

# Presbyterian Promise News

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*The articles in this issue focus on literal and figurative trials. Lisa Bove and Scott Clark reflect on the personal and judicial ironies stemming from the church's trial of Rev. Janie Spahr. Lisa Larges reflects on the issues related to her decades-long struggle to be ordained, and Elder Ralph Jones looks at the fault lines in our own Presbytery.*

## My Trip Back

Lisa Bove

The trial was great, right up until the verdict. That's really how it was.

My spouse, Renna, and I traveled to Napa, California for the trial where Rev. Jane Spahr was to face Redwoods Presbytery's Permanent Judicial Commission (PJC) for officiating at ours and other marriages during the period that it was legal in California for same-gender couples to marry. Janie and the legal team asked that all of the couples be allowed to testify as "witnesses." When we tried to explain to our friends in the Los Angeles area that we were going to testify on behalf of someone who legally married us – well, they thought we'd be touring Napa and wine-tasting the whole time. They thought this was some kind of plot to get away for a few days from our 11 and 9-year-old daughters ... adult time. Only when you have been involved in Presbyterian struggles to accept, ordain, and marry for the last 34 years would any of this mish gosh make sense. Not even then, really.

Testifying was an opportunity to witness to the love, commitment, and totally fabulous legal marriage we had, and a chance to surround Janie with our love. Renna, my spouse, is a Seventh Day Adventist who has no experience with the Presbyterian trials and tribulations that engulfed me up until about 13 years ago when I turned to creating and nurturing a family. This was her first exposure to the meetings, strategizing, and wringing of hands, and what an amazing exposure it was. The parking lot of the hotel where we stayed was full of rainbow stickers. There was a suite for

us to gather where we sang and prayed and introduced ourselves. Volunteers who support Janie came from all over, New York, Texas, California, and the wife of the doctor who delivered her children even stopped in to say hello. We traveled in caravan style to the trial and tried to look our "Sunday best" at all times.

Our legal team, Scott Clark, Sara Taylor, and Beverly Brewster informed us of what all the "gobbledegook" meant. We had a brilliant expert witness. The other side had very little opening argument and no experts. Some of us felt sorry for the "prosecution," as she sat all alone with little of the support we had. We had spirit and spunk and grace.

Every couple who was able was allowed to testify. Some of the stories of rejection by the church were gut wrenching. I felt how crazy the church was for rejecting so many of our people again and again. Each couple was profound in its admiration for Pastor Janie who stood by them in so many life celebrations and sorrows. So, of course they expected her to officiate at their wedding. The prosecution only asked a few questions of one couple. Most of the time, the members of the PJC listened respectfully. They were seen smiling and nodding more than once.

Finally it was our turn. Renna and I told of our meeting, of how Janie flew across the country to be

with us when I was in labor with our oldest child, how she participated in the baptism of both our children, stood with us when both of us lost parents in 2007. We told how she "blessed" us in our ceremony in January, 2008. When we alluded to the allegations by members of our Presbytery against us and our clergy for our "blessing," members of the PJC grimaced, as if they would never do such a thing.

On we went to tell about our wedding. Janie officiated with Dan Smith at our legal wedding in October, 2008. We went to Yosemite with our children, our surviving parents, our children's godparents, and Dan and Janie. We planned on a ceremony in Tuolumne Meadows, but as we gained altitude that day the rain turned to snow. We ended up marrying in a borrowed Ranger station at the edge of

**January 23**  
 Presbyterian Promise Annual Meeting  
 3 PM - New Haven

**February 12**  
 PSNE Vote on Amendment 10-A  
 Fairfield

Please Be There!  
 Wear your rainbow scarf or pin!

Yosemite with a warm wood-burning stove behind us. The panel from the PJC listened and smiled and nodded. One guy asked what kind of beer we had to celebrate after the wedding. They seemed to love us. They were respectful. They smiled and nodded.

Then we had to wait for the verdict. To have to keep coming back was a good sign, we all said. They're really thinking through how to make a wonderful, groundbreaking liberating, policy-changing decision.

We had such positive expectation – until the chair started reading. There it was again, the smiling, nodding, paternalistic ... we love you, but. They found that Janie had violated the current policy, and though they seemed “sorry,” they just “had” to rule that way. For me, it was “déjà-vu.” The Presbyterians who won't let you openly have a call, the Presbyterians who affirm, that “yes, Lisa, you are called to pastoral ministry by God,” but we just can't let you serve that way.

I said to myself, “I should have known. The Presbyterians always let you down.” Our legal team had been clear and worked hard. We were obviously in the right. When is the Presbyterian church going to acknowledge that society has surpassed it? Everyone knows this is going to change. But, the disappointment was still painful. We cried, and prayed, and sang. Some of the commission members patted us on the back. Others voiced support. Some seemed to think they were “doing us a favor.”

So, there it is: my trip back into the inner workings of the Presbyterian system. I maintain my membership in the Presbytery of the Pacific. I lead worship when I can and have preached periodically. I still feel my first calling is as a Presbyterian minister, but my day-to-day job is in social work. I returned to get my MSW as a way to support myself while the PC USA figures out what to do with “out” GLBT clergy and candidates. Supporting our family and raising our children is our highest priority at this time. Renna and I are grateful that we got to contribute to creating a loving and accepting church so that when our children reach maturity this may all be a thing of the past. Then we will be able to put our energy into eradicating hunger and homelessness and those sorts of things, maybe.

*Lisa Bove is a member of Pacific Presbytery, working as a psychiatric social worker (while waiting for the church) and loving life with her spouse of 13 years and two beautiful daughters.*

## **Twenty Five Years and Waiting: Why it is time to end G-6.**

*Lisa Larges*

I've been a candidate for the Ministry of Word and Sacrament in the Presbyterian Church since before the Internet – for nearly a quarter of a century. In 1986, during the Reagan Administration, I came under care of the Presbytery of the Twin Cities Area. In 1990, as I was going before the

Committee on Preparation for Ministry for my final assessment, I wrote a letter to the committee disclosing my sexual orientation, and giving the theological and Scriptural reasons why sharing this part of my identity was important in my call to ministry. In 1991, the Committee voted to approve me as ready to seek a call, and they asked the Presbytery to affirm their decision, which the Presbytery did one evening in late October of that year. I have often said that it was the affirmation extended in that vote which awakened in me a deeper love of the church and a commitment to stay in this long and leisurely conversation.

The first judicial case came a year later, as the Permanent Judicial Commission of the General Assembly overturned the decision to certify me ready for a call. At that same time, the Commission also decided that the Downtown United Presbyterian Church of Rochester NY could not call the Rev. Janie Spahr as their Co-Pastor. Those of you who have been working for justice in our denomination for a long while will remember that the rule that was then in effect was the so-called “Definitive Guidance” (a perhaps deliberate oxymoronic pairing) which held that “self-avowed, unrepentant homosexual practice” was not in keeping with ordained service to the church.

*Time passed.*

In the mid-90's, still a Candidate for Ministry, I asked to have my candidacy transferred to the San Francisco Presbytery. Many of you will know that in 1996 our denomination amended its *Constitution* to its current policy on Ordination standards.

*Time passed.*

In 2002 I had the great privilege of coming to work with That All May Freely Serve. The board of TAMFS has always understood this work of advocacy to be ministry, and thus created its staff positions to be “called ministries.” Thus I began working with the Committee on Preparation for Ministry of San Francisco Presbytery to finish the ordination process so that I might be ordained in to my current position with TAMFS.

In 2004, the CPM voted not to certify me ready for a call. But, at the same time, a task force from across the church was working to find a new way for Presbyterians to live together in such a way as to honor the divergent points of view on ordination for LGBT persons. After 5 years of work, their recommendations were adopted by the General Assembly, and presbyteries and congregations were given a little more freedom to decide whether or not to ordain LGBT persons on a case by case basis.

*Or not.*

That is, some argued that all the new policy did was allow for greater diversity of theological opinion, but that indeed there could be no room for approving the ordination of so-called “practicing” same-gender loving persons. Is there room? That is the essence of the question that is now

working its way through our Presbyterian judicial system. In 2008 the General Assembly issued an Authoritative Interpretation (a device for clarifying church policy) that stated that the right of conscience extended equally to both belief and practice. Nonetheless, those who oppose the ordination of LGBT persons maintain that there can be no rule other than that in section G-6.0106b, thereby declaring the one sacrosanct principle to be that of the ordination of only those qualified persons who live in the fidelity of heterosexual marriage, or chastity in singleness.

Under the new policies, I went back to the CPM, this time with a "Statement of Conscience" giving my theological reasons why I could not comply with a standard that was unjust, demeaning, and counter to God's grace. Provisions in our *Constitution* make allowances for such positions of conscience, under a principle which Presbyterians take very seriously, which affirms that God alone is Lord of the conscience. It was just this provision that the Task Force and the General Assembly lifted up as it sought a new way for greater openness across the church.

Finally, in November of 2009, the Presbytery voted to approve my work with TAMFS as a validated ministry, and my ordination to it. Earlier that year, the Presbytery of John Knox, had similarly approved the ordination of Scott Anderson, an openly gay man who had also submitted a statement of conscience. The votes of both presbyteries were challenged and those objections were heard by two synod courts.

So it was that I and interested spectators showed up at a generic hotel conference room early last fall, as the Synod of the Pacific took testimony and heard the arguments as to whether the San Francisco Presbytery acted properly in its action to approve my ordination. Both Scott and I, and all of us who have been seeking a more just and inclusive Presbyterian Church, and, indeed, the whole church, owes a debt of gratitude to the Covenant Network, and especially to Doug Nave, the tireless attorney and Covenant Network board member who served as counsel for both presbyteries in addition to perhaps a dozen or more cases before church courts defending the rights of LGBT persons and our allies. Before the Synod Commission, Doug, along with the Rev. Mark Achtemeyer and the Rev. Jack Rogers, argued eloquently and passionately for the principle of mutual forbearance. If God is indeed sovereign, then none of us has custody of the truth, and we must find a way to learn with humility and openness to discern the call of God in a person's life, even when that person's theology might differ from our own. What's more, we must not allow the separation of belief from practice, recognizing that persons of all sexual orientations and gender identities can live and serve according to the integrity of their own convictions as informed by Scripture, prayer, and the

community of faith.

After more than ten hours of testimony and legal argument, and a day of deliberation, the Synod ruled that indeed the Presbytery was within its right to approve my ordination. A few weeks later, the Commission of the Synod of Lakes and Prairies made a similar ruling in Scott Anderson's case. Both of these cases have been appealed, and will go before the GA PJC, probably at the same time, sometime in 2011.

Meanwhile, there are more than sixty LGBT inquirers and candidates for ministry in the Presbyterian Church. However sound and well-intentioned the current policy lifting up freedom of conscience may be, it is clear that we owe it to each of those persons seeking to follow God's calling in their lives to be fairly assessed by their committees and presbyteries without the endless threat of judicial action. We owe it to them to work tirelessly to pass amendment 10-A which will make clear that no one can be preemptively barred from following that call because of who they are or who they love.

## Courage and Constraint: Marriage in the Presbyterian Courts

Scott Clark

"We are constrained."

With those three words, on August 27, 2010, a 4-2 majority of a Presbytery Permanent Judicial Commission found the Rev. Dr. Jane Spahr – an honorably retired Presbyterian Minister of the Word and Sacrament – guilty of "representing that a same [gender] ceremony was a marriage."

At the same time, in a decision that is beyond ironic, the court repeatedly and emphatically commended Rev. Spahr's faithful ministry:

- The court – quoting the *Book of Order* – commended and gave thanks for Rev. Spahr's "prophetic ministry that for 35 years has extended support to 'people who seek the dignity, freedom and respect that they have been denied,' and has sought to redress 'wrongs against individuals, groups, and peoples in the church, in this nation, and in the world.'"



Rev. Janie Spahr and some of the couples she married

- The court acknowledged that the marriages of these couples are, in fact, marriages and the court thanked the couples who had testified for sharing “their great joy in marriage” and “their great hurt through the policies of the church.”
- The court expressly found that Rev. Spahr’s ministry had been faithful to the Gospel and that she had “followed the *Book of Order* by remembering that our confessions and church [are] subject to the authority of Jesus Christ, the Word of God, as the Scriptures bear witness to him.” (emphasis in the court’s decision)
- The court acknowledged that its own interpretation of church rules was contrary to the Gospel and that its own decision continued the harm that the church has committed against LGBT people.
- Nevertheless, the court stated “we are constrained” to find Rev. Spahr guilty.

And then, the court apologized to the couples.

I had the honor and privilege to serve as part of the defense team that advocated for Rev. Spahr, for the couples, and for an inclusive understanding of the Gospel during the August proceedings. As we appeal the decision, I’ve been asked to share just a bit of our story.

In May 2008, the California Supreme Court issued its landmark decision recognizing the right of same-gender couples to marry, affirming the full dignity of LGBT couples and our families. Following the decision, over 18,000 same-gender couples were married in the state of California. Many of them asked pastors and faith leaders to celebrate their marriage with them and with their families. Not surprisingly, a number of couples asked Rev. Jane Spahr. Some of those couples had known Janie as pastor and friend for years and years. Some had never met Janie in person, but knew that she was a pastor who – for over 35 years of ministry – had stood up for the full dignity of LGBT people in the church and in the broader community.

And they were celebrations indeed. Over the course of the four months that marriages were legal in California, these couples gathered with their families, and with Rev. Spahr, and celebrated the legal recognition of what they already knew to be marriage and family.

Sadly, in November 2008, a majority of voters in California passed Proposition 8 and took away – at least for a time – the legal right of same-gender couples to marry. Several months later, an anonymous Presbyterian elder filed a complaint challenging Rev. Spahr’s participation in these marriage ceremonies. A Prosecuting Committee of the Presbyterian Church then charged Rev. Spahr for celebrating the marriages of sixteen same-gender couples, alleging that she had impermissibly represented these legally sanctioned marriages as marriages. The Prosecuting Committee alleged no violation of Scripture and no direct violation of any provision of the *Constitution*. Instead, the Prosecuting Committee alleged that Rev. Spahr had violated language of a previous

decision of the General Assembly PJC – decided before marriages were legal in California – that suggested that a minister could not represent a same-gender ceremony as a marriage.

Notwithstanding the heartbreaking verdict, the week of trial in the case was amazing. The prosecution presented no witnesses. They rested on the fact that Rev. Spahr had represented these marriages as marriages, and argued that the Presbyterian Church did not allow that. As the defense began, Professor Deborah Krause (Dean of Eden Seminary) testified as to how Rev. Spahr’s ministry was faithful to both Scripture and the constitutional responsibilities of a Presbyterian minister, how the description of marriage in the *Directory of Worship* is a series of non-exclusive definitional statements, and how that description of marriage actually does not reflect marriage as described throughout the Scriptures (when marriage was primarily viewed as a property transaction).

The heart of the defense, though, was the testimony of the couples. The couples testified as to how they had experienced Rev. Spahr’s ministry over the course of the years that they had known her. They described Janie’s marriage ministry and her intense marriage counseling – usually for one whole year – what the couples all called “the homework” – as they explored the meaning of marriage, and went deep into their life together. The couples told stories of their life together, as they explained the importance of marriage in their extended family, and how the marriage ceremony had actually brought their family closer together.

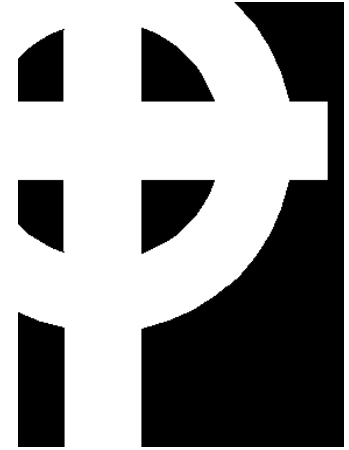
And most of the couples spoke very candidly about how they had been harmed by the church. One couple described their upbringing in a conservative church, and how they had been made to feel like they were outside of God’s love. They shared how, when they were able to marry in a church, it was the first time in a long time that they had felt as if God’s love was for them too.

Couple after couple, as they testified, something in the makeshift Presbyterian courtroom changed. On the first day of trial everyone had been on guard. On the second day, as couple after couple told their stories, we all relaxed. We listened. We laughed together, and we sat in moments of silence, remembering deep pain. We sat sometimes in tears – all of us, the couples, the lawyers, and the court.

One of the most remarkable things to me about the couples’ stories is where they dared to tell them. These couples came and shared their stories in a church tribunal. They came and they told these stories of hurt that the church had inflicted to a church tribunal that had the power to hurt them again. They understood the risk, and they told the stories anyway. And both the hurt and the healing were embodied in that room – real people, real lives, real hurt, real healing, real courage.

As I continue to think about that week and the court’s decision, I continue to come back to two things: the courage

# PRESBYTERIAN PROMISE



You are invited

## The Annual Meeting

(It's important, musical, tasty and an opportunity to consider one of the most difficult challenges we face as Presbyterians.)

Sunday, January 23, 3:00 – 5:00 p.m.

First Presbyterian Church New Haven (704 Whitney Ave)



Join us and our special guest, Lisa Larges, Minister Coordinator of That All May Freely Serve for a music-filled worship, a short business meeting, and a panel to consider the issues, emotions, and opportunities that are associated with the painful separation of churches from the PC USA. The panel will include Lisa Larges, Rev. William Goettler, and Rev. Johanna Johns Jung who is serving on a PSNE “discerning the way” task force. There will be time for questions and discussion.

*Help Presbyterian Promise help the homeless:* We have promised to provide food for the Monday lunch for 12 homeless men who will be staying at First Presbyterian Church on Sunday night as part of a project called Abraham's Tent. If you are able, please bring an item appropriate for a bag lunch.

We will celebrate with a finger food reception following the program.

# The Incredible Importance of 10 – A being approved ...

PSNE votes on Proposed Amendment 10 – A on  
**Saturday February 12<sup>th</sup>** at Fairfield: First!  
Wear your rainbow scarf or pin!  
*Stop by the Presbyterian Promise table if you need one.*

The proposed amendment 10-A would replace the second paragraph of our denomination's ordination standards – the famous G-6.0106b – with:

*Standards for ordained service reflect the church's desire to submit joyfully to the Lordship of Jesus Christ in all aspects of life (G-1.0000). The governing body responsible for ordination and/or installation (G.14.0240; G-14.0450) shall examine each candidate's calling, gifts, preparation, and suitability for the responsibilities of office. The examination shall include, but not be limited to, a determination of the candidate's ability and commitment to fulfill all requirements as expressed in the constitutional questions for ordination and installation (W-4.4003). Governing bodies shall be guided by Scripture and the confessions in applying standards to individual candidates."*

Why this is important:

- As the Advisory Committee on the Constitution says in their Advice, "... This overture seeks to restore the ordination practice and principles affirmed in the Adopting Act of 1729..."
- While it sets a high standard for officers, it does not single out any group of members for special scrutiny.
- It places responsibility for preparation and examination with the candidates and those who know them best – their presbyteries or their sessions.
- It could resolve the seemingly endless debate over ordination standards.
- It might allow us all to come together around other pressing concerns.
- It presents the Gospel in a more welcoming way.

What you need to do:

- Attend the February 12<sup>th</sup> Presbytery meeting at the Fairfield church.
- Make sure your Session has elected a full slate of commissioners and that they will be attending the meeting.
- Recent votes suggest Southern New England is likely to approve the amendment, but every vote counts. It failed by the absence of one vote in one of the first presbyteries to vote!

And:

- Reach out. Not everyone has made up their mind. This is a different proposal.
- Study the resources
  - in the official book of amendments
  - on the Covenant Network website
  - on the More Light Presbyterians website (which has video statements by some of this proposal's GA overture advocates)

of the couples, and the constraint of the court. I am haunted by those three words: "We are constrained." To its credit, our Presbyterian *Constitution* has much to say about full inclusion and participation (G-3.0401, G-4.0403), non-discrimination (G-5.0202), inclusive ministry (G6-0202(b), G-6.0203), pastoral care for all within the church (W-6.3002, W-6.3010, W-6.4000), and the obligation of justice and compassion as lived out in our shared life of worship (W-7.3000, W-7.4000). But what this court experienced was constraint – with the court apologizing for what it felt constrained to do, even as it acknowledged that its own decision was harmful and contrary to the Gospel.

The couples give us a glimpse of a better way – a glimpse of what the church can be. The Gospel of Jesus Christ calls us to courageously stand in the midst of injustice, voicing harm and hurt, and insisting on healing and justice. The Gospel of Jesus Christ calls us not to a culture of constraint, but to a culture of courage. We are appealing the Presbytery PJC's decision. May the church come to stand with these couples as, together, we live out the truth that the Gospel of Jesus Christ is good news for us all.

*Scott Clark works with the spirituality program at San Francisco Theological Seminary, and is a candidate for the ministry of word and sacrament in the PC USA. He is a member of Rev. Spahr's defense team, along with Beverly Brewster and Sara Taylor.*

## Fear not ...

*Ralph Jones*

The More Light Presbyterians' Christmas letter began: "In her book *Amazing Grace*, Kathleen Norris describes counsel from a Benedictine monk regarding her decision as a 40-year old to 'go back to the Presbyterian Church, or not' upon her move to South Dakota. He said, 'the church is a sinful institution, how could it be otherwise? The Church is like the Incarnation itself, a shaky proposition.' Norris offers: 'For me, the Incarnation is the place, if you will, where hope contends with fear. Not an antique doctrine at all, but reality – as ordinary as my everyday struggles with fears great and small, as exalted as the hope that allows me some measure of peace when I soldier on in the daily round.'"

The church a shaky proposition where hope contends with fear as an every day struggle? Does this seem at all familiar? We are all too aware of the too many young people who experience the church's teachings as the source of the bully's taunts, the locus of their alienation. We know the hours and prayers and pleas that have gone to seek a more welcoming and inclusive church. We wait, with anticipation and uncertainty, the outcome of the current voting on 10-A, on ordination and "virtue." We are tired of this. We are tired of the conflict.

In July 2010, three churches wrote a letter to the Presbytery of Southern New England's Council calling, demanding even, that it lead us in a time of repentance. The three initial churches were later joined by three additional concurring

churches. The letter raised three truly substantive issues: "Denial of the Word of God, Denial of our Constitution, and Broken Trust, Peace, Unity and Purity." These deserve consideration

## Biblical Authority

The nature of Biblical authority was raised by a phrase in the rationale for the replace G-6.0106b overture PSNE sent to the recent General Assembly. It may be worth quoting that paragraph in full.

Our standards have never been successfully expressed as a few simple ideas or behaviors. As Calvin understood, Scripture contains the word of God, but it is not the word of God. The result is that we depend on our *Confessions* to inform the way we approach, read, understand and interpret scripture. Likewise, Scripture and our polity contain our standards, but are not our standards. We continually engage them as we seek to faithfully apply our standards to particular people and callings.

The letter writers took exception to "contains ... but is not." No doubt this metaphor could have been expressed more completely, but it pretty clearly isn't a denial of the Word of God. Rather, it points to what was the core of Calvin's life work and to the fundamental reason Presbyterians require well educated clergy. God's word must be interpreted in each and every age and context. The scriptures are not formulas carrying one obvious meaning for all times. As Bruce Gordon expressed it in his 2009 book *Calvin* [p. 107]:

In the 1539 *Institutes* Calvin remarked that 'who even of slight intelligence does not understand that God is accustomed to prattle, as it were, with us, like nurses with babies? Such forms of speaking do not so much give a crystal-clear picture of what God is like as accommodate the knowledge of him to our slender capacity.' Scripture is God's means of speaking to humanity, and the interpreter's task is to explain the various media by which God communicates – instruction, admonition, pastoral comfort, polemic. To achieve this, Calvin believed, following Erasmus and Melancthon, a scholar required the tools of humanist rhetoric by which he could explain faith. All the reformers distinguished between the Bible and the Word of God, or Gospel. Scripture *contains* 'perfect doctrine', which is God's revelation, but it is not itself the Gospel. The purpose of the Bible is as an instrument of the Holy Spirit to reconcile humanity to God through Jesus Christ in the community of the church.

The six churches' letter actually goes beyond this issue to "ask the Presbytery to repent and affirm Scripture as the infallible Word of God, inspired and preserved by the Holy Spirit and is the authority for obedience in faith and life." Though it is a recurring debate, quite simply our denomination settled this some time ago.

The one sufficient revelation of God is Jesus Christ, the Word of God incarnate, to whom the Holy Spirit bears a unique and authoritative witness through the Holy Scriptures, which are received and obeyed as the word of God written." [Confession of 1967 9.27]

“Unique and authoritative,” not infallible or inerrant, is part of the ordination vows affirmed by every Deacon, Elder and Minister of the Word and Sacrament.

## Constitutional Issues

Rev. John Merz has for years been a presence with and an advocate for people who are dealing with an expensive, incurable illness that often leaves them marginalized and broke. He has served his entire ordained ministry in this presbytery ministering to persons living with HIV/AIDS. We know his ministry well.

At its May meeting, on the recommendation of its Committee on Ministry, PSNE “revalidated” John Merz’s ministry. The signers of the letter see this action as ratification of a violation of our *Constitution*. The matter begins with an article John wrote in this newsletter, in March 2009, describing the journey to marriage to his partner Bill. Their Vermont civil union seemingly had not created a problem, but his marriage and his writing about it has. By way of background, when the Connecticut legislature made marriage available to couples regardless of gender they also phased out civil unions. To be sure they would remain legally recognized as a family, John and Bill had to get married.

Almost from the beginning, God recognized that, “It is not good that the man should be alone; I will make him a helper as his partner.” [Genesis 2:18] The people in the Bible understood children as key to the survival of the family and nation and to the preservation of property. How does this apply in a world facing overpopulation and with very different approaches to land and inherited property?

Literature and the historical record tell us that in every age and culture there have been women who have found the answer to loneliness with another woman and likewise men who have found their help and companionship with another man. However only in recent decades has it become possible to discuss this in America. History and our own denominational struggles tell us that religious/cultural/social mores change slowly and painfully. We should not be surprised that it is difficult to arrive at a new understanding of marriage.

Jesus never applied the law in a way that would distance even the least of God’s people. Rather, and often in ways that disrupted expectations, he interpreted the law so it would benefit the most marginal people, including even gentiles in God’s blessing. “The Sabbath was made for humankind, and not humankind for the Sabbath;...” [Mark 2:27] is one of the most revolutionary thoughts in the Bible. Whatever our traditional understandings, we are enjoined to find ways to welcome and include all and certainly all who faithfully seek Jesus.

Even if the Bible encourages us to understand and welcome people, not to marginalize them, are we still constrained because John and Bill violated some essential aspect of church law? Our *Directory for Worship* speaks of marriage as between one man and one woman. All officers

of the church agree to be subject to its discipline. We need to think as clearly because here’s where it gets particularly confusing and difficult.

The Preface to our *Directory for Worship* reads:

This directory suggests possibilities for worship, invites development in worship, and encourages continuing reform of worship. It sets standards and presents norms for the conduct of worship in the life of congregations and the governing bodies of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) .... This directory uses language about worship which is simply descriptive. (emphasis added)

Our *Book of Order* specifically uses certain words like “shall” and “is to be” to indicate mandates. The section about marriage, W-4.9ff, does not use this language except to mandate premarital counseling. It describes marriage using the customary language, but it does not specifically prohibit or exclude the possibility that there might be other appropriate forms of marriage. It says nothing about same gender marriage which wasn’t even being discussed when it was written. Of course reading this section this way is pushing the boundaries. Of course, if same gender relationships are to be honored and welcomed in our churches, our polity must be revised. But our present need, in this Presbytery in this state where same gender marriages are legal, is to welcome all of God’s people. Aren’t we compelled to read our rules so they include rather than exclude?

Further, the perceived error is not even clear. While John’s article reports they felt that God was present at their marriage, it was not done in a church and he did not expect it to be recognized by the PC USA. It’s not clear that anything done during the service went beyond what has been allowed by our church’s judicial findings concerning “same sex blessings.” And at the time of their marriage, there had been no PC USA judicial finding or General Assembly action specifically prohibiting same gender marriages in states where such marriages are allowed. As our denomination’s courts have defined it, a “same-sex ceremony,” which may be blessed but may not be called a marriage, is distinguished from a marriage in that there is no new status conferred. But as their marriage was authorized by Connecticut, a new status was indeed conferred. This was a marriage, not a same-sex ceremony/blessing being called a marriage. So, do these past findings even apply?

In the time since John’s and Bill’s marriage, two church courts have found that our polity does prohibit same gender marriage, even in states which authorize it. Scott Clark’s and Lisa Bove’s articles in this issue reflect on one of these cases. Both decisions appear to recognize that their understanding of our polity creates injustice. Both cases are being appealed; there is little point in trying to anticipate the results. But in our church’s courts, conviction must be beyond reasonable doubt. There clearly are plausible reasons to doubt that a punishable offense has occurred here.



## Trust

This is the heart of it, isn't it. My experience is that the church I joined in 1967 is being overrun by a culture that reflects a particular, limited version of the gospel. I'm sure they, in turn, think my understanding seriously deficient. Trust is in short supply.

The 1983 General Assembly, the one which gave us reunion, adopted a document titled, *Historic Principles, Conscience and Church Government*. It is easily found through Google and rewarding reading. Among its insights:

- the right of private judgment ... includes the right to be wrong.
- The church protects its own minority point of view as if it were protecting its future, recognizing that the dissenter may well represent the will of God.
- Forbearance is willingness to accept other people in the church who do not share our own ideas. To exercise forbearance is to accept diversity with gratitude for those who differ and willingness to remain in conversation with people whose perspective may disturb us.

### Other insights:

(6) Schism is generally the result of an improper understanding or use of Presbyterian polity. Lessons available to us from our history include the following as contributing factors:

- ...
  - d. a governing body assumes the simple majority to be sufficient for taking action binding the conscience of a large minority.
  - g. an individual church officer or group of church officers become isolated from the governing body and see the action of the body as that of an enemy, thus refusing to take such actions with seriousness.

Does any of this resonate with the situation here in our presbytery and in our denomination? The majority view in this presbytery about the place of lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender Christians in the life of the church seems to be a minority in denominational votes. Are we, or they, or whoever, protecting our future?

A November 2000 *PC USA News* article quotes Rev. Jerry Andrews, then head of the Presbyterian Coalition:

... I cannot imagine that we can get past this without talk, ... I do think we've drifted apart for a whole generation. ... We've gone to different seminaries, read different books. We read 'The Book' differently. We talk to ourselves and we think we're 'the church.' We need to be remembering that we are colleagues in ministry ... and we need to know the truth about each others' beliefs.

In its response to the six churches, our Council recommended dialogue. That has seemingly been rejected. Two of the six are in the process of leaving the denomination. If we cannot expend the effort to get to know each other, then we will not trust each other. Can we not all recognize each other as faithful even when we understand our faith in somewhat different ways? But the body will be broken indeed if we do not have the time to recognize the varieties of our Christian

experiences.

Have you ever noticed that the first words of Christmas are "Fear not?" Those are the first words the angel speaks to the shepherds, to Zechariah, to Mary and to Joseph. The Rev. Munib Younan, Bishop of the Evangelical Lutheran Church of Jordan and the Holy Land, began his Christmas letter this year reflecting on this pervasive message. There were so many reasons to be fearful when the message was first spoken. But what is there to be afraid of in our denomination? Other Christians? Surely not. Differing expressions of Christian belief? Surely not, for we remember that for now we see as in a mirror, dimly and we know that our salvation comes by grace, not the accuracy of our theology. Thank God!

## Scarves of Hospitality and Witness – Wear one on February 12

*Dick Hasbany*

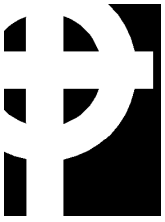
Almost 2000 home knitted and crocheted rainbow scarves were points of light for those lucky enough to be at the 219<sup>th</sup> General Assembly in Minneapolis last July. As part of a More Light Presbyterians project aimed at fostering hospitality, solidarity, and witness, the scarves were worn around necks and draped over shoulders. Each one declared that God's love includes gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender persons; each one invited conversation. Elder Ralph Jones, at the Assembly as PSNE's overture advocate, noted that "It was quite remarkable how the scarves worked to open communication among strangers at GA – and not only with others who were wearing the scarves."



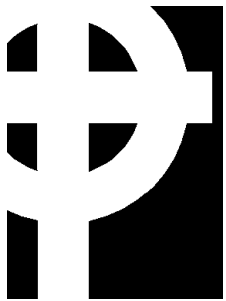
Presbyterian Promise believes that the color, community, and message of the scarves should be part of our life in Southern New England,

219<sup>th</sup> GA

especially as we come together in Fairfield on February 12<sup>th</sup> to decide whether or not to ratify Amendment 10-A and reform our currently discriminatory ordination standards. We've heard that friends are knitting in preparation for the Presbytery meeting. If you'd like to help, we'll send you details. Or stop by our table to receive a scarf as a gift from us! It is a positive act of community, belief, and an invitation to reconciling conversation, and a colorful witness to God's love. For more information about knitting a scarf or for questions, please call.



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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.

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

<http://PresbyterianPromise.org>

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.