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**Mount Merapi, Central Java, seen from the Buddhist temple of Borobudur**

See page 2, inside this cover, for reflections on religion and politics,  
and ways we might witness to faith as a key to peace rather than war.

**In this season of Advent  
may we live in hope  
work for justice  
pray for peace  
and seek to embody it  
in our lives and in our world**



## The Editor's Spot

### Religion - dividing or healing?

The recent eruptions of Mount Merapi on the island of Java (the photo on the front cover shows an earlier, gentler eruption) have brought back many memories for me. The clouds over the mountain carry a majestic beauty – along with the terrible destruction they bring to so many people. I lived for ten years within sight of that beautiful volcano, as a Presbyterian fraternal worker (now called a “mission co-worker” I guess) teaching at Satya Wacana Christian University.

Like many who go to places and people that are strange to them, I learned far more in those ten years than I ever expected. One thing I learned was to respect and learn from a huge variety of religious beliefs and practices. While most of our neighbors in the small city of Salatiga were nominally Muslim, many of them were also members or supporters of the Communist Party, until it was outlawed after a purported coup attempt in 1965. Many were also deeply influenced by the worldviews of the Hindu and Buddhist faiths that had dominated Central Java centuries earlier.

So our city contained mosques, Protestant and Catholic churches, Buddhist temples, little neighborhood shrines to various local spirits, floral sacrifices to gain fertility for the rice fields, and more. A couple hours' driving took us around Mount Merapi to the ancient Hindu temple of Prambanan; a little further brought us to the Buddhist temple of Borobudur.

Through the interwoven web of religions,

people somehow managed to live together quiet peacefully. Now and then we heard reports of Muslims attacking Christian churches (and occasionally of Christians attacking mosques, too). In the aftermath of the 1965 failed communist coup (which was apparently instigated by the CIA, as a means to undercut and destroy the largest communist party outside the “Iron Curtain” countries), people took the chance to settle scores, and hundreds of thousands of people died. Many were executed (or “killed while fleeing”) by the Indonesian army, but many others were slaughtered by civilians in vigilante squads, who used the opportunity to kill people they didn't like, often because they saw those people as not “faithful Muslims.”

The gentle tolerance of the Javanese people cracked, and in the name of religion countless people died.

And during all this, I was learning from my colleagues and students – learning about how people can live in ways shaped deeply by a variety of traditions. Many of my students were from the Central Java area, where so many strands of religion were so closely interwoven. While most of them were Christian, and some were preparing for the ministry, they were shaped by many of the older layers of spiritual traditions too – folk religion, Hinduism and Buddhism of many sorts. These all gave them a depth of patience and tolerance, along with a sensitivity to emotions and to beauty, and a gentleness of manner, that I came to respect and enjoy.

Now, why am I dredging up all these ancient memories? The cloud from Merapi's eruption is just part of the reason. **I've been thinking of how deeply our society is becoming divided, not by religion itself, but by the ways religion is being used.** People have been using religion to throw the mantle of holiness over one political cause or another, and to condemn as evil the people and groups that they see as "different from us," and beyond the limits of our tolerance.

Right now it seems urgent for a group like ours, committed to a faith-based progressive vision for our church and our society, to offer some response to the damage being wrought in the name of religion. **What can we say, how can we act, to be a voice for reason and reconciliation in this deeply divided and fearful world?**

How can we be a "witness for peace" in our nation's religious and political life?

We might well begin with our Reformed heritage. After all, if John Calvin and others had accepted the absolutist claims of the Roman Catholic Church, we would still be Catholics. While the Reformers were certainly not against religion, they stood clearly against absolutism. This was not something new to Luther and Calvin. After all, if Jesus had not challenged the absolutist claims of the Pharisees and of the Roman Empire, his followers would not have created the communities based on grace and love and openness, which eventually grew into the world-wide Christian church.

So we follow them in recognizing that religion is a human enterprise. It is a human enterprise, just as much as politics, and the science of biology, and the art of dancing and everything else that we do. Religion is our very human effort to make sense of life, especially in light of our many and varied experiences of what we call "the holy" – the mysterious, numi-

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nous, transcendent experiences that touch our lives now and then.

Does that mean that religion is not “true,” that we’re just making it all up? Not at all. We’re trying to understand our everyday (and sometimes out-of-the-ordinary) experiences, just as physicists try to make sense of all those blips and numbers they see and measure in their laboratories, and that shape our material world. But the physicists sometimes get things wrong, and then other physicists do more experiments and come up with new theories to correct the mistaken ones. They never claim they have a complete picture of how the physical world works, but they keep getting better pictures, atom by atom.

So in religion, while it differs from physics in pretty obvious ways, we keep trying to get a better picture of how things really are, even as we keep reminding ourselves (and keep forgetting again) that God and God’s doings in the universe are infinitely beyond our understanding. So in our religions, as in our sciences, we have every reason to be humble – modest in our claims, cautious in our assertions, always open to the Beyond.

Unfortunately, though, humility is a scarce virtue for religious folk. Religious faith – especially monotheistic faith, it seems – seems to lead people to claim they alone have The Truth, and everyone else has it wrong. So we build walls to protect our True Religion, in the sure knowledge that we’re right and everybody else is going to hell.

Right now it looks as if the religious wall-building efforts are getting stronger by the day, with the Israeli “security wall” as our clearest example. The recent U.S. election

campaign provides plenty of examples, too. Yet we are trying to follow Jesus, who kept pointing to a God whose love enfolds *all* people and calls us to love them as well. Just as Jesus sent his disciples out into the countryside to preach and to heal, so he urges us outward, pulling down the walls, opening doors of welcome and windows to let in new light, new truth.

One of the paradoxes of the Christian imperative to engage in outreach – mission, evangelism, whatever you want to call it – is that its seeming arrogance (“We have the Right Faith for you!”) in fact leads the missionary into contact with people outside his or her faith community, and into relationships that often lead to mutual respect and understanding. So I went to Indonesia, and found myself learning from and appreciating those whom I had gone out to “save.”

Our theological tradition reminds us in many ways that we do not own God, and that God is infinitely beyond both our understanding and our control. Paul Tillich and H. Richard Niebuhr both spoke of “the God beyond God,” who stands beyond (or behind or above or whatever you choose) all the many gods of our many faiths. What Tillich called “the Protestant principle” reminds us that no one person or institution has the whole truth. That alone should challenge us to be open to other faith traditions, even as it reassures us that such openness is in no way a betrayal of our own faith.

So we might begin to witness to our church, and our society, about the essential openness of the Christian faith. But mere talking is not enough. The Buddhist monk and teacher Thich Nhat Hanh, in *Living Buddha, Living Christ*, talks about the need for “communities of

practice.” He is calling for groups of people who are intentionally living into – practicing – the disciplines and life changes called for and made possible by their faith traditions. For him, that includes the Buddhist practice of mindfulness – a deepening awareness of the self, and the myriad ways in which the self is deluded by taking itself and its ideas of the world too seriously, along with the Christian practice of a praying and loving community.

Learning *just to be*, instead of always busying myself with *doing* (even doing justice!) may help me learn that what makes me unhappy is thinking that I can achieve happiness by my own efforts. My unhappiness comes from trying to avoid uncomfortable things in my life, and to protect myself from all the threats that the world holds over me. Thich Nhat Hanh has reminded me of what Jesus has taught us too: That we cannot save ourselves by our own efforts, and cannot achieve happiness by striving for it. “For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake will find it.” (Matthew 16.25)

**What difference might it make to our congregations, to our denomination, and to us, if we began forming such small, intentional communities of practice, committed to openness toward our neighbors – especially those with whom we seem to have the most serious differences?**

**What, might be some practical steps we might take to bear witness to a God whose love is for *all* creatures, not just for a favored few?**

Here are a few ways we might put our faith into action:

- Supporting social policies that affirm

and show respect for all persons/groups/species. As Presbyterians we might do this through General Assembly resolutions, and through our offices in Washington and at the UN.

- Strengthening programs in our denomination and our congregations that reach out to groups that are “different,” and that are being subjected to hostility, suspicion, and persecution because of their differences.
- Helping our church and society remember that faith casts out (or at least reduces) fear, and it’s fear that drives us to build walls and conduct wars (holy and otherwise) against those whom we fear, just because they seem different.
- Reminding ourselves and others how often Jesus told his followers “do not be afraid.” He knew they would face threats, but he knew also that in God’s care they would not be overcome, destroyed.

God calls us to work for peace and justice in the world God has created. Such efforts involve us in conflict and struggle as we face the huge differences and tensions the divide us as human beings. But even in the struggle, may we face the world always rooted in a deep, calm awareness that God’s world is one, we are one with one another even in our differences. The walls *will* fall, peace *will* come, the reign of God will be made real among us. We can rejoice in being called to play our small parts in that great cosmic adventure.

Doug King

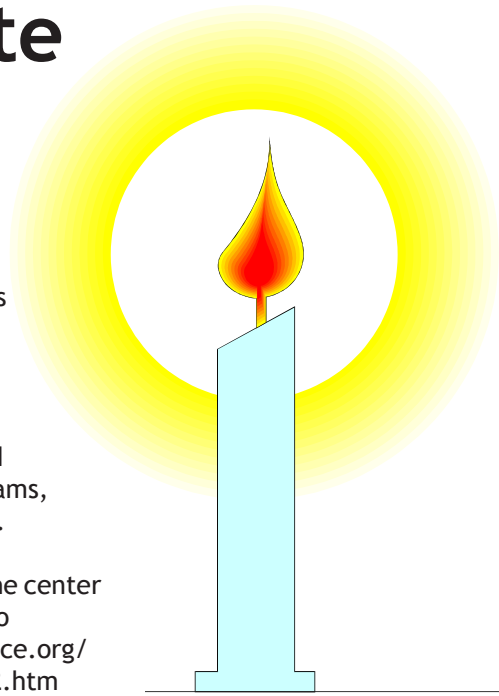
# Celebrate

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## The Mission of Presbyterian Voices for Justice

We are a playful and passionate community  
of women and men in the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.)  
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an end to war and all forms of violence,  
and a justice-loving shalom over all the earth.

We commit to risking the transformation of our own selves  
and our organization  
to live into this vision,  
even as we invite both church and society  
to meet this challenge.

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## Another take on religion and politics

# Putting Hussein in Christmas

by Rita Nakashima Brock

Speaking of the politicization of religion (or is it the religification of politics?), Dr. Rita Nakashima Brock has generously shared a short essay she wrote not long after the election of Barack Obama as President in 2008, in which she offers a fresh look at the inter-religion dimensions of Christmas. Rita Brock identifies herself as an “engaged theologian,” who has been a central organizer of the Truth Commission on Conscience in War.

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During the 2008 election, the right wing emphasized President Obama’s middle name to suggest that he was not a Christian – as if there is something wrong with being a Muslim, as Colin Powell noted. Nathan Thornburg at *Time* < <http://www.time.com/time/politics/article/0,8599,1718255,00.html> > criticized Candidate Obama for choosing not to defend his middle name and continuing to reinforce the right wing use of it to stir up Islamophobia.

As I stood on the mall that cold January day in 2009, I heard President-Elect Obama swear his oath as Barack Hussein Obama. It was a lovely moment. The use of his middle name as a slur suggested that Christians cannot respect the truths of other religious traditions. This slur is a betrayal of its founder Jesus Christ.

The nativity story in the gospel of Matthew reports an inter-religious convergence. Jesus’ family was Jewish (and he was, too!). Tat-Siong Benny Liew, a New Testament scholar, reads the story of the magi as an interfaith revelation of the truth of Christmas. The magi, from Persia (Iran), were Zoroastrian monotheists who had their own ideas about a Shoshyant, a

hoped-for Messiah who would restore justice and endow blessings. < <http://www.iranian.com/MahmoudSadri/2006/December/Christmas110/index.html> > Because the Persian King Cyrus helped the Jews rebuild their temple after the exile, Jewish leaders had regarded Zoroastrianism favorably. Liew notes that the Zoroastrian magi knew a Jewish savior had arrived, who was important to the world.

Mahmoud Sadri in “Gift of the Magi” < <http://www.iranian.com/MahmoudSadri/2006/December/Christmas110/index.html> > suggests Iranian-Americans should also celebrate Christmas because Jews developed the idea of a messiah from Zoroastrianism. Sadri notes Christmas also has meaning for Muslims, who honor Mary, the mother of Jesus, in the Quran 19, 15-34, which also tells the story of the nativity and virgin birth.

Christians in the fourth century adapted Christmas from a winter solstice holiday for the Roman god Saturn. Later, Christians in Northern Europe blended Christmas with their winter fire-lighting festivals and sacred trees. These festivities apparently bothered the Puritans, who outlawed the observance of Christmas in England in

1647. Jehovah's Witnesses avoid the holiday because Christmas is inextricably mixed up with paganism.

Exclusivist Christian claims have wrecked havoc in the world – especially from the beginning of the crusades in the 11th century. Christian leader Bernard of Clairvaux coined the term “malecide,” killing evil-doers, to replace “homicide,” killing humans. Instead of condemning any homicide as a sin, as the early church had done, the medieval church promoted malecide as a way to atone for sin. Killing Muslims and Christians who opposed the crusades, such as the Cathars, became an act of holy war against the enemies of God. Christian leaders, such as Bishop Anselm of Canterbury, taught a piety of intense terror of divine judgment and hell and fear of human diversity.

Recovering the multi-religious dimensions of Christmas affirms the inclusive, hopeful, and open-hearted sensibility of the gospel accounts, grounded in a God so generous and loving that all creation is saved by the nativity. Let's celebrate Jesus' birth as a multi-cultural festival of life's goodness in religious communities that nurture justice, non-violence, peaceful cooperation, and respect and compassion for others. It is a happy holiday indeed, and Hussein would be welcome.

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This was originally posted on December 09, 2008, on the Beacon Broadside blog, with coauthor Rebecca Parker.  
<http://www.beaconbroadside.com/broadside/2008/12/putting-hussein.html>

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## Some resources for issues coming to presbyteries

A number of the most important actions of the 219th General Assembly are now being sent to the presbyteries for their action, to confirm or reject them as amendments to the PC(USA) Book of Order.

We're providing resources to help inform the reflection and debate, along with updates on the voting.

Our three areas of primary interest are:

- Amendment 10-A, which would remove the current ban on lesbian/gay/bisexual/transgender persons being considered as possible candidates for ordination as elder or ministers. (Beginning on this page.) For more material, go to [http://presbyvoicesforjustice.org/2010/presbyteries\\_act\\_on\\_10A.htm](http://presbyvoicesforjustice.org/2010/presbyteries_act_on_10A.htm)
- Amendment 10-2, which would add the Belhar Confession to our Book of Confessions. (Beginning on page 16.) For more material, go to [http://presbyvoicesforjustice.org/2010/presbyteries\\_act\\_on\\_belhar.htm](http://presbyvoicesforjustice.org/2010/presbyteries_act_on_belhar.htm)
- Amendment 10-1, which would adopt the new Form of Government that was approved by the Assembly. (Beginning on page 21.) For more material, go to <http://presbyvoicesforjustice.org/2010/resbyteries%20act%20on%20FOG.htm>

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## A Resource on GLBTQ Ordination

**Answering common arguments against LGBTQ ordination and making our own in favor of inclusion.**

**by the Rev. Doug Hagler and the Rev. Aric Clark**

This is available in easy-to-print PDF format on our website, at [http://presbyvoicesforjustice.org/LGBTQ\\_Ord\\_argts%20Portrait.pdf](http://presbyvoicesforjustice.org/LGBTQ_Ord_argts%20Portrait.pdf)

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### Common Arguments Against

#### “Homosexuality is an abomination”

The Hebrew word, [*toevah*], sometimes translated as ‘abomination’ or ‘detestable’, is also applied to the eating of shellfish in Levitical law, among other things, and seems to be a ritual-uncleanliness term, sometimes used to describe idolatry. Of course, it is not

translated as ‘abomination’ when applied to eating shellfish, because abomination is a word specifically chosen in an attempt to paint a particular act as more heinous than the others listed in the same section of law. This is the long-standing translators’ bias impinging on the Biblical text.

Furthermore, the act described as ‘abomination’ was not describing a committed, monogamous relationship between two

people of the same gender - which was not a category considered in Bronze Age Middle-Eastern thought. Rather, the 'abomination' in question would have been an instance of adultery and/or having sex with ritual prostitutes.

### **“Homosexuality is the ‘sin of Sodom’”**

The 'sin of Sodom' is inhospitality. Nowhere in scripture is the destruction of Sodom linked with same-sex activity of any kind. The story immediately preceding the account of the destruction of Sodom is of Abraham receiving the three strangers and being hospitable to them. This is contrasted with the reaction of the men of Sodom who seek to gang-rape the angel visitors while Lot protects them under the auspice that they have accepted his hospitality. Ezekiel, in listing the sins of Sodom lists pride, idleness, greed and *inhospitality*, but never mentions homosexuality. Jesus himself cites this reason by analogy claiming that the towns which are inhospitable to his disciples will end up worse than Sodom or Gomorrah. The association between Sodom and homosexuality is largely the fault of bad translation. The Hebrew word, [*qadesh*], meaning 'temple-prostitute' has often been mis-translated 'sodomite' though it bears no linguistic relationship to the city of Sodom.

### **“Homosexuality is like pedophilia or bestiality”**

Pedophilia in any circumstances constitutes rape because, by legal definition, a minor cannot be a consensual sex partner. Pedophilia is also a violation by any measurement because it is forcing sexual activity on someone who is not physically or psychologically ready for it. Love and sex between two consenting adults who

are the same gender has nothing to do with pedophilia whatsoever, whether legally, morally or theologically.

Bestiality is a person having sex with an animal - this comparison is offensive, as if a same-gender partner was not even a human being. Love and sex between two people of the same gender has nothing to do with bestiality whatsoever, whether legally, morally or theologically.

### **“Homosexuality is like incest or polyamory”**

It must first be noted that the Bible openly approves of both incest and polyamory. Because of this fact, those wishing to make a purely "Biblical" argument should accept this as a point *in favor of* LGBTQ ordination. Nonetheless, this argument is false. Incest is very often also rape and sexual abuse, and in cases where it is not rape/abuse it risks offspring with severe genetic abnormalities. Incest is something that, despite the Bible, we have come to reject over time, even though royal families practiced it well into the last century. Polyamory is also something that the Bible approves of but which we reject. It is now our assumption that fidelity is best expressed, children best raised, etc. by monogamous parents. It should be noted that at least 50% of Americans, through divorce, practice serial polyamory, and that this is no bar to ordination. Homosexuality is not like either incest or polyamory.

### **“Homosexuality is unnatural”**

No matter how we interpret the word "natural", this claim is false. That homosexual activity is observed in nature among other mammals is incontrovertible. Even if no other mammal engaged in any

homosexual activity, there is no question that such activity occurs among humans, meaning that it is indeed entirely “natural”.

If the claim is that homosexual activity is “unnatural” because it does not lead to procreation, then we would have to condemn all sex that is not aimed at procreation as equally “unnatural”, and may have to consider preventing married adults who are not parents from being ordained - not to mention anyone on birth control, anyone who masturbates, etc.

If the claim is that homosexual activity is “unnatural” because it is dangerous or perverse, we should bear in mind that there are no sexual behaviors that LGBTQ persons engage in that straight persons do not do in far greater numbers. Homosexuality is natural by any reasonable definition of the word.

### **“Homosexuality is dangerous and/or unhealthy”**

As mentioned above, this argument is nonsensical because there is nothing, *no specific sexual activity*, that LGBTQ persons engage in which straight persons do not engage in in greater numbers. If we are going to have sexual-act litmus tests for ordination, we should at least be fair about it. But the above claim, that LGBTQ activities are somehow especially or inherently dangerous or unhealthy, makes no sense whatsoever, because there are no exclusively LGBTQ sex acts for us to consider.

### **“Homosexuality is a choice”**

Putting the ocean of anecdotal evidence against this claim aside, there is no scientific consensus supporting the claim that homosexuality is a choice in the vast

majority of cases - quite the opposite, no credible American scientific organization would support that claim. Because sexuality is more than brain chemistry, scientific studies will never tell us all we want to know about ourselves, but the evidence that homosexuality is not a choice in the vast majority of cases is consistent and overwhelming.

### **“Sexual orientation can be changed with ‘reparative’ therapy”**

Even in cases where “reparative” therapy isn’t simply abuse, this is not true in the vast majority of cases. The fact remains that some “reparative” therapies are abusive and even criminal. Beyond Ex-Gay is one example of an organization and conference for the survivors of these therapies. Truth Wins Out is another. Attempts to change a person’s sexual identity overwhelmingly fail (except in a few rare cases), which leads to an escalation of force used by those who are committed to the false idea that a person’s sexual identity is a malfunction of some kind. This is a view that is not shared by any credible American scientific organization, and should not be encouraged by the church.

### **“Homosexuality damages society and/or traditional marriage”**

Claims like these are actually impossible to demonstrate or prove, but they are common nonetheless - perhaps for that very reason. There is little question that fighting over homosexuality damages the members of society who are denied equal rights under the law and are treated as second-class citizens. As for marriage, we don’t think any responsible observer would attribute our current problems with marriage in the US to LGBTQ persons.

There is no situation where a societal ill can be legitimately laid at the feet of the LGBTQ community, where no other causes or circumstances can be identified. The above argument is rendered meaningless, and is simply an expression of fear, or perhaps frustration, deserving a pastoral response - but not validation.

Furthermore, 'traditional marriage' is a recent social construct. Our contemporary romantic ideal was a terrifying innovation 100 years ago. Traditionally, marriage has involved polyandry, polygyny, surrogate pregnancy, concubinage, arranged marriages, marriage between children, and others. The Bible approves of at least 8 types of marriage, including marrying war hostages, marrying slaves, marrying up to 700 women, marrying a sibling's widow, marrying one's rape victim, and others. We rightly reject these many forms of 'traditional' marriage.

### **“Paul condemned homosexuality”**

The passage from Romans 1 popularly cited as the most damning New Testament condemnation of Homosexuality is a warning against the dangers of self-righteousness, not a polemic against Homosexuality. If anything it ought to be read as a strong caution against the belief that we can keep the church pure by keeping the wrong kind of people out. We are all in exactly the same position before the grace of Jesus Christ and no rule, least of all one as arbitrary as G-6.0106b, can ensure the faithfulness of the body.

Furthermore, we do not support every claim we can cherry-pick from the epistles. Paul also condemns women speaking in assembly or uncovering their hair. As a church, our polity should not, and does not, depend on proof-texts lifted out of context. Rather, Paul and the early church

consistently defied social boundaries as they welcomed, as equals, many excluded and supposedly 'unclean' persons.

### **“Ordaining LGBTQ people makes it harder to work with churches in the rest of the world”**

To what degree are we willing to compromise our conscience and our polity for the sake of 'getting along'? Many churches in other countries do not ordain women either - it is a fact that our ordination of women makes it more difficult to work with ultraconservative denominations and some international churches. Shall we cease to ordain women then? There are places in Africa that are currently debating whether to jail and execute LGBTQ persons. Must we deny our reason and conscience to support jailing and executing sexual minorities as well? We are better off as a witness of justice, equality and conscience for the whole world to see. This is the way the church has always been at its best, choosing the love of God for all persons over the injustices of the world, loving the unclean as Jesus did.

## **Arguments in Favor of LGBTQ Inclusion**

### **Justification is by faith**

Justification comes by grace through faith and not through any human effort. Establishing a suspect standard of holiness for service in the Church contradicts our confessions where we proclaim that all have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God, but equally that all have been set free from bondage to sin and death in Christ. We are freed for service - a service which we unjustly and selectively deny to some who Christ has claimed.

### **We are sanctified by the Holy Spirit and gifted for service**

The Holy Spirit is the source of all holiness. Just as we are not saved by our own effort, we do not grow in grace by our own sweat either. There are no actions of repentance, charity, or mercy that any individual could perform which would make them worthy of the Ministry of Word and Sacrament. Our worthiness lies not in our personal righteousness but in the sanctifying work of the Holy Spirit in our lives, evidenced by the gifts of the Spirit.

### **LGBTQ persons have clearly demonstrated spiritual gifts for ministry**

There are among us at this very moment LGBTQ individuals with an interior sense of call who many have testified are gifted with spiritual charisms for ordained ministry. That there have been in the past, are currently, and will be in the future, powerful preachers, teachers, leaders, and caregivers who happen to be LGBTQ persons is amply witnessed. Since ordained ministry in the Reformed tradition is strictly a division of function, and not of holiness, there can be no justification for denying their gifts for service. With Peter we ask “surely no one can stand in the ways of the Holy Spirit?”

### **We call unclean what God calls clean**

“What I have called clean, let no one call unclean.” In the Acts of the Apostles, God encourages Peter to break the Law of Moses regarding purity - God directly tells Peter to commit the ‘abominations’ of eating shellfish with Gentiles. Peter’s vision is about the continuing expansion and inclusion of God’s call, begun in the OT with the many calls to hospitality and love of neighbor as well as aliens in the

land. Even if we pretended that the OT condemned consensual, adult same-sex love (which it does not mention, much less condemn), that love would be right there on the table-cloth...with the shellfish. This is not Peter’s innovation, nor his revisionism, nor his denial of God’s authority, any more than it is for those who support LGBTQ rights and inclusion for now. It is merely the continuation of God’s ever-expanding call, breaking down barriers wherever the Spirit is found.

### **We are made a community of equals in Christ**

Male nor female, Jew nor Gentile, slave nor free. Neither how we are born, nor who we are politically or socially organized, nor how we are economically related to each other, is to have any impact on our status as children of God in Christ. All children of God should be welcomed in ministry. We extrapolate this powerful good news in many ways already - beyond ‘Jew and Gentile’ to other races and nations; beyond ‘slave or free’ to other economic systems and injustices. The community of equals in Christ extends to LGBTQ persons as well.

### **Jesus is silent on homosexuality, and nowhere in the Bible are loving monogamous LGBTQ relationships dealt with at all**

Though Paul mentions it twice, Jesus does not talk about homosexuality at all in the Gospels that we have as canon. An argument from absence isn’t necessarily very compelling, but it is worth mentioning that for over 30 years we have energetically argued over something that the authors of the Gospels did not feel was worth mentioning even once one way or another. Paul, the first to write about Jesus

whose manuscripts we have, encouraged people not to marry at all because he expected the imminent return of Jesus in his lifetime. He did not speak of committed LGBTQ relationships any more than the Hebrew scriptures did.

### **Our first and most important ordination is in baptism**

Our first and most important ordination is in Baptism, where we are adopted into Jesus Christ and given the ministry of every disciple. Ordination to a specific ministry in the church, whether of an Elder, Deacon, or Minister of Word and Sacrament does not confer any ontological change, override, supersede, or even amend the prior ordination into the ministry of the baptised. The distinction we make in the offices of the church is one of function and not of holiness. By saying that a baptised, called, and gifted individual is ineligible for a particular ministry by virtue of supposed insufficient holiness we are denying their Baptism. If one's Baptism can be annulled by supposed sin, or is dependent on our effort and perfection, then we are all *doomed*.

### **The priesthood is composed of all believers**

In the Reformed tradition, from the very beginning, it was understood that every believer is responsible as part of the priesthood that priesthood was not a special ontological status conferred by the church, but was rather a general calling conferred by the grace of God on all baptised believers. The fact is that every LGBTQ Christian is *already* called to ministry.

### **Exclusion of LGBTQ persons adds nothing of value to the ordination standards we already have**

Ignore for the moment that the average American becomes sexually active at 16 and gets married at 28, and that simple 'chastity in singleness' does not begin to address this societal reality in believers' lives. Apart from the exclusion of LGBTQ persons from ordination, G-6.0106b does nothing whatsoever to further or deepen the Book of Order's definition of ordained office or requirements for those seeking ordination. It can be omitted without losing anything of value.

### **LGBTQ persons already serve in other denominations and organizations, proving dire predictions false every day**

LGBTQ persons are serving in ordained ministry in various denominations currently and the predicted denominational collapses have not taken place. The real harm is being done however by our continuing to fight over this issue, which damages the peace, unity and purity of the church particular and universal, as well as the witness of the church to the world. Furthermore, we must never shrink from doing what is right for the sake of protecting our denomination. Even if acting justly causes a mass exodus from our denomination, that is no reason to continue to act unjustly.

### **No church that does not choose a LGBTQ minister, Elder or Deacon will ever have to ordain one**

Even if the PC(USA) is to begin ordaining LGBTQ persons this very moment, there is no church anywhere in the denomination which would be forced to accept any particular LGBTQ pastor, Elder or Deacon against its will. It is the Presbytery's

function to examine candidates for Ministry of Word and Sacrament, and that will continue without interruption when G-6.0106b is erased from the Book of Order. The fact is that G-6.0106b does not protect anyone from anything. All it does is ensure that people who are demonstrably called to pastoral ministry are not allowed to live that calling out, and churches in need of pastoral leadership are unable to find it.

### **The church is currently lending tacit support to mocking, bullying, torment and exclusion suffered by LGBTQ persons**

LGBTQ persons are being mocked, bullied, tormented, and discriminated against at this very moment, possibly jailed or even executed overseas. Some in recent days have taken their own lives as a direct result of this hateful treatment. Every second we fail to stand up and declare unequivocally that God loves them and they are welcome, is a second we acquiesce to bigotry and tacitly support bullies. It is time to begin undoing the harm official church policies of exclusion have wrought.

### **Conclusion**

There are not even selfish reasons to retain G-6.0106b and continue to unjustly exclude LGBTQ persons from ordination. That single clause will not prevent frustrated congregations from leaving the denomination, nor will it convince parishioners frustrated with decades of conflict over this issue to remain. It will not maintain even a veneer of peace, unity and purity in the church. G-6.0106b does not put our current debates over ordination to rest. What it means is that barely more than half of the denomination is able to force its interpretation of ordination on every individual Presbytery, congrega-

tion, and member of the Presbyterian Church (USA).

Getting rid of G-6.0106b will not force a single Presbytery or congregation to ordain or accept a single candidate they do not vote to accept. What it will do is enable thousands of congregations and dozens of Presbyteries who have been a slight minority in the denomination right now to consider, just consider, LGBTQ persons for ordination where they might be called to serve.

In a situation where believers disagree in good faith according to their conscience, where 30 years or argument has not made any progress in producing consensus, it seems most reasonable, most just, and best to allow freedom of conscience. Nothing is preserved when 51% of the denomination maintains a specific litmus-test and forces 49% to apply it. There is no other clause like G-6.0106b which is aimed at a specific issue in the same way in all of the Book of Order. G-6.0106b is an aberration in our polity, and we are better off in every conceivable way without it. It is not justified ethically, rationally, politically nor theologically. It is time for us to vote in favor of inclusion.

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Have questions about one of the points raised or want to see citations to support these arguments?

Go to:

<http://twofriarsandafool.blogspot.com/>

# A Brief Study of the Confession of Belhar

prepared by the Rev. Lorelei Hillman

This paper is also available in easy-to-print PDF format, with graphics, at [http://presbyvoicesforjustice.org/Belhar\\_Study.pdf](http://presbyvoicesforjustice.org/Belhar_Study.pdf)

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## Psalm 106:6-12

Both we and our ancestors have sinned;  
 we have committed iniquity, have done wickedly.  
 Our ancestors, when they were in Egypt,  
 did not remember the abundance of your steadfast love,  
 but rebelled against the Most High at the Sea of Reeds.  
 Yet he saved them for his name's sake,  
 so that he might make known his mighty power.  
 He rebuked the Sea of Reeds, and it became dry;  
 he led them through the deep as through a desert.  
 So he saved them from the hand of the foe,  
 and delivered them from the hand of the enemy.  
 The waters covered their adversaries;  
 not one of them was left.  
 Then they believed his words;  
 they sang his praises.

## A Little History

Apartheid caught the force of world disapproval in the early 1990's, but it had been established as a policy of the government of South Africa – made legal and enforced – in 1948. “How could this have happened?” we ask today; “How could a nation institutionalize racism in such a way?” Americans, because we have our own history of slavery and deeply-rooted racism, know the ongoing struggle to eradicate it from society. “How could a country which had avoided this until 1948 have suddenly decided that apartheid was okay?” For the answer, we have to look into South Africa's past and understand the role of the church.

The European settlers in South Africa were predominantly Dutch and English. As they moved to this new land, they brought their own particular religious beliefs and traditions with them. Among them were missionaries, who were zealous to introduce people to Christianity. The work of nation-building is extensive, so the settlers quickly began to import labor from outside the area (primarily India), as well as drawing from native groups.

Churches for white settlers were established along familiar lines of theology and polity. Dutch settlers established the **Dutch Reformed Church in South Africa**. Missionaries began to plant churches with the groups of people they ministered to, which

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varied widely in terms of economic and social status, and ethnic background or tribal affiliation. As the different individual churches grew and developed, so did their church structures, affected by the resources and traditions they interacted with.

### **Theology as Rationalization**

Abraham Kuijper (1837-1920) was a popular Dutch theologian of the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. In response to the dissolution of the concept of the divine right of kings (sovereigns are placed by God and therefore to be respected and obeyed no matter what their decisions might be), Kuijper developed the idea of ‘sphere sovereignty’ – that God had placed leaders and groups in varieties of positions of power, and that within their right ‘sphere’ they held divine right. The white Dutch Reformed church members interpreted this to have meaning along racial lines – *races* were *spheres*, and should therefore be separated. At the same time, the promised unity found in the Biblical texts was redefined as a hope for the next life, rather than a truth to be lived in this life.

In 1829 some of the rural congregations of the Dutch Reformed Church in South Africa asked their denomination’s permission to separate facilities for whites from those of blacks. The synod considered that there was no distinction between those who had been baptized in the name of the triune God, and refused to allow this segregation. Within 25 years, however, they reversed the earlier decision. The rationale was that this allowed those who were “weaker” (1 Corinthians 10:28), and could not accept full unity of the body, to continue to worship. Church services, and thereafter church facilities, separated along racial lines. All non-white members were designated as the **Dutch Reformed Mission Church**.

White Christians knew that this action was wrong. In order to give it authority, they had to pointedly ignore large segments of the Bible, and set aside their understanding of the sacraments (baptism and communion), and drastically restructure their ecclesiology. A theology which Kuijper had introduced in Europe – specifically in the Netherlands – as a formula for political theocracy became social and economic slavery in South Africa. Apartheid (“apart-ness” in Dutch and Afrikaans), had begun in the church itself, and from the church became rooted in the secular realm.

“...we can see the direction that the Dutch Reformed Church in South Africa took as it dealt with racial discrimination. First, it said that the unity of the church meant that all were welcome at the table. Scripture and theology led them to that decision. Second, when racial pressures mounted, the church allowed for the establishment of separate churches and services. Third, what was allowed became what was required. Finally, the church created a theology of apartheid that not only required separation of the races; it said it was God’s divine will for the entire country. At first, the Dutch Reformed Church in South Africa believed that the unity of the church had to be expressed tangibly in worship and sacraments. Over time, they developed an anemic belief in the unity of the church as an invisible and spiritual reality only.”



As this separation became entrenched, there were further divisions in the body of Christ. The Dutch Reformed Mission Church gradually became a ministry with “colored” people (non-whites of a variety or mix of backgrounds, excluding black Africans). **The Dutch Reformed Church in Africa** was composed of blacks. **The Indian Reformed Church in South Africa** included those whose ancestry came from the nation of India. Over the same span of time, what had begun as *permission* to separate developed into *policy* within the church, and through the church into the community’s social and economic structures. In 1948 it was legalized by the South African government, and thereafter enforced by the police.

In the 1950’s and 1960’s a new theology began to form through the Catholic Church in Latin America. Based on the view that one of Jesus’ primary roles was as Messiah, or liberator, the new “liberation theology” was a response to the suffering and misery of the poor and the powerless. A Christian moral reaction to systemic injustice, this approach made the claim that ‘God preferred the poor.’ As Jesus Christ liberates the individual from sin, so he liberates the church from its collusion with social sin – and makes the Christian responsible for their part in either maintaining or changing the status quo. Although this is an extremely brief description of the liberation theology movement, the perception that human beings were not only able, but duty-bound to take an active part in creating a society which made the promised ‘new heavens and new earth’ a reality swept out of the Catholic Church in Latin America and took hold around the world.

The intersection of liberation theology and apartheid put tremendous pressure on the government of South Africa. At the same time, an international ecumenical movement brought Christians together across denominational boundaries. Issues common to the church in many countries began to get focused attention, including apartheid. In 1970 the World Council of Churches created a program to combat racism. The theology which had been used to validate apartheid was declared heresy in denomination after denomination – by 1982 the World Alliance of Reformed Churches bluntly called apartheid a sin, and its justification ‘a travesty of the Gospel.’

That same year, the Dutch Reformed Mission Church composed the Confession of Belhar; four years later they adopted it as a formal document of their church. The social situation in South Africa was also growing more and more tense, as apartheid’s economic results drove non-whites to violence. The international community, recognizing the systemic wrong of apartheid, began to isolate South Africa politically and economically. These were important matters, but for the framers of the Confession of Belhar, there was even more at stake – apartheid, they said, called into question the nature and use of Scripture, for if both whites and non-whites could read the same Bible and come to such drastically opposed conclusions, what does the Gospel mean? Again, what will be the nature of the Church? If we are one, with Christ as our head, how can the separation of apartheid be allowed and even promoted *by the church*? The confession they authored was not a statement of a *new* understanding, but a strong affirmation of what was already known.

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Once composed, the Confession of Belhar became an effective tool against the Church's sin of apartheid – written by the Church, for the Church, to remind the Church of what it must be. Study of the Confession provoked discussion, and discussion led to transformation. Faced with making a decision between upholding the status quo or adopting a more biblical, theologically correct approach to unity, the black Dutch Reformed Church in Africa joined with the colored Dutch Reformed Mission Church in affirming that the church must be united in Christ, across all divides, and in opposition to social structures that tried to preserve apartheid.

The Confession of Belhar played a significant role in the years following the end of apartheid (1994) as well. Not only did it bring about re-unification of the colored and black churches in South Africa (now the Uniting Reformed Church), but its message of reconciliation, of unity in Christ, powerfully affected the way non-white Christians in South Africa responded to their release from segregation. The same document that had given them strength to stand up against injustice gave them the moral authority to move beyond their incredible pain and bitterness toward those who had caused their suffering. In Christ, they sought true unity, freedom for all persons, and protection for the powerful as well as for the powerless. In doing so, they set an example for all in the Church to follow:

*“...the church as the possession of God must stand where the Lord stands...”*

### **Why Should the PC(USA) Consider Adopting the Confession of Belhar?**

Our discussion of the Confession of Belhar has been prompted by similar discussion in some of our affiliated denominations. As we take these relationships seriously, we explore with our Christian brothers and sisters theological matters which they are considering. Our Book of Confessions, one of the two parts to our denomination's constitution, contains eleven creeds, confessions and catechisms which not only speak to who we have considered ourselves to be at points in our history, but also actively help us understand and be formed by the faith of our Christian predecessors.

Having come out of South Africa and the context of apartheid, the Confession of Belhar is uniquely the voice of those who have suffered the Church's sin of rationalizing and theologizing racism. It draws from the strength of the faith of the oppressed themselves, and not from the voices of the powerful speaking on their behalf. Confessions are statements of what the Church believes – not only in the intellectual sense of our understanding of the Gospel, but in terms of what we hold dear about our faith. Each document included in the Book of Confessions takes a particular stand, saying (in effect), “We hold this to be truth for us” as the body of Christ. Each comes out of a specific context and deals with a specific issue which the Church faced at that time. Certainly, the issue of racism is one which cannot be ignored or denied, as it affects believers in this nation as well as in South Africa. The Confession of Belhar's deeply biblical clarity on the complete unity of the Church is relevant to us today, just as it has been for Christians in other countries.

### **Why Not the Belhar?**

Some feel that the material covered in the Confession of Belhar is already available through the other confessions in our Book of Confessions, specifically through the Declaration of Barmen (which exhorts the church to stand against being co-opted by the state and sets the Church's allegiance to Jesus Christ above their national sentiments), and the Confession of 1967 (which describes the primary ministry of the church as reconciliation).

While the wording of the Confession is fitting for its particular issue, there is concern that it might be used on a broader basis – specifically to strike against the full inclusion of gay, lesbian, bi-sexual, and transgender persons in the life of the church. Those who oppose ordination of GLBT persons in active relationships are wary that the Confession of Belhar might 'open a door' to changes in our denomination's constitution that would allow for this to happen.

There are some who think that the Confession of Belhar has already become outdated; they would rather consider a confession which goes further in naming and responding to additional contemporary issues, such as full inclusion of GLBT persons, the role of women, utilization of gender-equal language for people and for God in our statements of faith, ecumenical and interreligious relationships and more.

### **What Happens Next?**

Addition of the Confession of Belhar to the Book of Confessions has been approved and recommended by the General Assembly which met this summer. At the November 13, 2010 meeting of the Presbytery of Grand Canyon, our commissioners (pastors and lay commissioners) will vote – if a majority of the presbyteries in the denomination approve it, it will be adopted.

### **Further Resources**

The Inclusive Language Translation of the Belhar Confession  
<http://www.pcusa.org/resource/belhar-confession/>

A Study of the Belhar Confession and its Accompanying Letter  
<http://www.pcusa.org/resource/belhar-confession-study-guide/>

The PC(USA) Book of Confessions <http://oga.pcusa.org/publications/boc.pdf>

Texts of Creeds and Confessions throughout History  
<http://carm.org/creeds-and-confessions>

The Phoenix Affirmations [http://www.npgcable.com/~jkoehn/pa\\_sg\\_intro.html](http://www.npgcable.com/~jkoehn/pa_sg_intro.html)

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## A new Form of Government

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The General Assembly voted to recommend a revised Form of Government to the presbyteries by a vote of 468 in favor, 204 against, and 6 abstentions — a 70%-30% margin.

The new Form of Government includes:

- Foundations of Presbyterian Polity — the principles that are foundational to government, worship, and discipline for the PC(USA) — preserves the vast majority of the material in the first four chapters of the current Form of Government.

- Form of Government — in six chapters, which spells out the constitutional framework for government of the PC(USA) as it seeks to respond to God's call to life in mission.

- Advisory Handbook for Councils for the Development of Policies and Procedures — required by the Form of Government as an aid to councils (governing bodies) of the church for developing the policies and procedures to carry out their mission.

Nothing will actually be changed until a majority of presbyteries vote to approve this new Form of Government. Voting must be completed by July 10, 2011, and if affirmative, the new Book of Order would take effect the next day.

The proposed Foundations of Presbyterian Polity and Form of Government are intended to help the church better meet the needs of mission in the 21st century.

The Foundations of Presbyterian Polity gathers together in three succinct chapters the historical and theological provisions that have defined, and continue to define, our church life together. Placing this bedrock material into a separate section of the Book of Order will provide a teaching tool to explain who and what we are.

The current Form of Government has evolved over the years from a Constitution into a regulatory manual that attempts to provide a “one size fits all” answer to every situation faced by congregations and presbyteries. The problem with this regulatory approach is that the diverse, multicultural environment in which we do mission no longer permits a “one size fits all” approach if we are to do mission effectively. The proposed new Form of Government lifts up the constitutional standards that are essential to our life together, while at the same time empowering councils (governing bodies) at all levels to respond more effectively to the ministry and mission needs that each faces.

*More on next page.*

For links to resources from the Office of the General Assembly and other sources, go to:

<http://presbyvoicesforjustice.org/2010/presbyteries%20act%20on%20FOG.htm>

## “A cleaner, leaner Form of Government for Presbyterians”

by Talitha Phillips

Talitha Phillips is a seminary student at San Francisco Theological Seminary and blogs at Madame Future Moderator. She posted this comment live on July 8, 2010, from the General Assembly in Minneapolis.

It is with great joy and dancing (would be cartwheels, if not for my crutches) that I announce the 219th General Assembly of the PC(USA) voted 468-204-6 (69%-30%) to recommend we adopt a new Form of Government (n-FoG). I was excited about it at the 218th GA (2008) where it more narrowly squeaked by, and I kind of knew it would *pass*, but I'm just overjoyed to see how very many people have gotten on board and envision it as a part of our future!

We Presbyterians have an enormous Book of Order (BoO), one part of which the n-FoG would replace, if it's ratified in the next year by 2/3 of our presbyteries. The BoO is larger & heavier than many Bibles, and in many cases harder to understand. It has been amended 300 times in not very many years (how many times has the US' constitution been amended? Think about it). The new FoG will not bring our document down to the concise level of a constitution, but it reads MORE like a constitution and less like a manual of operations. Where the old FoG gave 27 responsibilities to presbyteries (G-11.0103), the new proposal says three things: Provide that the Word of God may be truly preached and heard; provide that the Sacraments may be rightly administered and received; and nurture the covenant

community of the disciples of Christ. The same three calls are given to church, presbytery, General Assembly. Each is explained (for example “nurturing the community” for the presbytery includes ordaining, dismissing, and disciplining ministers) but it's all under a much more sensible (and to my ears, spiritual) rubric.

The stripping away of rules and regulations is hard for some people to stomach. I heard someone say that we would need to be “so much more alert” to the dangers of misuses and abuses. Yes. He was right. But maybe we'd also need to be more alert to one another, and to our faith, and to the church. We are risking some pain and struggle, but are we not also “risking” great benefits? Maybe we'd wake up and think about things instead of consulting a manual that tells us what to do next. The question asked might be “what would Jesus do?” instead of “well what does the BoO say we have to do?” While we can never quite govern a church based on a bracelet slogan, it would not hurt to have that question more active and alive, and if we need to break out of complacency and force ourselves to ask that question, I believe that the n-FoG will provide many options for such questioning.

To see this online, go to <http://www.patheos.com/community/mainlineportal/2010/07/08/cleaner-leaner-form-of-government-for-presbyterians/>

## 'We're All in This Together: Confronting the Structures of Injustice'

Jane Hannah, coordinator of this event,  
reports on the Ghost Ranch seminar  
held July 26 - August 1, 2010.

Again this summer Presbyterian Voices for Justice and Presbyterian Peace Fellowship joined in co-sponsoring a seminar at Ghost Ranch, "We're All in this Together: Confronting the Structures of Injustice." The inspiration for the seminar was a guidebook for social action, *To Do Justice: A Guide for Progressive Christians*, edited by Rebecca Todd Peters and Elizabeth Hinson-Hasty. Ethicists from across mainline denominations contributed essays connecting their faith to the most urgent public issues of our time. Three of them, notable educators, became our leaders for 2010.

Dr. Grace Kao is an Associate Professor of Ethics at Claremont School of Theology; Dr. Elizabeth Hinson-Hasty an Associate Professor of Theology at Bellarmine University in Louisville, and Dr. Gary Dorrien is the Reinhold Niebuhr Professor of Social Ethics at Union Theological Seminary and Professor of Religion at Columbia University. They provided a wealth of information and tools for addressing justice and peace concerns.

The Advisory Committee on Social Witness Policy of the PCUSA (ACSWP) has been instrumental in developing an ecumenical Social Creed for the Twenty-first Century in honor of the one-hundredth anniversary of the 1908 Social Creed. This is a document that should be known to every congregation, one these leaders had a part in developing.

Dr. Hinson-Hasty had also co-edited Prayers for The New Social Awakening,

Inspired by the New Social Creed, with Christian Iosso, Coordinator of ACSWP. We began our sessions each morning with one of the prayers from this collection written by Christians of many traditions who feel called to speak out and act in hope of realizing God's vision for a just world.

Viewing the excellent DVD, "Toward a New Social Awakening: The Social Creed," produced by ACSWP, introduced us to the history of the 1908 Social Creed and background for the 2008 "New Social Creed for the Twenty-First Century." (This can be viewed on-line at <http://gamic.pcusa.org/ministries/acswp/social-creed>)

The social gospel movement grew from the belief that churches have a responsibility to address social issues, and that Christians are obligated to reform society. Elizabeth and Gary challenged us with the history of the Social Gospel and looking at it in light of our own time. The similarities between present economic circumstances and those of the early 20th century are striking. The social gospel had a big impact on theological education and social ethics studies. Jesus was the example for social justice but churches did not always accept the ideas of the early reformers. Many congregations still largely avoid race, gender and economic critiques.

Grace presented an excellent PowerPoint "Primer on Thinking Ethically about War" followed by Gary's discussion about War/Militarism/Foreign Policy. Background about the "Just War Theory," and when

war is unjust, presented a multitude of questions and the obstacles toward defining any war as “Just.”

Many provocative issues were raised by statistics concerning the experience of women worldwide. *Half the Sky: Turning Oppression into Opportunity for Women Worldwide*, by Kristof and WuDunn, had been on our reading list for the seminar. Quoting Kristof’s belief that the well being of women is the moral issue of the 21st Century, Elizabeth asked “Should Women’s Rights be the Church’s Cause for our Time?” In addition to encountering the many worldwide abuses against women, we were given suggestions for supporting victims of gender abuse. A series of brief films “What Harm is it to be a Woman?” was available for participants to view as was the DVD “Soldiers of Conscience.”

Gary provided an in-depth look at current economic practices fed by a belief in an unrestricted ability to acquire wealth. We are a long way from economic democracy. Today’s capitalism commodifies everything, exploits resources, disrupts societies, and damages the environment, all creating a huge surge in inequality. An unleashed greed describes our current economy and is the source of much of the injustice experienced by growing numbers of our population. Advocating a more democratic economy would directly address many of the social problems we face.

Grace, who was Assistant Professor of Religious Studies at Virginia Tech when 32 students were shot and killed, raised provocative questions in discussing a Search for Religious Meaning in those Shootings. Was the early labeling of Cho an Islamic suicide-killer a matter of hasty, sensationalized reporting or part of a deeper problem making him an “other”? Actually, Cho had

used Christian symbols to describe, even sanctify his actions. Dr. Kao asked if there are steps we as Christians could take to prevent our traditions from being used for such destructive ends. What role should we play when our nation is engaged in on-going wars abroad? She raised many disquieting questions about the shootings themselves and the responses to it, asking what can be learned from this tragedy.

There was much to take back to our congregations, both the questions and some resources to address the need for justice in our communities, the nation, and the world.

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For a more detailed report on this seminar, see the article by one of the participants, the Rev. Schanel Steinnager, who is Hunger Action Enabler for the Presbytery of Philadelphia. It’s on our website at [http://presbyvoicesforjustice.org/2009/ghost\\_ranch\\_seminar2010.htm](http://presbyvoicesforjustice.org/2009/ghost_ranch_seminar2010.htm)

Among other things, the article includes links to a wealth of online resources that were mentioned during the seminar.

Steinnager concludes her report:

Ghost Ranch continues to be a place of beauty, where in addition to my conference work, I enjoyed hiking, a gospel music concert, and the finale of the children’s programs, each age group presenting on their theme of “Peace, Justice, and Families.” What a week!

That’s a good summary – and a reason to plan now to get to one or both of our seminars planned for next summer at Ghost Ranch. See the next two pages!

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A Ghost Ranch seminar

## A FAITHFUL RESPONSE TO IMMIGRATION

August 1-7, 2011

Cosponsored by Presbyterian Voices for Justice  
and Presbyterian Peace Fellowship  
Coordinated by Jane Hanna

Discerning God's call to advocate for a just immigration system requires people of faith to have a knowledgeable understanding of the issues related to modern global migration. Julia Thorne will help us to understand present immigration law, how detention and deportation policies impact both migrants and our communities. We will learn about Presbyterian policy on immigration reform. Mark Adams and Miriam Maldonado Escobar, PCUSA Mission Co-Workers, will share their experiences with the many players on the border (the undocumented, Border Patrol Agents, faith communities, rich and poor, humanitarians, landowners and communities on both sides of the border).

As momentum builds to reform US immigration, our voice as informed faith communities advocating just policies and practices is the challenge we face.

**Julia Thorne**, Manager of Immigration Issues and Immigration Counsel in the Office of General Assembly, Presbyterian Church (USA). She creates resources and provides advice to presbyteries and churches regarding immigration law and issues. The Office also works with presbyteries, churches and interfaith partners on advocacy for the reform of current immigration policies, procedures and laws in accordance with General Assembly policy. Since graduating from college, Julia has worked with internationals as Foreign Student Advisor, College

Instructor, Campus Minister and Private Immigration Attorney.

**Mark Adams** has served since 1998 as mission co-worker with Frontera de Cristo, a Presbyterian (USA) Border Ministry centered in Agua Prieta, Mexico and Douglas, AZ. As U.S. coordinator of this bi-national ministry, he is responsible, in partnership with the Angel Valencia of the National Presbyterian Church of Mexico, for the coordination of the six ministry areas: church development, health, family counseling, the New Hope Community Center, mission education, and the Just Trade Center.

Through Frontera de Cristo, Mark brings together people from both sides of the border, building relationships and understanding between them. He is a minister member of Presbytery de Cristo, PC(USA), and is a fraternal member of the Presbytery of Chihuahua (National Presbyterian Church of Mexico).

**Miriam Maldonado Escobar** works in the Mission Education ministry of FDC and is a leader of a bi-national Permaculture project with Jose Luis Ramirez of DouglaPrieta Trabaja. She and Mark are married and have three children.

**For more information, and to register when the Summer Catalog is posted, go to <http://www.ghost ranch.org/>**

Another Ghost Ranch seminar:

## **Sex, Faith, and Culture: Understanding the Mix in our Lives and Society July 25-31**

Sponsored by Presbyterian Voices for Justice  
Coordinated by Sylvia Thorson-Smith

Twenty years after the controversial report, “Keeping Body and Soul Together: Sexuality, Spirituality, and Social Justice,” was overwhelmingly rejected by the Presbyterian General Assembly in 1991, two of its primary authors will begin this seminar with a reflection on the development of the report and the firestorm that surrounded it. How did such a sex-positive, women-friendly, and gay-affirming study ever get written in the first place, and what’s been the impact of the report on its supporters and critics?

The conversation will then shift to a variety of concerns on the “justice-love” agenda, including alternative reproductive technologies, comprehensive (vs. abstinence-only) sexuality education, equality for transgender and bisexual as well as lesbian and gay persons, same-sex marriage, sexuality while living with Alzheimer’s and other chronic illnesses, and the intersections of race, gender, and sexuality.

This seminar will welcome all perspectives and experiences, and will be designed to maximize participation of those who attend. Participants will be invited to share their insights about the ongoing personal, social, and ecclesiastical quest for an “ethical eroticism,” one that deepens self-respect and strengthens inclusive, radically hospitable communities.

### **The Seminar Leaders**

**Sylvia Thorson-Smith**, a native of Alaska, has an MA in sociology and women’s

studies from Wichita State University (Kansas) and taught courses in sociology (human sexuality), gender and women’s studies, and religious studies at Grinnell College (Iowa) for 15 years before retiring to Tucson, Arizona in 2003. Her publications include *Body and Soul: Rethinking Sexuality as Justice-Love* (with Ellison), and *Called Out With: Stories of Solidarity in Support of LGBT Persons*. She currently serves as an elder on the session of St. Mark’s Presbyterian Church (a More Light congregation) and lives with her retired partner-husband, the Rev. Mike Smith. Sylvia is a member of the board of Presbyterian Voices for Justice.

**Marvin M. Ellison**, a native of Tennessee, completed his doctoral studies at Union Theological Seminary (New York) and teaches Christian social ethics at Bangor Theological Seminary. He is a minister-member of the Presbytery of Northern New England. He founded the Religious Coalition Against Discrimination in Maine to support civil rights protections for gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender people, including the right to marry. His publications include *Sexuality and the Sacred: Sources for Theological Reflection*, and *Body and Soul* (with Thorson-Smith). He lives in Portland, Maine, with his partner Frank Brooks, a licensed clinical social worker.

**For more information, and to  
register when the Summer  
Catalog is posted, go to  
<http://www.ghost ranch.org/>**

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## Is our PC(USA) supporting union busting? SEIU challenges Express Scripts layoffs

prepared by Doug King

For some time now, SEIU Healthcare Pennsylvania, a branch of the Service Employees International Union, has been calling on Express Scripts to cancel its plan to close its prescription shipping facility in Bensalem, Pennsylvania, which would put 365 people out of work, many of whom are low wage workers with families.

Now the union is approaching a number of organizations that have sizable contracts with Express Scripts for mail-order prescription medicine, asking their support. One of those customers just happens to be the Presbyterian Church (USA). So a few days ago, a delegation of Express Scripts workers, who are union members, went to the main office of the Presbyterian Board of Pensions, seeking to make the church aware of the issue. The Board of Pensions staff, it appears, refused to meet with them, and is not responding to any of their letters.

What does this have to do with the PC(USA)? We're one of Express Scripts' clients, since over 120,000 people with medical coverage under the Board of Presbyterians have their prescriptions filled by the company. The union believes this puts the Board of Pensions among the top 25% of Express Scripts' largest clients.

Our church's social policies (not to mention Jesus' teachings and the whole Biblical witness) clearly support workers' rights, just wages, and the principle of labor unions as a means to achieving

justice. So it seems important that we be aware of what's going on between a very large company which we support with our business, and workers who are seeking support from groups like the Presbyterian Church.

Here's a bit more of the story:

The union workers have offered \$8 million in wage and benefit concessions to help keep the plant open. Even though these concessions included giving in to the company's demand that workers give up their pension plan, so far, the workers say, the company management has been unwilling to meet with the union, which unites 20,000 health care workers from all areas of the health care industry in Pennsylvania.

According to a report on October 15 by Jane M. Von Bergen, a staff writer for the *Philadelphia Inquirer*, "the company insists it's a done deal," which was announced to employees in their break rooms on October 8. The plan is to close the plant on December 16. Von Bergen adds that "Express Scripts, which reported \$24.7 billion in revenue and \$827.6 million in profit in 2009, said it would move the work to its new facility in St. Louis."

The union asserts that workers at the Bensalem plant have a high rate of productivity, exemplified last July when they filled a record 90,000 prescriptions in one day. The St. Louis facility, to which the company plans to transfer the work,

is still in a research and development stage, and would not have the skilled personnel needed to do the job, they say. The union questions whether the new system will be able to handle all the processing necessary to get prescription orders filled and shipped on time.

It's worth noting that the two Bensalem plants and a small facility in Albuquerque, N.M., are the company's only union shops. And the sizable concessions offered by the union are apparently not enough to satisfy the company, which seems determined to move this work to a non-union plant.

Union members have journeyed to Washington to talk with legislators, and to urge the Department of Defense to drop its contracts with Express Scripts. Earlier in October, more than a dozen Express Scripts workers traveled to St. Louis to confront George Paz, the company's CEO, for threatening to close the Bensalem facility.

< [http://www.seiuhealthcarepa.org/action/jobkillers/Express\\_Scripts\\_Workers\\_Take\\_Fight\\_for\\_Jobs\\_to\\_St\\_Louis.aspx](http://www.seiuhealthcarepa.org/action/jobkillers/Express_Scripts_Workers_Take_Fight_for_Jobs_to_St_Louis.aspx) >

Apparently it made no difference.

Paz, by the way, is reported by *Forbes* to have received \$8.57 million in total compensation last year. That puts him at number 10 in the ranking of executive incomes in the health care equipment and services area. *Forbes* ranks him at number 120 for compensation among all CEOs in the United States. [http://www.forbes.com/lists/2010/12/boss-10\\_George-Paz\\_23R1.html](http://www.forbes.com/lists/2010/12/boss-10_George-Paz_23R1.html)

One Express Scripts employee and union member, in an email dated November 11, 2010, relates what happened, and offers

her own thoughtful comment:

We made several calls to the Board of Pensions to get a meeting but they did not respond. So last week we went downtown Philly with packages of the same information I emailed to you. We went to the Fraternal Order of Police and other clients that do business with Express Scripts, and we were received graciously, so we decided that since we could not get a meeting with the Board of Pensions we would stop by and give them a package. The security guard called upstairs and they were told that someone would come down to accept our package. After 30 minutes no one showed up, so the security called again and this time they said that they had no one to come down to meet with us. We left a package with Security and left. We then sent EVERY board member a packet which had the same things I emailed you. Again ... no response. What we want to do is just sit down with them and tell them what we think will happen to the customers we serve, should Bensalem facility close down. Bensalem has the most seasoned workers, we have the lowest error rates and we are the ONLY facility on the east coast, so if prescriptions are filled in St. Louis the patients we serve will have slower turn around time.

Express Scripts is union busting, bottom line, but the general public does not care about that, what they care about is how it affects customers so we want to let them know.

[She closes with what sounds to me like a pretty good summary of the Gospel:]

What I don't get is how Christian people can say labor disputes are not a part of the church! Maybe it is just me, but my faith touches everything I do, and I cannot say that God has no place at my job, or is MIA [missing in action] from Monday to Friday between the hours of 9 to 6. God encompasses EVERYTHING I do from my children to my marriage to my job and everything in between. In today's economy throwing possibly 1,000 people out of work could place them at the door steps of churches and food pantries.

Clearly the General Assembly and the church's members cannot dictate policies of the Board of Pensions. That is being demonstrated right now in the BoP's response (or lack of response) to the General Assembly's call for equal treatment of same-gender partners in terms of medical and pension benefits. But perhaps we as members of the PC(USA), and many of us as ministers whose pension and medical benefits are managed by the BoP, may want to ask a few serious questions.

For instance, does the Board of Pensions pay attention to the policies and behavior of its sub-contractors? Does it exercise due diligence in seeking suppliers whose labor practices are to some degree reasonable and fair? Is the BoP willing to meet and talk with groups that have concerns they want to discuss with it, or will it simply refuse to meet those with such concerns? The SEIU union

members are asking for just 15 minutes or half an hour for a small delegation to meet with someone in a responsible position in the BoP.

Can our church engage in this effort for justice? If the Board of Pensions will not talk with the employees of Express Scripts, nor with the company itself, can some of us as ministers and members of the PC(USA) speak up? Go to < [http://presbyvoicesforjustice.org/ES%20CEO\\_letter.doc](http://presbyvoicesforjustice.org/ES%20CEO_letter.doc) > for a letter drafted by the union members, that you might revise for yourself and send to CEO George Paz. Or you could make a phone call to him. And perhaps some other office in the PC(USA) might engage in a conversation with the company. The union is clearly asking the church to provide them with a little leverage with the company, to avoid the loss of nearly 400 jobs – or 1,000 jobs if both Bensalem plants are closed.

In short, do we care about God's call to do justice, to love mercy, and to walk humbly with our God? Would we want to agree publicly with the last paragraph in the union member's statement (above) about the SEIU's visit to the BoP? (It really looks like pretty good theology to me!) And might we act accordingly, and ask our church to do the same?

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For more information on the union website, visit <http://www.seiuhealthcarepa.org/action/insideesi/default.aspx>

And to follow updates on our own website: <http://presbyvoicesforjustice.org/2010/express%20scripts.htm>

# News of Voices for Justice

## We celebrate the life of Hank Bremer, former Witherspoon treasurer

Hank Bremer, who served as Treasurer of the Witherspoon Society from 1992 to 1999, died peacefully at home on Monday, November 8, 2010, after a lengthy illness. Born in 1932 in Peculiar, Missouri, he graduated from Park College in Parkville, Missouri, and later from San Francisco Theological Seminary. His many productive years in ministry, both as pastor and as administrator in Presbyterian retirement homes, were marked by strong social and political leadership and involvement in peace and justice movements in California, Mexico, and Central America.

After retiring in 1997, he and his wife Teresa moved to Santa Fe, where he worshiped in First Presbyterian Church,

As Witherspoon's treasurer, Hank contributed both his administrative skills and his passion for justice, along with his concern for people, and the wisdom gathered through his own life struggles. We're grateful for what he shared with us!

Memorial services of thanksgiving for Hank's life are to be held at 11:00 on Saturday, November 27, at First Presbyterian Church in Santa Fe.

The leadership of PVJ joins many others in mourning his loss, and we extend our sympathy to his widow, Teresa Bremer, who can be reached at 1075 Calle Largo, Santa Fe, NM 87501

## Godspeed and thanks to Molly Casteel

We are pleased to announce that the Rev. Molly Casteel, who has served on the Board of Presbyterian Voices for Justice since 2009, has been appointed to a four-year term as Assistant Stated Clerk of the General Assembly, with responsibility for Representation and Inclusiveness Services. Because of her new position, she has submitted her resignation from the PVJ board.

During her time on our board, Molly served briefly as Co-Moderator. And more than that, she has consistently contributed to our work through her broad and deep understanding of the Presbyterian Church (USA), her commitment to fair representation and involvement of all the different groups within the church's membership, and her joy in the life of following Jesus.

We are sorry to lose her contributions, but we rejoice that they will continue to be at the service of our church as a whole. We wish her Godspeed.

### Deadline for the Winter 2011 issue is February 1

Please send your news and views to:

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# Network News

## from Presbyterian Voices for Justice

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Fall 2010

### On religion and politics:

The Editor's Spot: Religion – dividing or healing? 2  
Putting Hussein in Christmas, by Rita Nakashima Brock 7

### Resources for issues coming to presbyteries:

Amendment 10-A – GLBTQ ordination 9  
Amendment 10-2 – the Belhar Confession 16  
Amendment 10-1 – new Form of Government 21

### Ghost Ranch

A report from our Summer 2010 seminar 23  
Two seminars for 2011:  
A Faithful Response to Immigration 25  
Sex, Faith and Culture 26

### Is our PC(USA) supporting union busting?

SEIU challenges Express Scripts layoffs 27

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