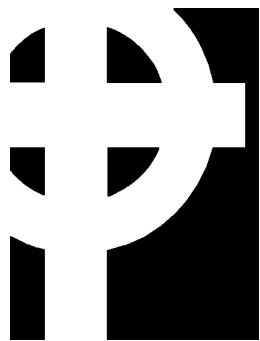


# PRESBYTERIANS say *yes!*

As of this writing 96 of 173 presbyteries have voted to ratify proposed amendment 10-A. It will replace the present paragraph G-6.0106b in our *Book of Order* on July 10<sup>th</sup> of this year.



## Presbyterian Promise News

Issue Number 29  
June 2011

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## To Celebrate ... or what?

... that seems to be the question, implicit at least in much I've heard about the passage of 10-A, the amendment that will officially replace G-6.0106b in our Presbyterian *Constitution* on July 11th. There is no question that this a major milestone, a transformative event in the life of the church, a kairos moment that comes along only every few generations.

It is important to celebrate this new day, but it is also important to know what we are celebrating.

This change is a victory for the church – for the whole church. It is not a victory for “us,” or a defeat for “them.” The victory is that the church has freed itself from a deeply flawed theology. The church is no longer trying to stand between God and those God has called. The church has moved toward recognizing God’s efforts to do a new thing in our midst.

This change is a change in the rules, in church law. There is a strained balance between community and law, law and community. Laws change in response to changing awareness and perception in communities. But changed laws also change the way communities see and act. It has taken our church community far too many years to acknowledge where God has been leading us. That struggle has been long and is worth celebrating, as are those who have led us in the struggle. But this new rule also will likely be transformative of how we understand God’s leading. It can be expected to give people permission to understand things in a new way. It will lead some to new and renewed understanding of their faith and their tradition. It will introduce the church to some new possibilities, to new ways of seeing and of being a community. That is worth celebrating.

But this is no time to spike the football. We know that

just as there has been a very long road to this point, there is a long, long road ahead, leading on toward welcome and justice. We remember the high price paid for this day, especially by those who hoped, prayed and lived for this but who are no longer with us. And we know that some of our brothers and sisters will take this vote as a repudiation of their faith, will see it as “apostasy.” Let us hope now that we have learned from having lived for more than fifteen years under a Book of Order power-play. This is no moment for a renewal of violence, a continuing of the pattern where one gang of Presbyterians beats up on another gang of Presbyterians.

One of the foundations of our polity is we trust that we best know God’s will, Jesus’ leading of the church, through a prayerful and disciplined process of voting. When we trust this, we are not in a position of winning or losing depending on the outcome of a vote. We all win as the outcome is what helps us know God’s leading. However counter-intuitive this may be, the vote guides and corrects us.

How then to explain the fifteen years with old ‘b’ we have just endured, those of us who seek a more welcoming, open church? I do not offer any easy answer. While we may think voting our best approach to knowing God’s will, it is a flawed, imperfect way. Our reformed theology tells us that sin interferes with everything we mortals attempt. Our polity is not perfect, and it won’t be perfected when 10-A becomes official. But high as the cost has been, these fifteen years have at least made us talk to each other across our theological and cultural divides. People who otherwise would not have thought about the place of lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender people in the church have done so. Some, unfortunately, have hardened their positions, but many others have come to new insight and understanding. This change was not glibly achieved. That is something to celebrate.

## “So Great a Cloud of Witnesses”

### *Our Honor Roll of Saints*

Anonymous  
Doug Atkins  
Jim Beates  
Carl Bisson  
Cathy Blaser  
A. David Bos  
Hank Bremer  
Robert McAfee Brown  
Sydney Brown  
George Buse  
Elizabeth Cockcroft  
Dorothy Christensen  
Bob Christensen  
John Conner  
Jim Costen  
Bob & Evelyn Davidson  
Ginny Davidson  
Chuck Doak  
Miles Doane  
Brent Dugan  
George R. Edwards  
Doug Elliott  
Rob Elwood  
Matt English  
Glen Fennema  
Bryant George  
Wayne & Mildred Glaser  
Bill Goepfing  
Ross & Norma Greek  
Vin Harwell  
Bob Hasek  
Orlando Haynes  
Willard Heckel  
Dick Hetz  
Tom Henderson  
Deb Hitty  
Lucy Hixon  
Harry Hofelder  
Molly B. Hopper  
Charles (Chuck) R. Houdek  
Gene Huff  
Converse “Conny” Hunter  
Lynn Johnson  
Matthew Jones  
Lily Joules  
Art Kaltenborn  
Doug Kenney  
Maggie Kuhn  
Dan Little  
Don Marshall  
Jeanne Marshall Pritchard  
Merrill Proudfoot  
Rod & Jessie Martin  
Stan Malinowski  
Anita McAllister

*con't. next page*

New ‘b’ – as that’s what 10-A will become – clarifies that the responsibility for determining who is to be ordained belongs with the Sessions and Presbyteries that are responsible for ordination. It clarifies that the people who are in the best position to make these decisions are responsible for making them. It gives permission. It does not mandate anything. That is its true gift to the church. It asks us all to consider people as individuals, and not by categories. While it establishes that God’s grace extends beyond boundaries that most all of us accepted only a few decades ago, it does not try to force anyone to compromise their belief. That is a gift to be celebrated.

New ‘b’ also sets an agenda for the next years. There is plenty for Presbyterian Promise and its friends to do.

It seems likely that some people will decide to leave this denomination. That process can be challenging, and addressing it in a constructive manner will be one agenda.

Many more people will need to think and act locally as their church or their presbytery considers individual candidates for office. Our too often too verbal debates will have to seek to balance head and heart in a flesh and blood decision. Reconciling words may help.

LGBT candidates will still be pioneers. While some churches and presbyteries will welcome their gifts, many others will present them with unknown challenges. It’s always hard to be the first, or even the second or third. We need to stand ready to ease these transitions.

Presbyterians are now in an awkward place when we try to think about same gender marriage. Our church’s courts have said that Presbyterian pastors may not participate in these services, limiting their ability to minister to some of their congregants. This is likely to be the next great denominational study and

debate.

Above all, we continue to have a responsibility to tell the world about God’s welcome. There are denominations and countries that have gone ahead of us, but there are many that do not understand what we’ve said. We need to get the word out. As the song says, “Loaves abound!”

There is much to do, and that is worth celebrating.

*Ralph Jones*

## The Radical Honesty that Led Us to This Moment

*For everything there is a season, and a time for every matter under heaven. . . a time to weep, and a time to laugh; a time to mourn, and a time to dance. . . Ecclesiastes 3:1,4*

Ecclesiastes tells us that there is a time for everything under the sun, but with the ratification of Amendment 10-A I am finding the moment ambiguous. I want to dance because there is joy in knowing that Lisa Larges and many gifted lesbian and gay candidates can now be called into service. But joy is tempered by other emotions including, strangely, sadness. I have pondered this odd ambivalence and wondered whether I was just gifted with a morbid or depressive personality which might account for it. Then I read something by Chris Glaser on a MLP Dawn posting two days after the Twin Cities’ vote made 10-A the new standard of ordination. “This morning,” he wrote, “I found myself crying as I thought of so many Presbyterians I wish had lived long enough to see this day.” Chris asked that people send in the names of people for an honor roll of those who witnessed over this 33 year period of wrenching, often hurtful, and sometimes grace-filled discernment. The names flowed in throughout the morning and into the following days. [See the adjacent Honor Roll.]

With this newsletter, we are trying to capture the complex and ambiguous moment we find ourselves in with the passage of 10-A. We remember and look back, sharing stories of some people who helped us arrive at this moment, stories of people who were condescendingly dismissed and marginalized, who remained faithful to their calling as best they were able. We hold up with gratitude the joy and liberation that came in the struggle itself, and in the abundant moments of love and community that the struggle created. And we look at some of the work still to be done, especially with youth and our need to be clear, “it can get better.”

*Dick Hasbany*

### **Bill Silver – Radical and Honest**

*Bill Silver was the first out-gay man to seek ordination in the Presbyterian Church. His presbytery, The Presbytery of New York City, asked the General Assembly for definitive guidance about how to proceed. The 1976 General Assembly established the Task Force on The Church and Homosexuality to study the issue and make a recommendation. After two years of study, the majority of the Task Force judged that they*

could find nothing compelling to prohibit ordination, but a minority submitted a report concluding homosexuality not the intent of God for humanity and inconsistent with ordained service in the denomination. The 1978 General Assembly meeting in San Diego adopted the minority report, initiating the 30+ year struggle within the denomination. Bill Silver's papers are housed at Yale, and we have been lucky enough to discover Suzanna Krivulskaya, who has "opened" them up to us to give us a picture of this pioneer, courageous enough to recognize his sexuality, like his call to ministry, as a gift from God. Here is our interview with her.

1. I understand that you are not Presbyterian. How did you learn about Bill Silver and what interested you about him?

I was part of a graduate seminar in Readings in the History of Sexuality in the fall of 2010. I noticed that religion was largely absent from the discussion of sexuality in contemporary scholarship, and I decided to do my part in integrating the two. That Yale happened to have Bill Silver's archive was largely a coincidence, and a happy one. By studying his papers, I wanted to get at the core of the difficult relationship between religion and sexuality. I wanted to know what influenced Silver to not only come out at a time when it was dangerous and unpopular (1972), but also to seek ordination while being openly gay. I found my answers in Silver's theology of God's creation being ultimately good and in Silver's posture of radical honesty.

2. Can you talk a little about what radical honesty meant for him and why it was important?

This was an inspiring discovery. I think part of Silver's motivation for coming out was the deep sense of isolation and alienation that he felt from his culture because of his sexual orientation. Even when faced with potential for further rejection, however, Silver chose to be honest with God, with himself, and with his community. He documents this struggle in his "Liberation: Becoming Free" journal, which he submitted as part of his Master of Divinity thesis at Union Theological Seminary in 1973. The first entry begins, "Two days ago, I looked at myself in the mirror, and – for perhaps the first time – I liked myself." Silver liked himself despite what the popular discourse about homosexuality tried to instill in him. This is not to say that the discourse did not affect him. Before he finally came out to himself as a gay man, he briefly attempted to accept bisexuality in hopes that being bisexual would eliminate the need to ever come out. Not surprisingly, that experiment did not work very well. Silver writes, "One cannot become hetero by practice – this much I have learned. Nor can one destroy by simply denying. I am a gay person. I do desire men and I do not hate myself for it. I am not dirty, evil, perverted. I am only repressed, insecure and relatively innocent."

This was an important step in Silver's coming out process. It also required deep theological searching and reflection. Silver decided that if God indeed created the world, then Silver's sexuality was part of that creation. Because God

called all of creation good, Silver's sexuality was indeed not dirty, evil or perverted. This did not mean for Silver that he now had a theological free pass to follow his every desire. Instead, Silver took sin seriously and sought to discipline his will and his actions in accordance with what he perceived to be the fundamental and guiding principles of Christianity, namely the commitment to demonstrate love and goodness to all of God's creation.

The final step of faith and honesty was coming out to others. On Halloween 1972, Silver sent out postcards to his friends and family that read, "Mr. William David Silver is pleased to announce the birth of himself as a gay person, after 25 years in a "womb" that finally got too small. The precise time of the joyful event was not recorded due to the unusually long period of labor. However, the young arrival seems healthy and happy, and is adjusting well to his new life. It is hoped his friends will do the same." Radical honesty was the only viable path for Silver. Through it, he hoped to honor God, his community, and, finally, himself.

3. You might say that his radical honesty forced the entire denomination to begin a struggle leading in the direction of greater honesty. His desire to be ordained as an openly gay man short circuited the denomination's continuing to live dishonestly, i.e., ordaining candidates who remained silent about their sexual orientation. The denomination has paid dearly in its struggle toward honesty. What was the price Bill Silver paid?

We must remember that Silver was denied ordination in 1978. The price that he paid was not only the inability to be a minister (which, by the way, he wanted to do since he was a teenager), but also a deep feeling of rejection by the very community that he considered his home. Silver also faced rejection of his sexuality from his family. His mother's letters to him reveal a deep sense of anxiety about Silver's coming out as a gay man.

Having said that, I like to believe that Silver would not have done it any differently, even with all the rejection that he faced. His theological convictions were stronger than his fear. He became a voice for those who were afraid to come out. He inspired others to join in by affirming that who they

Jack McClendon  
 Chuck McClain  
 Dave & Jeanne McGown  
 Lew Mudge  
 Bob Nunn  
 Tom Otte  
 Mary Pennock &  
 Mary Samuelson  
 Chuck (Charles  
 Winslow) Pilling  
 Norm Pott  
 Merrill Proudfoot  
 Howard Rice  
 Fred Rogers  
 Isabel Rogers  
 Letty Russell  
 Roy Schlobohm  
 Bill Silver  
 David Sindt  
 Gus & Char Sindt  
 Thomas Stewart  
 Jack Stotts  
 Dan Stoecker  
 Margaret Stoltman  
 Randy Taylor  
 Donald Thompson  
 William P. Thompson  
 Terry Troxell  
 Rosemarie Wallace  
 John Wareham  
 Howard Warren  
 Mary Ellen Webb  
 Barry L. Williams  
 Rodger Wilson  
 Chuck Winslow  
 Dick Winslow  
 Marge Wuopio  
 Warren Zeh  
 Irene Zvonik

Additions and  
 corrections to:  
 Chris Glaser  
[ChrsGlaser@aol.com](mailto:ChrsGlaser@aol.com)  
 Thanks. all!

were was not wrong or sinful or shameful. God loved them just as they were. And I think that once the Presbyterian Church decides to finally officially implement the same level of radical honesty and acceptance that Silver embodied, his sacrifice and his memory will be honored even more.

4. *What was Bill Silver like? What happened to him after the denomination decided that ordination of unrepentant, practicing homosexuals was not part of God's intention. How did his quest for personal integrity and ordination change him over the years?*



Bill Silver

Integrity led him to seek ordination as an openly gay man.

Unfortunately, most of Yale's papers focus primarily on the years leading up to the 1978 General Assembly. However, the archives also give us some clues about Silver's life after this traumatic event. Silver went on to become an active leader and organizer in the Cherry Grove community in Fire Island, NY. He was an amazingly creative person, and he was able to work as a graphic and fine artist through most of his life. I think ultimately Silver chose to focus on

serving people who did accept him – his LGBT community in Fire Island. In that way, his quest for ministry was fulfilled. At least that's how I like to think of it. Silver finally found a place where he could become a minister and serve those he loved unconditionally, without regard to sexual orientation, social standing, or any other characteristic that was not yet accounted for by the official position of the Church.

5. *What wisdom and lessons did you find in these papers? Was there anything that surprised you?*

As far as helping me understand the general ethos of religion in American in the late 1970s, I suppose I was surprised most by the divide between identity and sexuality that was the status quo position of the Church. "I hope you don't take this personally" was the prevailing attitude of those who voted against ordination for openly gay people. How such a position was supposed to be interpreted as somehow not personal, remained to Silver and his supporters unclear. It is this divide of separating body from self and sexuality from identity that I find both puzzling and fascinating as the subject of study. That we have in part moved beyond this binary as a culture and a society is a sign of hope for our future.

*Suzanna Krivulskaya is a Master of Arts in Religion student at Yale Divinity School. Her concentration is in Women's, Gender, and Sexuality Studies. Originally from Belarus, Suzanna received her Bachelor of Arts degree from LCC International University in Klaipeda, Lithuania. She hopes to continue her work in the study of religion and sexuality by pursuing a Ph.D. in Religious Studies and American History.*

### Janie Spahr Remembers

*We asked a radically honest and gifted minister, Rev. Janie Spahr, to take a few minutes to recall the faces and share some of the images that she has carried throughout the*

*struggle in our denomination. As the lesbian evangelist of That All May Freely Serve, Janie traveled the country making this issue one about persons, grace, and justice. Her trial for marrying same-gendered couples moves to the General Assembly Permanent Judicial Commission this year. Here is what she sent us.*

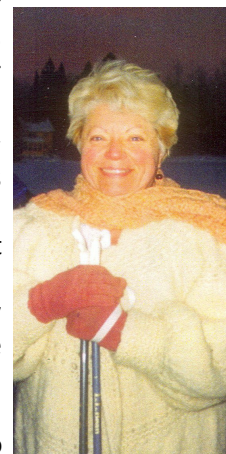
I have written some notes and reflections here, which make me weep. So many in our movement stand out, so I hesitate to write, knowing I will miss some. This task is one of thanksgiving for those who have made today possible. Some are not with us due to death, others because they have moved on, some to other faiths and spiritual journeys.

We remember David Sindt from Lincoln Park Presbyterian Church in Chicago, the founder of Presbyterians for Gay Concerns, Presbyterians for Lesbian/Gay Concerns, and now its current incarnation as More Light Presbyterians. David stood with the sign at the General Assembly in 1974 asking "Is there anyone else out there gay?" It was Jim Anderson, elder from New Jersey who, librarian that he was, was key to taking care of all of our records, making all our reports to the Assembly committees, and collecting our history. Rodger Wilson from Bethany in Dallas, Texas wrote our many songs and sang us into being.

Bill Silver, out of Central Presbyterian church in New York City was by every standard ready to receive a call. Since he was ready to seek a call as an openly gay man, his presbytery, New York City Presbytery, asked the General Assembly for guidance in this matter. By the time the 1978 General Assembly voted on the matter in San Diego, it had three "out" candidates stand before it. They were Bill Silver from Union Seminary, Sandy Brawders from Princeton Seminary, and Chris Glaser from Yale Divinity School.

Chris served on the General Assembly Task Force that prepared the 1976-78 report on the church and the homosexual considering the ordination question. He sat with such allies as Virginia West Davidson, Chair of the Task Force. The majority report of the Task Force concluded before the meeting of the Assembly that lesbian and gay candidates ready for ordination should be able to serve. Among those who created the majority report were people like Rev. Bob Davidson of New York City, who worked with his wife Evelyn and the Circle of Light Committee at West Park Presbyterian to become the first More Light Church.

Sandy Brawders was assigned to serve as a theological seminary delegate to the Assembly committee that considered the Task Force report. Thus, she had access to speak, and she was moved to come out before the whole Assembly. After she did her life was threatened and she lost her scholarship to



Sandra E. Brawders is now executive director of the Master Logger Certification Program and the Trust to Conserve Northeast Forestlands.

Princeton. Others gathered funds so she could continue and graduate. People were afraid to sit with her when she returned to the campus. While visiting Princeton many years later, I met a professor who knew Sandy and said that she was the most brilliant student he had ever had the honor of teaching. Sandy, Chris and Bill, along with David Sindt, Rodger Wilson, Jim Anderson and others, were out front talking with commissioners, making us known as real people of faith. After each session in the evening friends and allies joined them with lighted candles to sing the commissioners home as a witness so that folks could meet and talk with them.



Chris Glaser writes "A Blog for Progressive Christians," posted every Wednesday morning. His most recent book is titled *The Final Deadline*.

There was a Task Force minority report which said no to ordination, and that ended up replacing the majority report and being adopted by the 1978 Assembly. John Conner, the newly elected moderator, was able to get in the grandparent clause so that those who were ordained before 1978 would be protected and not put in harms way.

Following the terrible no vote, many gathered across the way in the hotel which looked like a cave and which we likened to the catacombs. Those who gathered there gave birth to a movement that brings us to this glorious day. People did not abandon their callings. Chris Glaser became the founding director of the Lazarus Project out of West Hollywood Presbyterian Church ["a ministry of reconciliation . . . to empower lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and heterosexual persons to love one another in the just and respectful way Christ taught us."] and went on to write a dozen books, including *Uncommon Calling* about his experiences seeking ordination.

We always remember our forefathers and foremothers who made it all possible. May Bill, David and Rodger rest in peace and joy and Sandy and Chris receive the accolades they so richly deserve. With love and thanksgiving we celebrate our dear friends like Lisa Larges and Scott Anderson who can now be ordained and who will usher in a new history and herstory, which is part of God's ongoing story of liberation, justice and love"

*Edited by Dick Hasbany*

## The Work Goes On...

### "Sticks and Stones"

*A sermon preached at Turn of River Presbyterian Church in Stamford, May 22, 2011, by Rev. John Merz. The scripture text is Acts 7: 55-60*

"Sticks and Stones will break my bones, but words will never hurt me." So goes the childhood ditty. Words will never hurt me. Sadly, that was not the case for 13-year-old Texan Asher Brown who shot himself in the head. Sadly, that was

not the case for 13-year-old Minnesotan Seth Walsh who hung himself from a tree in his backyard. Sadly, that was not the case for 15-year-old Indianan Billy Lucas who hung himself in the family's barn. Sadly, that was not the case for 18 year old Rutgers University student Tyler Clementi who jumped to his death from the George Washington Bridge. Sadly, that was not the case for Justin Aaberg or Cody Barker or Raymond Chase. All were bullied by words. All were bullied for being homosexual/gay. But words will never hurt me? Sadly, that childhood ditty is inaccurate. According to a recent survey on gay bullying, nine out of 10 gay, lesbian and bisexual students are bullied in school, and they are four times more likely than heterosexuals to attempt suicide.

What's this got to do with being Presbyterian?

Lisa Larges, a 1989 graduate of San Francisco Theological Seminary, Presbyterian and a lesbian, has spent 20 years trying to get ordained in the PC(USA). She has endured countless votes and court trials that have blocked her from ordination. She is still not ordained. Sadly, words have hurt her.

David Cooper, an elder-elect at the St. Paul Presbyterian Church of San Angelo, had his Session's examination of him challenged in the church court system, because he is in a committed same-gender relationship. Sadly, words have hurt him.

The Rev. Erwin Barron, a professor of ethics, was brought up on church charges of violating the Presbyterian *Constitution* by contracting a legal civil marriage with another man. Conviction would have resulted in the loss of his ordination. Sadly, words have hurt him.

The Rev. Jane Spahr has been convicted by the Permanent Judicial Commission of the Synod of the Pacific for performing marriages of same-gender couples. Opponents have sought for years to block and then remove Janie from ordination because she is a lesbian but now that she is retired they have taken a different tactic to "shut her down." Sadly, words have hurt her.

We can't tell Lisa or David or Erwin or Jane that words don't hurt. Sometimes words have hurt them worse than stones.

Speaking of stones, and stonings, today's Scripture lesson is about Stephen. Stephen was a follower of Jesus. He was the first layperson commissioned by the Apostles to provide caring ministry to those in need. Many see Stephen as the first deacon in the church. But he became too popular so folks conspired against him and made stories up about him and took him to trial. He spoke the truth and it was a scathing indictment against the courts and against the people. And this made some people really mad.

But before we demonize those people in the courtroom, let's take a moment and reflect. The high priest, who oversaw the court of 23 judges, was a man of God. He was anointed to keep the laws of Moses. The judges were wise men, thoughtful. They took their job of weighing matters of justice seriously. The people in the court must have been faithful, hardworking, earnest believers, otherwise they wouldn't have

wasted their time with this “false teacher.” They believed deeply. They stood up for what they believed in. They were God’s army against a corrupt new religion. And they saw it as their God-given duty to stop Stephen’s ministry by any means necessary. They used the existing church court system. They took Stephen to court. While the story is dramatically told in Acts – that they got so enraged that they dragged him into the streets and stoned him – the fact is that stoning to death was indeed the accepted practice of punishment for the crimes with which he was charged. He knew, they knew, everyone knew that the end of the story was that he would be stoned.

We don’t use sticks and stones in church courts anymore. We use votes. And for many years the votes of the Presbyterian Church have barred our gay brothers and lesbian sisters from ministry. But before we demonize the people who have actively worked against the inclusion of gays and lesbians (bisexuals and transgender) in our denomination, let us remember that they are faithful, hardworking, earnest believers. They believe deeply. They are standing up for what they believe in. They are God’s army against a corruption of their religion. And they see it as their God-given duty to stop the ministry of gays and lesbians by any means necessary. (While I admire their determination, I disagree with their conclusion.) They have been using the existing church court system. They have taken Lisa and David and Erwin and Jane to court.

In response to the rash of gay suicides, a new media campaign called “It Gets Better” was created. For gay teens – bullied and at wits end, sometimes in families that abandon them – ten thousand videos have been created and posted on the Internet by folks as famous as President Obama, movie stars and celebrities. Others by ordinary folks just like you and me. The message is simple “Hang in there – it gets better.” “No longer do you need to choose between your sexuality and your safety. No longer do you need to hide or be shameful. No longer do you need to question whether God wants you to live. It gets better.”

Well friends, I am here today to share good news with you. There is hope in the Presbyterian Church. It has just gotten a little better for gays and lesbians. On May 10<sup>th</sup>, 87 Presbyteries, including our own, secured the necessary votes to insert new language into the Church’s *Book of Order* that replaces language that has been used to categorically bar gays and lesbians from ministry – language that has given permission for opponents to stone them with words and court cases. In essence the *Book of Order* said, “Gays and lesbians need not apply.” Regardless of where you personally come down on the issue of homosexuality, I think we can all agree that blanket discrimination against any one group of people is wrong and has no place in the church. So this recent vote sends a new message. It is a message of hope. It is a message of peace. It is a message of inclusion. It says that there is room in the Presbyterian Church for all people, in all positions of leadership, if they are called by their Session or Presbytery. Some people and churches will leave the denomination because of this. Most will not. Like the debate over the ordination of women in the 60’s, those who remain

Presbyterian will find a way to welcome gay brothers and sisters, just as we learned how to welcome women ministers.

What has just happened in the Presbyterian Church is a good thing. We can now tell young gays and lesbians who are being called to the ministry, “Hang in There. It is Getting Better. No longer do you need to choose between your God-given sexuality and your God-given call to ministry. Or sit in the pews as a young person and feel like there is no place for you in this denomination. No longer do you need to hide or be shameful. No longer do you need to question whether God is calling you to do ministry. Or to live. God is calling you.”

As I see it, friends, we as individual Christians, as a local church, and as a denomination are being offered the chance to no longer lay down our jackets and pick up stones; we are being invited to lay down a welcome mat instead. And to rejoice that God’s church is big enough for all persons – gay or straight – who come here looking to find a friend in Jesus.

And, finally, if any of you happen to have a family member or close friend who is gay or lesbian, call them and tell them that you love them and that God loves them. Assure them that it is getting better. That will be a most welcomed call, I assure you.

And this, my friends, is the good news of the Gospel this morning. Amen.

## **Teen Bullying – It Can Get Better if We Make it Better**

A spate of youth suicides has brought significant media attention to the quiet, everyday suffering of the thousands of young people nationwide who are victims of homophobic bullying. Although the culture as a whole has moved toward greater acceptance of gays and lesbians, bullying remains a major issue. Across the country, concerned adults – straight and gay – are starting to address this problem. The efforts range from national campaigns like Dan Savage’s “It Gets Better” project to grassroots efforts based in schools, churches and communities.

Last year, I volunteered for one of these organizations, a Miami-based nonprofit called YES Institute. YES runs on a small budget but makes a big difference. The Institute was founded fifteen years ago with a mission to prevent suicide and bullying of LGBT teens. To carry out this mission, YES staff travels to nearby community groups, giving presentations about gender and orientation and teaching communication skills so as to empower LGBT youth and their allies to speak out. I signed on as an editorial intern, but as the year went on, I had the opportunity to share my story as a guest speaker, and more importantly, to hear other people share theirs.

YES’s work serves a broad spectrum of organizations – schools, of course, but also churches, hospitals, colleges, police departments, even Disneyworld (it is Florida, after all).

When a veteran math teacher at a nearby school changed gender, YES worked with parents, teachers and students at the school to make sure that the transition went smoothly for everyone else as well. When a police officer came out of the closet in the conservative suburb of Homestead, YES brought in straight and gay cops from Miami Beach to talk about serving on an integrated police force. At a local community college, I had the chance to share my own coming out story with social workers and psychologists in training, many of whom were curious about what it takes for a person to come out to him- or herself even before reaching out to others for help.

For me, the most difficult part of the work was hearing the stories told by the kids at local schools. Edward, who was teased mercilessly for coming out his freshman year, joined a gang and started using drugs to prove he was macho in spite of his sexuality. Carlos, a straight, fifteen-year-old sophomore with earnest eyes and a soft smile, talked about coming under the influence of a group of friends who made him attack another student to show he wasn't gay. The tears in his eyes as he recounted beating up a weaker classmate brought home the reality that often the youthful perpetrators of LGBT bullying are deeply troubled themselves.

Although all school bullying is deplorable, LGBT-related harassment is especially hard on teenagers because the stigma surrounding homosexuality means that traditional sources of support, such as parents and church groups, are often unavailable to gay teens who need help. In my talks at local school groups, I often mentioned that I had studied religion. Often, a nervous-looking high school student approached me afterward to ask about coming out to his or her Christian parents.

But religion could play a redemptive role as well. One of the most remarkable people I met through YES was a middle-aged Cuban immigrant named Rachel, who shared with us the story of her son, a Jesuit in training who had left that path on realizing he was gay. Rachel told us that she had been completely crushed, and talked of praying for her son, going to her priest for help, and urging her son into therapy to heal him. She shared the long and slow process of coming to accept him for who he was.

And then she talked about the ways in which her faith shaped her response to her son's sexuality. She founded an organization to help other Catholic parents in her situation to come to a place of love and understanding. Recognizing that one of the major hurdles to acceptance is the social stigma associated with having a gay son or daughter, she set up a hotline that Catholic parents could call to have private, anonymous conversations with other Catholic parents in the same position. She recruited English- and Spanish-speaking parents from a variety of cultural backgrounds, to better match callers with sympathetic listeners.

My experience with YES introduced me to the ways in which LGBT-related bullying affects the lives of people in circumstances far different from my own. It also taught me a

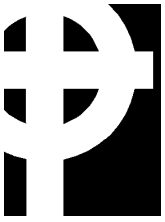
way of approaching the problem that privileges reconciliation and relationship without shying away from confrontation. Because YES's speakers are trained in taking the high road, adept at turning the other cheek and at seeing the motivations behind people's anger, they are often able to defuse hostile audiences and promote peaceful resolution of conflict.

Because of its basic, agreeable goal of keeping youth safe, and its simple model for promoting honest but low-tension communication on controversial issues, YES was able to promote healing and reconciliation in a wide variety of Miami-area communities. As we continue to work toward LGBT inclusion in ordination and marriage in the church, it is worth remembering that we and those who disagree with us all see ourselves as Christians, as part of the body of Christ – hard as it may be to believe at times. Healing and reconciliation within our own faith community will require forgiveness and generosity of spirit from both sides of the divide.

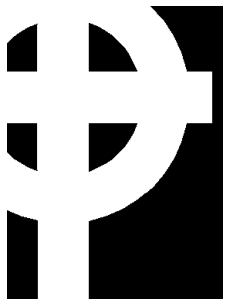
*Margaret Fox is pursuing a joint J.D./M.Div. at Yale Law and Divinity Schools. She is a member of First Presbyterian Church in New Haven.*

## Calendar

<p><b><i>Behold God is doing a new thing.</i></b>          5 June, 7 PM – Worshiping and Enjoying God's Grace          First Presbyterian Church, New Haven.</p>
<p>June 10, 7:30 PM –  <b><i>Bullied</i></b> chronicles one student's ordeal at the hands of anti-gay bullies and offers an inspiring message of hope to those fighting harassment today. Robin McHaelen, Executive Director of True Colors, will lead the discussion afterwards.          The Shoreline Unitarian Universalist Society (SUUS),          297 Boston Post Road in Madison, CT.</p>
<p><b>National MLP Conference 2011</b>  <b>September 2-4</b>  <b>Welcome to the reforming PC USA!</b></p> <p>Registration is open for MLP's National Conference hosted by Third Presbyterian Church in Rochester, NY.          We are delighted that Cynthia Bolbach, Moderator, 219th General Assembly and Rev. Dr. Margaret Aymer Oget, a Professor of New Testament at Johnson C. Smith Theological Seminary at the Interdenominational Theological Center in Atlanta, GA are our conference keynote speakers.          Updated information at <a href="http://www.mlp.org">www.mlp.org</a>.          The conference opens with dinner on Friday, September 2 at 6 p.m. and closes after worship on Sunday, September 4 at Noon. If you have questions please contact us at <a href="mailto:mlpconference@mlp.org">mlpconference@mlp.org</a>.</p>



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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.