciences cry out that the policy is as wrong as it has ever been. Yet I cannot help but see the spirit working in a most mysterious way in the ELCA stance and rejoice somehow in this new impossible contradiction. It is, in a way, similar to the schizophrenic contradiction in our last General Assembly's raising up the use of scruples and embracing the spirit of the Peace, Unity, and Purity Task Force report. The action left exclusion as policy but urged a new culture in Christ for us, one based in restraint and hope that our everlasting intense and loving dialogue would move us beyond fear to a stronger sense of the spirit working in all of us.

So, our proposal goes out in a very complex and ambiguous context. The foundation will make its decision in December, and we hope to hold the summit in late winter, well before the General Assembly, June 2008. We are hopeful about the chances for this proposal, but we also feel that a facilitated strategy summit is so important that we are seeking alternative ways to make sure it takes place whatever the foundation's funding decision. We need to nurture our movement into something more cooperative, compassionate, and wise so that it can be an effective witness to the justness of our goal and the depth of our love for each other. We pray that the entire movement will be able next June to echo Emily Eastwood's recent words, "the dam of discrimination has been broken." Whatever progress we make, whether it is an incremental step or a great leap to the Promised Land, we will be thankful for it.

Dick Hasbany

National Welcoming and Affirming Conference, August 31 – September 2, North Decatur, Georgia

I had the privilege of attending the annual More Light Presbyterians Conference which was held in the land of Dixie last week and wanted to tell you about the highlights. (Presbyterian Promise not only had a display there but also contributed financially towards the conference.) My sister, Ginny, also went (she's from North Carolina) so it was great to spend time together.

Overall I found the conference very educational and inspiring, especially for someone such as me who has not been as active in the cause in recent years as I had been. It was heartwarming to hear about all the small and large ways LGBT equality in the PC USA is being moved forward, even though it sometimes does not feel that way!

I learned how much education is available to those of us who may be too shy to admit we don't know as much as we would like about some of the issues. MLP has clear,

straightforward and concise handouts about various topics such as bisexuality, transgender, intersex, sexual ethics, legal cases' status, marriage vs. civil union, PFLAG, the meaning of the words "more light", dealing with church fights, spiritual nurture for the fight, and more. You can visit their web site to obtain most of these educational handouts for use in your church or spiritual group.

Some other items which caught my attention were, worship services and workshops. The workshops I attended were on "Re-Imagining Theology", "Parents and Family Stories" and "Marriage Matters." We all learned about the new civil rights initiative by MLP called "PEP" (Presbyterian Equality Project" which will lend the religious-LGBT voice to state and federal movements for equality (especially marriage) and social witness. PEP is exciting, as it is a recognition that we in this movement are not limited to a one-note song (the church) but have the ability, and responsibility, to also press for the continual expansion of civil rights in our country and world. We can "walk and chew gum at the same time!" A cosponsor for the conference was the Human Rights Campaign; I had not known that this world wide, non-church related, gay rights organization had a component addressing LGBT life in religious organizations and spirituality. I also learned that Walter Wink has an updated version of his great pamphlet, "Homosexuality and the Bible" (the old version has a green cover, the new has a blue cover.) It adds a section on civil unions/marriage and a general lamentation over the acrimonious atmosphere surrounding these issues in the Christian church generally.

Several persons at the conference remembered Letty Russell fondly, as well as Tom Otte. We all affirmed that there is "No Turning Back" from the road to full ordination equality and marriage equality.

Barbara Hager

Calendar

Michael Adee Weekend

Join us for one or all of these events with Michael Adee, M.Div., Ph.D., National Field Organizer, More Light Presbyterians.

Saturday, September 29

10:00 – 1:00

Presbyterian Promise Board Meeting, First Presbyterian

Church, Hartford, 136 Capitol Ave. The board will be joined by Michael Adee, and a light lunch will be served. Non-board members are welcome, but RSVP is required. Please call either the church (860) 246-



2224 or Dick Hasbany (203) 777-4579.

Sunday, September 30 -- A Day with Michael Adee in Hartford and New Haven

Sunday Morning at First Presbyterian Church, 136 Capitol Avenue, Hartford, CT. For more information about any of the following events, call the church at (860) 246-2224

9:15-10:15 – **Adult Forum** (conversation with Michael)

10:30-11:30 – **Worship.** Michael will preach.
Sermon title: "Being Family, Being Church"

Following worship join us for a **Church and Community picnic** on the church grounds – open to everyone. If you can join, please email revtdavis@sbcglobal.net or call 860 246-2224. There is no charge for the event. Those who wish may contribute at the time of the event or by using special envelopes available in the sanctuary. Special invitations have been extended to two Churches to join us for all or part of the day – Hartford's Metropolitan Community Church, a member of Center City Churches, and Amistad Church UCC, a predominantly Afro American inclusive Church, whose pastor, Bishop John Selders, is the presiding Bishop the Council of Bishops and Elders of inclusive Churches. Please join members of First Presbyterian Church and two other welcoming churches for a time of fellowship, network building, and good food.

Sunday evening at First Presbyterian Church, 704 Whitney Ave., New Haven. For more information, call the church at (203) 562-5664 or Dick Hasbany at (203) 777-4579.

6:00 – **The Welcoming Congregation, the Welcoming Community – Dinner, and conversation with Michael Adee.** Join us for a short worship led by Adele Crawford and community dinner (chili and salads) in New Haven hosted by members of First Presbyterian Church and Presbyterian Promise.

Jesus, the Bible, Homosexuality, and other Important Topics

October 14, 21,28 – You are invited to join members of First Presbyterian Church in New Haven for three sessions focusing on our personal and denominational grappling with issues of sexuality biblical interpretation, justice, and love. The sessions will focus on Jack Rogers' book, *Jesus, The Bible, and Homosexuality*, but will bring together a variety of profound themes about how to relate to loved ones, how we read the Bible, and how we live together as people of faith. For more information, call the church at (203) 562-5664, or Dick Hasbany at (203) 777-4579.

Celebration in the Round

Janie Retires



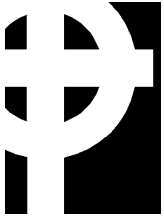
it's a garden party



with time for gifts



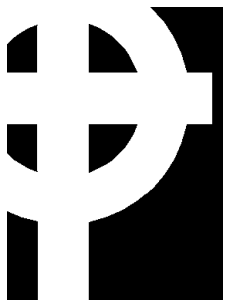
and for worship and discussion
Janie at First Pres in Stamford



Presbyterian Promise News

704 Whitney Avenue

New Haven CT 06511



Presbyterian
Promise

News

is published by

PRESBYTERIAN

PROMISE

Inc

704 Whitney Ave

New Haven CT

06511

Proclaiming God's promise of justice and love in Jesus Christ
By organizing inclusive and inquiring churches in the
Presbytery of Southern New England
Into a community of mutual support for the empowerment of
Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual and Transgender persons,
And for outreach, education and Christian evangelism.

visit us at

Crossroads Presbyterian Church

First Presbyterian Church

First Presbyterian Church

First Presbyterian Church

Providence Presbyterian Church

Wilton Presbyterian Church

Waterford CT

Hartford CT

New Haven CT

Stamford CT

Providence RI

Wilton CT

(860) 442-3693

(860) 246-2224

(203) 562-5664

(203) 324-9522

(401) 861-1136

(203) 762-5514

...working to extend the hospitality of Christ to all God's children....

<http://PresbyPromise.home.att.net>

Affiliations
That All May Freely Serve
More Light Presbyterians

Our ministry is one of reconciliation – introducing GLBT people and families to welcoming congregations even as we educate churches about what it means to be truly welcoming.