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**Witherspoon
is joining with
Voices of Sophia**

Help us find a new name and logo!
Details on pp. 38-39



The Co-Moderator's Column

Transformation Time

By Bill Dummer



So, here we are on your computer screen, we hope, instead of on paper. As one who attended several Congregational Redevelopment/Transformation conferences, I recall the year the conference logo was a butterfly emerging from a chrysalis. This image recently came to me as I thought about what is happening with the merged Witherspoon Society and Voices of Sophia. The Board has gone into a chrysalis to get some important work done. We have a team working on drafting a new mission statement. We have a team developing a new realistic budget. We are collecting suggestions for a new name and a new logo (a contest, actually). This is pretty exciting, but there is nothing to show for it yet. When all of this is completed, we will emerge from our chrysalis a new entity, and a stronger force for justice of every kind in the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.).

Meanwhile, some great events took place this last summer, and this issue of *Network News* is here to report on them. They include the Big Tent event, the triennial Women's Gathering, the Peace and Justice Week at Ghost Ranch, and the annual More

Light Presbyterians conference.

It is time for me to change seats to the other side of the cockpit. I want to thank Jake Young for his quiet, gentle, yet strong presence as Co-Moderator for the past three years. I wish him God's presence and protection as the pastor of the only More Light church in South Carolina as he retires from many years on the board. Until our re-emergence as the "new and improved" and only broadly based social justice organization in the church, I will be flying solo. We expect that to happen around the first of the New Year. Meanwhile, we hope you'll keep those articles, cards, letters (**and membership renewal checks**) coming.

To send a membership – new or renewal, just go to

http://www.witherspoonsociety.org/membership_form_2.htm

And if you'd like to send a special contribution to help us enter our new era as a united organization, place go to

http://www.witherspoonsociety.org/2008/contribution_form2.htm



And the other Co-Moderator's Column

“It's been a fine ride.”

Reflections from retiring Co-Moderator Jake Young

My, how time flies! Especially when you're having fun, like hosting Witherspoon Dance Parties at General Assembly, attending engaging Peace and Justice seminars every summer at Ghost Ranch (and riding horses – with the polite assistance of wranglers – and watching the falling stars on the Mesa at night – every night we saw more than a dozen in the unpolluted skies of GR), and meeting Presbyterians from across the country and around the world working for peace and justice.

After six years, I'm rotating off the Board of the Witherspoon Society. I've spent the last three years as Co-Moderator. A lot of changes have taken place during my tenure. In addition to the shift to biennial Assemblies, we have seen significant changes at the national offices in Louisville, continuing attenuation of Presbyterian membership, and a reassessment of the meaning of Presbyterian mission (including the emergence of the

somewhat puzzling term, “missional.” Is that an adjective? Should it be a verb?)

During my time on the Board, we continued Witherspoon's important presence at General Assemblies. We went from Columbus to Denver to Richmond to Birmingham and San Jose advocating for a variety of peace and justice issues. Why? Because injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere, to paraphrase Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. At each of those sites, we provided multiple opportunities for Commissioners and observers to engage in education, advocacy, networking, and entertainment. At every GA, we offer two pre-Assembly events, a Sunday luncheon with a keynote speaker, and, of course, a Tuesday evening – post Committee work – Dance Party with an open invitation to all God's children.

Over the last six years, we intentionally



Jake Young

strengthened our ties to Presbyterian world mission. We've sponsored missionaries and held two world mission conferences at Stony Point and in Louisville. We have strived to have a "seat at the table" when it comes to determining how our denomination will interact with our global neighbors.

Meanwhile, drastic changes have taken place at the PC(USA) Center in Louisville. Ostensibly due to the "budget axe," many of our favorite projects have met their demise, including the publication of *Church & Society*. As Presbyterians nationwide have determined that "designated giving" is the way to go, we have watched the ranks of talented national staff members dwindle. We have observed the emergence of a demoralized culture of "where shall the axe fall next" in Louisville. This leads us to reconsider our historic commitment to supporting – almost uncritically – the national offices. Many of us are convinced that recent changes are not only budgetary necessities, but a systematic effort to reduce and control our church's social witness.

At the same time, we are undertaking exciting changes in our own structure. Following the 2008 General Assembly in San Jose, we began discussing a merger with our sister group, Voices of Sophia. We are convinced, that our two groups will benefit by combining our strengths. As I write, a new organization is entering late gestation. Don't worry, there'll be no late term abortions here. (What can I say? It's

my final column. Don't blame Doug) In January 2010, you will witness a new affinity group in the PC(USA) committed to pursuing peace and justice, especially including gender equality. Your old Voices of Sophia and Witherspoon buttons will be memorabilia and you can visit our combined booth in Minneapolis to get the latest gear.

Finally, some things stay the same. We will continue to host our Ghost Ranch social justice seminar at the end of July with partners, Presbyterian Peace Fellowship and Presbyterians Restoring Creation. I initially attended out of a sense of obligation, but have returned multiple times since with a sense of anticipation. I recommend it highly. You will not be disappointed and you can bring your friends and family members to partake of the other art/history/adventure related events being offered concurrently.

It's been a fine ride. I have engaged a remarkable community of colleagues over the last few years – all of us sharing a commitment to seek justice, love kindness and walk humbly with our Creator. Thank you, all. And please continue your support of the Witherspoon Society/Voices of Sophia. I will.

Grace and Peace,
 Jake Young
 Anderson, SC



The Editor's Spot

Is it time to find new ways to live out our Reformed commitment to justice?

My wife and I have been moving again, a process which gives rise to thoughts about change, along with all the chaos and confusion and not being able to find anything – either in our house or often enough in our new neighborhood. So bear with me, friends, for a little reflection on change and the challenge of living in the midst of mess.

The Witherspoon Society and Voices of Sophia are going through an exciting process of change as we merge two groups with strong commitments to a more just and inclusive church, working for a more just and inclusive society. That is, we're certain, a good change,

but it brings with it some costs – one of them being the need to pause a bit and sort out our differing styles and ways of working. And another cost is sorting out our financial situation, which right now is a matter of some concern. That is a major reason why our Board has decided that the next two issues of *Network News* will not be published in “hard copy” printed form, but will come to you only in this electronic form. We hope the PDF format will be easy for you to print out for yourself, though, to read at your leisure and to share with others.

Change is going on in our Presbyterian Church, too – not in the form of any

We invite you to join us!

If you're looking for a community of progressive Presbyterians, witnessing and working for peace and justice in God's world, we can help provide you with information, theological reflection, and companionship on the journey.

Just use the return envelope in the center of this newsletter, or contact our Membership Coordinator:

Gusti Newquist
 3809 E Third Street
 Tucson, AZ 85716
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 E-mail: gustinewquist@mindspring.com

new mergers like ours, but rather in the form of new assaults on our church's historic commitment to engagement with political and social issues, in our neighborhoods and around the world.

Some of our members who attended the Churchwide Gathering of Presbyterian Women in Louisville last July, noticed that as they talked with people there about the coming merger of Voices of Sophia and Witherspoon, some were simply puzzled that a church group would talk about "justice" as its primary concern. For all their commitment to the Presbyterian Church, they had simply never seen that as a major focus of the life of faith.

And just before that, at the Big Tent Gathering of various Presbyterian agencies in Atlanta, people were startled to hear the Rev. Robert W. Bohl, Moderator of the 206th General Assembly in 1994, and former pastor of Village Presbyterian Church, Prairie Village, Kansas, assure his evangelical friends that they could feel safe coming back to the PC(USA) again, since the liberal elements and activities that they have found so distressing are now under control.

It also became clear in that meeting that the agencies of the church which are most directly involved in social ministries, the various groups belonging to PHEWA, the Presbyterian Health, Education and Welfare Association, were also under attack, as it was announced that the executive director of PHEWA, the Rev. Nancy Troy, was

one of the latest staff people being dismissed by the simple measure of eliminating her position.

In the midst of all these challenges to the church's social ministry, there are strong voices being raised to call for a continued commitment to justice. The Rev. Dr. Johnnie Monroe, on receiving the PHEWA award during their meeting in the Big Tent gathering, delivered an impassioned affirmation of that commitment, rooted in his own faith and experience as an African-American. As a young person, he knew the Presbyterian Church "stood for truth and light and justice. They reminded us that we were the salt of the earth and the light of the world." But now, he said, "something has happened to this Bible-believing, justice-seeking denomination. ... Instead of making the world look like us, we have begun to look like the world. What I see is a church that is looking more like a corporation than Jesus Christ. We balance the budget on the backs of those who can least afford it." (See page 14.)

And the Rev. Dr. Margaret Aymer, who is assistant professor of New Testament at the Interdenominational Theological Center, and serves on the PC(USA)'s Facing Racism Strategy Team, preached a strongly biblical sermon at the All-Church Gathering, calling on Presbyterian Women to follow Jesus' example in a ministry of "meddlin'" (as in "now you've gone from preachin' to meddlin'") – that is, going from mere talk into action for

change, welcoming the outcaste, and much more. (See page 9.)

We are happy to provide the full texts of both of these statements here. We hope you'll find them helpful and encouraging for your own thinking, and for sharing with your friends, as we all face what appears to be a strong effort to undermine our church's commitment to follow Jesus in ministering to a hurting (and often unfair) world.

How might we respond creatively to the continuing efforts to undermine the Presbyterian Church's social ministry?

Find new, creative ways to talk about justice – not as an end in itself, but as a reflection of love and compassion and respect for God's creatures, in the face of myriad ways that social and political and economic (maybe especially economic!) structures hurt people.

And let's be aware that the Church is a structure which can easily do just the same thing – as we are seeing now in the most recent efforts by some in the leadership of the General Assembly Mission Council to revise the employee handbook that governs their staff. Apparently the intent is to make it easier to dismiss employees with no reasons needing to be given, and leaving little recourse for the employees to protest or seek redress.

For more on this, see the PC(USA) website for the proposed changes in the GAMC employee handbook at:

<http://www.pcusa.org/gamc/business/sept09/actions/T102C.pdf>

There is also a brief but very helpful response from the Advocacy Committee for Racial Ethnic Concerns, the Advocacy Committee for Women's Concerns, and the Advisory Committee on Social Witness Policy. To read it, just go to:

<http://www.pcusa.org/gamc/business/sept09/actions/T102C.pdf>

Given such apparent dismissal of a vital part of the Reformed tradition, what can we say? What can we do?

Here are a few very tentative thoughts:

Let's acknowledge that life is messy – and so is the church. It's a mess that God loves, but it's still a mess, and while many of us progressive sorts want to look on the hopeful side of things, we need a bit of realism, too. We need to recognize that small steps forward are being taken, and celebrate those steps toward justice and inclusion. But we also need to be aware that many of our fellow Presbyterians are fearful of change, determined to preserve what they perceive as the "purity" that God demands – whether that purity is understood in terms of sexual relationships, or beliefs, or race or culture or politics.

And then let's recognize that calling for "justice" may be so abstract that it is really not inviting to many of our sister and brother Presbyterians, just as it is unattractive to many Americans today.

So how can we invite others to join us in



answering God’s call to “do justice, love mercy, and walk humbly with our God”? What many of us really have in mind, as we try to work for justice, is much more concrete and human than it may sound. We see people who are being hurt, and our hearts are touched by their suffering, and often by their strength and goodness in dealing with the pain. We see the suffering, and we know that a loving God yearns for healing of the pain, for changes in the social systems that inflict it and the human attitudes that justify it.

Call it love. Call it compassion. Call it resisting society’s (or the church’s) inhuman treatment of human beings. It’s not merely interest in a moral abstraction called Justice. It’s caring about people who are God’s beloved children, and our own sisters and brothers.

That’s our calling. Let’s invite others to join us in caring – even in the Presbyterian Church (USA).

Doug King

“Let Justice Roll Down”

The Witherspoon Society Mission

We are a network of concerned Presbyterians responding to God’s call to let justice roll down, and to work for healing in a wounded world.

Our mission is:

- To listen and learn from those who have been silenced as we seek solidarity with them;
- To nurture the prophetic voice of the church;
- To equip Presbyterians for faithful participation in the church and world;
- To challenge unjust relationships of power;
- To advocate for peace, justice, the integrity of creation, and the full inclusion of all God’s people in church and society.

We seek to revitalize the church’s proclamation and action, informed by the whole gospel, and living into the promise of God’s reign.

A note on the URL links in this on-line version of *Network News*:

Because many of you will be reading this issue of *Network News* on-line, we are trying to provide working versions of all the URL links included here. The problem is that when some links are too long to fit on one line, they get broken into two or more lines, and then they won’t work. So we’ve tried to shrink them to fit on one line of type, which means they get really really small.

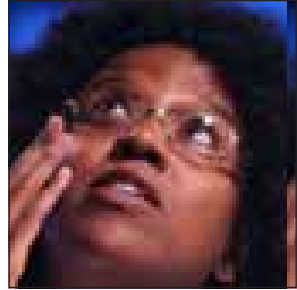
Sorry if this creates problems for you, but we hope it will be helpful!

Meddlin’

By Margaret Aymer

Sermon for 2009 PW Churchwide Gathering
Delivered Sunday, July 12, 2009

Of the many powerful presentations at the Churchwide Gathering of Presbyterian Women, held last July in Louisville, one drew special attention from a number of Witherspoon/Voices members who were there. Margaret Aymer, who is assistant professor of New Testament at the Interdenominational Theological Center, and serves on the PC(USA)’s Facing Racism Strategy Team, preached a sermon which she titled simply “Meddlin’.” It is a powerful call to ministry that includes all people, that proclaims forgiveness to all, and invites them into full participation – in the life of the church, in good health care, and in much more.



Margaret Aymer

Photo courtesy of
Presbyterian Women

This sermon was written and delivered by Margaret Aymer at the 2009 Churchwide Gathering of Presbyterian Women. To learn more, visit www.pcusa.org/pwgathering.

The sermon is posted on that website, and we are happy to publish it here as well, with the kind permission of Presbyterian Women.

Since I moved to Atlanta, I’ve picked up a number of Southern idioms. One of my favorite southern expressions is the warning, “Preacher, you’ve left off preachin’ and taken to meddlin’.” The good news of Mark 2:1-2 is that it calls us to a ministry of meddlin’.

As the story begins, Jesus is teaching in a house, and is drawing such a crowd that there is no room, even at the door. Four folks decide to bring a paralyzed man to Jesus, literally carrying the man between them. But, when they get to the house where Jesus is teaching, they can’t get inside. So, since their loyalty—a word sometimes translated as faith—is too strong to leave the guy on the pallet outside, and since there is no special access for people on pallets, they take to meddlin’. They climb the stairs to the top of the house. Then the four of them start to dig a hole, right *through* the roof of the house. And having successfully destroyed someone else’s property, they lower the one with paralysis through the hole in the roof in front of Jesus.



Nowhere in this entire story does *anyone* ask for a cure of paralysis. What these five folks want is access: access denied to the one on the pallet because he cannot propel himself into the house; access denied to the four pallet bearers unless they leave their friend outside. These five want access to the house, access to the teaching, access to Jesus. And they want it badly enough to take to meddlin', even if it means they have to dig right through the roof of the house.

Shortly after I moved to Atlanta, I met Guy Pujol, a good Baptist preacher. He saw a need to teach seminarians about HIV/AIDS, information that could change their ministries and save lives. Guy proposed to teach this as a class at his seminary for his Doctor of Ministry project. The proposal was lauded by his advisor, needed by his colleagues, and dismissed as impossible by the faculty of the school.

Guy wanted access — for himself, for the seminarians, and for the HIV-positive church-going persons that they would be serving, but there was no way in. However, an unlikely community from a neighboring poorer, historically-black seminary called the Interdenominational Theological Center, the home of Johnson C. Smith Seminary, gathered around Guy. We put him and his class on a “pallet,” “dug out the roof” to allow him access, and lowered this class on HIV/AIDS for seminarians down. The beloved community of ITC left off with preachin' and took to meddlin'. And our meddlin', in the form of this and many other classes on HIV, has literally saved the lives of ITC seminarians, seminarians from ITC's surrounding schools, and parishioners in churches throughout the deep South.

Guy's is not the only story of access denied. If we are honest, at the heart of many of our conflicts is the question of access, access to water resources, to food and shelter and adequate medical care, to energy, to human rights, to appropriate education, or to a place to call home. And in our denomination, we too fight about access, about breaking open the ceiling and giving everyone access to their God-given vocations. What would happen if we started knocking in some roofs? What would happen if we made it our practice to leave off preachin' and take to meddlin'?

Would we be demonstrating in the streets across this great nation, until all women, and children and men have access to the health care that they need, regardless of their income level? Would we be overwhelming our local, state, and national governments until people are not starving for food, or choosing between housing and medicine in this rich nation of ours? Would we be metaphorically climbing up to the top of the Capitol building, and breaking

through the great white dome on behalf of those that cannot carry themselves through the door: the undocumented, unseen, and unheard? Would we, who have so much power, insist that if everyone can't come in, we're taking it to the roof? Sisters and brothers, do we as people of faith, have the faith, the loyalty of a community of pallet-carrying roof-breakers? Are we ready to leave off preachin' and take to meddlin'?

I imagine that a pallet coming down through the roof must have amused Jesus. But even in his amusement, Jesus would have realized that the person in front of him had a problem. You see, in the first century, people believed that sickness was caused by sin. So, if your body was not like every one else's body, if you had such a grievous illness as paralysis, if you couldn't work, and if you couldn't walk, you must have been *very* sinful indeed.

This belief was something the paralyzed man had probably had to live with as long as his paralysis. It was probably as normal to him as his inability to walk. He may even have so internalized that shame and guilt, that he saw himself as hopelessly and irredeemably sinful. And so Jesus leaves off preachin' and takes to meddlin'. Right there, in front of them all, he performs a radical healing miracle for this man; he looks at him and says to him: Child, *your* sins are forgiven.

Understand, the healing of this man takes place in the moment that Jesus pronounces the man's forgiveness. In that instant, the paralyzed person is set free from the cycle of guilt and the self-loathing that came with being seen as accursed. He is healed, because he has been declared whole. This, not what follows, is the radical act of healing that gets Jesus in trouble. Jesus looks at the man and takes the burden of "it's your fault" off his shoulders. Let it go, child; *your* sins are forgiven.

We, the community of faith in the twenty-first century, claim not to really understand what's going on here. We profess to have separated sin and sickness in our thoughts, don't we? Ava Johnson, the protagonist of Pearl Cleage's novel *What Looks Like Crazy on an Ordinary Day*, might take issue with our self-righteous assertion. In the first scene of the novel, she is watching a TV show on women who are HIV-positive, and she, who is also HIV-positive, says to the reader

"I try to tune [them] out...but they're going on and on...and all of a sudden I get it. They're just going through the purification ritual. This is how it goes. First, you have to confess that you did nasty, disgusting sex stuff with multiple partners who may even have been of your same

gender. *Or* you have to confess that you like to shoot illegal drugs into your veins and sometimes you use other people's works when you want to get high and you came unprepared. Then you have to describe the sin you have confessed in as much detail as you can remember.

...Then once your listeners have been totally freaked out by what you've told them, they get to decide how much sympathy, attention, help, money, and understanding you're entitled to based on how disgusted they are." (*What Looks Like Crazy on an Ordinary Day*. New York: HarperCollins, 2002. pp. 3-4)

It is possible that Presbyterians have too many social graces to actually engage in those conversations; but there is a national purient interest in the purification ritual. Consider the popularity of shows about weight-loss, recovery from addiction, and terminal disease. As a nation, we do connect sickness with sin and we want our sick to engage in the purification ritual. And, we differentiate between the "innocent" sick and those who "have no excuse" for their diagnosis.

But as Christians, Jesus calls us to leave off preaching and take to meddlin'. That means, we do not get the luxury to decide between those who do and do not deserve health care. We do not get the luxury to decide between those who should and should not be able to afford medicine. We do not get the luxury to decide between the "innocent" sick and those "who have no excuses." To follow Jesus, we must give up our desire to see the purification ritual. Instead, we must be the community that, in Jesus' name, takes to meddling in the world's affairs. We are called to stand up on behalf of all those that the world considers sick and sinful, all of the excluded and shunned, all of those from whom the world demands the purification ritual. We are called to say to the one paralyzed with the belief that she is impure, unclean and irrevocably sinful: Child of God, your sins are forgiven.

Just in case you don't believe me that the most radical, healing act Jesus does in this passage is to forgive the sins of the paralyzed person, consider the reaction of the biblical experts. I call them biblical experts, because that's who the scribes were. They were *my* people, people who made their living in these texts, texts that were ancient even two thousand years ago. And they are right. The witness of the scriptures of the Hebrew Bible is that it is God, and God alone who forgives.

However, the Bible required rituals to signify that forgiveness: sacrifices of particular animals in the Temple of Jerusalem by the priest. According to Leviticus 6, the priest then got to eat that which was sacrificed. Friends, this

means that every time a person was declared forgiven of sin, the priests of the Temple got a lamb dinner.

Thus, when Jesus declared to this paralyzed person that his sins were forgiven, he had left off preaching and taken to meddlin'. There wasn't just a theological issue at stake here. There was a social and economic issue at stake, an issue of authority, of power, and ultimately of control. If preachers could declare forgiveness willy-nilly without the sacrificial lamb, then what would become of the priesthood, the Temple, the entire economic structure of Rome's client city Jerusalem? Jesus had stepped over the line. He was claiming that God is not confined to a place, a series of rituals, a group of trained professionals, or a set of legal requirements. Jesus claimed that the authority to forgive sins on earth is given to him; and as we find out in other gospels, it is given to us. Not even the Torah can bind that authority. It is *only* because Jesus needs to demonstrate this forcefully that he cures the man's paralysis. For the cure is not for the man; the cure is for those who do not believe that Jesus has the authority that the priests in the Jerusalem Temple do.

Are we willing to accept the cure? Are we willing, truly willing, to claim that Jesus' authority transcends all rules, all legislation, all church governance, all ordination standards, all social taboos, all of our genuinely-held beliefs and arguments? We insist upon a doctrine of the Sovereignty of the Triune God. But do we really believe it? Or are we afraid that if *we* follow Jesus to his logical end, *we* will have gone from ministry to meddlin'?

I have news for you. Ministry is meddlin'. Every time we stand with those whom our society calls unlovable and says "Child of God, *your* sins are forgiven," we are meddlin'. Every time we stand against the purification ritual and say, "I don't need to know how or why you're sick; you need to know that you are beloved of God," we are meddlin'. And every time we get up on the roof and knock in the ceiling so that those who are paralyzed by the injustices of our society have access to the resources that they need, we, the community of faith, are meddlin'.

Presbyterian Women, I beg you in the name of the Sovereign, Triune God: Leave off of preachin'. Take to meddlin'.

The author: Margaret Aymer, assistant professor of New Testament at the Interdenominational Theological Center, is a member of the PC(USA)'s Facing Racism Strategy Team. She is the author of the upcoming 2011–2012 *Horizons* Bible study on the beatitudes.

Getting Back to the Business of Being the Church

by the Rev. Dr. Johnnie Monroe

These remarks were given by the Rev. Johnnie Monroe on accepting the John Park Lee Award which was presented to him by PHEWA (the Presbyterian Health, Education and Welfare Association) at the Big Tent gathering in Atlanta last June. The news report of the event mentions his comments, but we believe they need to be heard in full, and throughout the Presbyterian Church.

We can only say a loud Amen!

If you have comments on Monroe's talk, please just send a note, to be shared on our website. E-mail to dougking2@aol.com, or send a plain old paper note to Doug King, 2805 Lakeshore Dr., # 9, La Crosse, WI 54603.

He began with Scripture:

I hate, I despise your feasts, and I take no delight in your solemn assemblies. Even though you offer me your burnt offerings and cereal offerings, I will not accept them, and the peace offerings of your fatted beast I will not look upon. Take away from me the noise of your songs; to the melody of your harps I will not listen. But let justice roll down like waters, and righteousness like an ever flowing stream. Amos 5:21-24 (RSV)

Now the company of those who believed were of one heart and soul, and no one said that any of



Johnnie Monroe (right) receives the John Park Lee Award from outgoing PHEWA board of directors President Warren Dennis.

Photo by Jim Nedelka, Presbyterian News Service.

the things which he possessed was his own. There was not a needy person among them. Acts 4:32, 34 (RSV)

Let love be genuine; hate what is evil, hold fast to what is good. Romans 12:9 (RSV)

For I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me drink, I was naked and you clothed me, I was sick and you visited me, I was in prison and you came to me. Truly, I say to you, as you did it to one of the least of these my brothers (sisters), you did it to me.

Matthew 25:35-40 (RSV)

Is this not the fast that I choose: to loose the bonds of wickedness, to undo the thongs of the yoke, to let the oppressed go free, and to break every yoke? Is it not to share your bread with the hungry, and bring the homeless poor into your house; when you see the naked, to cover him, and not to hide yourself from your own flesh? Isaiah 58:6, 7 (RSV)

For many years I saw these passages of scriptures along with other passages from the holy unit that deal with love, justice, advocacy and hope lived out in the Presbyterian Church (The United Presbyterian Church – Northern Branch).

I am third generation Presbyterian from Gable, South Carolina, and the product of the Goodwill Presbyterian Church and the Goodwill Parochial School. I, along with my parents and their parents before them, were all Presbyterians. So when I speak about how the Presbyterian Church, my denomination, has lost sight of its mission in recent years, I do not speak as an outsider.

I speak as a member of the family who has been raised and educated in the Presbyterian Church, having attended Presbyterian Parochial elementary and middle school, a Presbyterian university, a Presbyterian seminary, and have been a minister of the Word and Sacrament in the Presbyterian Church for forty-three years.

I remember when the Presbyterian Church, my denomination, was socially conscience- and justice-oriented – sending home missionaries to the South to organize churches and to establish schools for the freed persons – those coming out of slavery. It was the Presbyterian Church – Northern branch – that stood against the institution of slavery, and had it not been for the Presbyterian Church, I, and many persons who look like me, would not have believed in education.

I remember how the church, through the Board of National Missions, sent what was called ‘the barrel’ – clothes and other supplies for poor sharecroppers and tenant farmers to help them during ‘hard times,’ when there was no other help. I remember the Board of National Missions ensuring that ministers who pastored in poor rural communities and small towns had their salaries paid so that they could proclaim the gospel and stand for truth and justice without fear; I remember the Presbyterian ministers empowered and compelled by the gospel to go on the picket lines, to organize boycotts and sit-ins and demonstrations for justice, saying with the prophet that, ‘Justice must roll down like waters and righteousness like a mighty stream’; singing all the time the old negro spiritual – ‘Before I be a slave, I’ll be buried in my grave and go home to my Lord and be free.’ These men and those women also marched with Dr. King and encouraged their congregations and their communities to have a sense of dignity and to live in hope with

the understanding that they were not alone, but that they had the Presbyterian denomination behind them.

I remember men and women such as Eugene Carson Blake, George Todd, Bill Thompson, Gayraud Wilmore, Bryant George, Thelma Adair, Clarence Cave, Mildred Brown, Edler Hawkins, Robert Pierre Johnson, and many others continuously calling the church to its sense of responsibility and obligation to be the salt of the earth and the light of the world – “an advocate for those who had no voice – a friend to the friendless” – giving food to the hungry and clothes for the naked.

Those were the days when we were proud to be Presbyterians, for we were lifting up the blood stained banner of Jesus Christ. We were making disciples as food evangelists and we were not ashamed or afraid to stand for justice and truth, locally, nationally, and worldwide.

In recent years something has happened to this Bible believing, justice seeking, loving denomination that we call the Presbyterian Church (USA). Instead of transforming the world – instead of being salt and light, the church has become “conformers.” Instead of changing the world, we have gotten like the world – we have allowed ourselves to be changed by the world and we need to get Back to the Business of Being the Church.

Let me tell you what I see; I see a church that, like corporate companies,

is seeking to balance its budget by calling out justice ministries and ministries that empower women and ministries with ‘marginalized people.’ When cuts are made we cut ministries that affect the ‘least of these.’ Is not that the way of the world? When the times get tough and things get tight, we cut the education budget for inner city schools and programs that help the elderly and people are made to decide, “Do I buy food, pay rent or buy my medicine? I can’t do all three.”

In secular society we cut programs that feed the hungry and guarantee health insurance, while we spend billions of dollars perpetuating wars that we never should have been in and, as a result, babies suffer and people in this wealthy nation go to bed hungry every night. But I have come to tell us tonight that God is not pleased with the direction the denomination is moving, and we must get Back to the Business of Being the Church – we must lead the way as light to a dark wine and we must be salt to a world that has lost its taste for justice and righteousness.

I am still convinced that there is power for positive change in the Presbyterian Church (USA) – the church of Jesus Christ. There is a power gathering here in Atlanta under the Big Tent and among PHEWA. We must use gatherings like these to draft the docket for the next General Assembly. We must say to the Assembly, ‘He has shown thee, oh men/women, what is good and what does the Lord require of us but to do justice, to love kindness and

to walk humbly with God.’

I will close in a very few minutes, but let me tell you what else I see in my beloved denomination – I have noticed that in recent years we have become a ‘single issue denomination’ that believes that the only sin in the world is homosexuality, and that homosexuals should not be ordained. It’s all right to have Levites stealing, cheating; racists, sexism in ordained positions – some may even say it’s all right to ordain Rush Limbaugh, who spews poisonous venom through the airwaves – but don’t you dare ordain a homosexual.

Well, brothers and sisters, we are the justice arm of the church – and now PHEWA and the Caucuses must call out the church. Just as they cry out against homosexuals, we must cry out against murder, racism, warmongering, illegal guns in poor communities, corporate executives who make millions of dollars and put poor people out of work, and ‘sell the poor for a pair of shoes.’

Who knows that we, PHEWA and people of justice and people of color, are not still in this denomination “for such a time as this. You see, we have not yet assured; we have an African American President and it appears that we will have a Latino woman on the Supreme Court, but we have not yet assured – there is still need for some “Balm in Gilead.” So we must go from under the Big Tent and from the PHEWA gathering determined to fight for justice, determined to help some-

body, determined to call this beloved church back to the Business of Being the Church, singing as we go: “I’m going to Live so God can use me.”

The Rev. Dr. Johnnie Monroe
June 12, 2009.

If you want to print this issue for yourself, you get to choose the page size!

To print it in the size intended for publication (6 by 8 inches), when you click on “Print” in the Adobe Reader software, look at the choices on the “Print” screen, and set the “Page Scaling” choice at “None.”

To print it in full 8 1/2 by 11 inch pages (with larger type!) set the Page Scaling choice at “Fit to printable area.”

A report from

GHOST RANCH PEACE & JUSTICE WEEK, 2009

Jane Hanna gathers together a variety of reports from participants in the Ghost Ranch Peace and Justice Week. But describing Jane as simply the gatherer of reports would be far from adequate. For years now, Jane has organized and shepherded a variety of Ghost Ranch seminars, many under the sponsorship of the Witherspoon Society along with the Presbyterian Peace Fellowship, and also Presbyterians for Restoring Creation. Over the past couple years, these have been joined with a wider range of seminars during one "Week for Peace and Justice," including events sponsored by the Presbyterian Peacemaking Program and other program bodies under the General Assembly Council.

All of us who share a commitment to peace and justice want to express our gratitude to Jane for all she has done, and continues to do! (She is already pulling together plans and leadership for next summer's seminars!)

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In keeping with Ghost Ranch's long commitment to Peacemaking and Social Justice, The Witherspoon Society and Presbyterian Peace Fellowship sponsored three classes during the last week in July. The Rev. Diane Monger describes her experience during the seminar led by Cliff Kirkpatrick, ***New Eyes for Peace & Justice From the World Church.***

She writes, "It was one of the best seminars I've ever attended. Cliff, and all the others in the class, brought amazing stories and experiences of God working in the world." The following is Diane's summary of an information-packed week, abundant in resources for use in our congregations.

In this seminar we explored several recent global, ecumenical events that have the potential for reshaping our witness for justice in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. They include:

- 1) **The Accra Confession.** *The World Alliance of Reformed Churches call for "Covenanting for Justice in the Economy and the Earth"*
- 2) **Decade to Overcome Violence.** *The World Council of Churches sponsored movement of Christian communities around the world seeking alternatives to violence that lead to justice.*
- 3) **Calvin Jubilee.** *2009 is Calvin's 500<sup>th</sup> birthday and churches around the world are exploring what it means to have a Calvinist revolution in the 21<sup>st</sup>*

century.

4) **A Common Word Between Us and You.** *A dramatic call from 138 Muslim scholars and leaders to find common ground around our common calling to love God and neighbor.*

Together we studied the History, Content, and Impact of the *Accra Confession*. [http://www.warc.ch/documents/ACCRA\\_Pamphlet.pdf](http://www.warc.ch/documents/ACCRA_Pamphlet.pdf). This calls the church to the fact that NOW is the time for economic justice for ALL the peoples of the earth, and for environmental justice for the very survival of the Earth itself. We met in groups to look at the Implications for North American Christians using the new curriculum for North America, ***Covenanting for Justice***.

<http://www.canaac.org/wp-content/uploads/2009/04/Covenanting-for-Justice-Web-Curriculum-from-North-American-Working-Group-of-Covenanting-for-Justice.pdf>

Many congregations are already working on a ***Module on Global Climate Change: Renewing the Sacred Balance*** by making our churches more energy efficient. Presbyterians are also longtime advocates for “Modules on Farm Labor” and the “Global Sweatshop Economy.” We viewed the video on the plant in La Oroya, Peru that is the highest polluting plant in the world in the “Module on Environmental Justice and Human Rights.” It’s a powerful example of how corporate power exploits the health and economic rights of its workers and destroys the earth.

Mary Ann Lundy shared with us an overview on the World Council of Churches ***Decade to Overcome Violence 2000-2010***. Cliff Kirkpatrick shared his personal testimony from the *Living Letters Team Visit to Kenya in 2008*. These teams are ecumenical in nature and visit various areas of the world. Discussion and Bible Study in Groups around the themes in the DOV Study Guide, ***Why Violence? Why Not Peace?*** Tough questions are looked at in each section – Is Violence Inevitable? How Do We Use Power? How Do We Act Justly? This is a very powerful study that we commend to all of our congregations as we grapple with violence in today’s society. This is available at:

[http://www2.wcc-coe.org/dov/nsf/1bb65526e8149bac1256c1c003547c6/42084945a42e423bc1256c450040a1f3/\\$FILE/ATTCPSZY/2003UpdatedDOVStudyGuide.pdf](http://www2.wcc-coe.org/dov/nsf/1bb65526e8149bac1256c1c003547c6/42084945a42e423bc1256c450040a1f3/$FILE/ATTCPSZY/2003UpdatedDOVStudyGuide.pdf)

If you think Calvin is dead – think again! ***A Calvinist Revolution for the 21<sup>st</sup> Century*** is happening today as Presbyterians and reformed peoples around the world are discovering (or rediscovering) Calvin, perhaps for the first time in new and exciting ways! Aurelia Fule gave a most informative presentation on Calvin in relation to Peace and Justice. Her presentation is available by contacting [Mjhfos@aol.com](mailto:Mjhfos@aol.com) Calvin had many things to say about health care and healthcare reform; issues of equity between the rich and the poor; treatment of immigrants; taking care of the poor, widows and children, love your neighbor as yourself. Does this sound familiar? Take

heart – a quote from Calvin might serve us well as we speak to our politicians and the powers and principalities of today! You can read Cliff Kirkpatrick's speech on Calvin: ***France's Gift to the World: Presentation for the Jubilee Celebration of the French Reformed Church:***

[http://warc.jalb.de/daten/Image/Kirkpatrick%20presentation%20450th%20anniversary\(2\).doc](http://warc.jalb.de/daten/Image/Kirkpatrick%20presentation%20450th%20anniversary(2).doc)

Why are Interfaith Relations Critical for Global Peace and Justice? Just read ***A Common Word Between Us and You*** and the Christian Responses especially from the Archbishop of Canterbury and the NCC.

<http://www.acommonword.com/> In this post-9/11 world, that we live in, we are called into relationship with our neighbors – Muslim, Jewish, various Christian traditions, and other world religions. Written by 138 Muslim scholars and leaders, this document is a must read for us as leaders in PCUSA.

I encourage all of you to check out the websites given here to read and experience with us these five days at Ghost Ranch!

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Roxanne Abbas shares her summary of the class ***Speaking Out for Peace & Justice: Writing, Preaching and Speaking Make a Difference*** led by Greg Garrett. She writes, "Like other class participants, I frequently have the opportunity to speak out for peace & justice issues that I believe in deeply but often am unsure if my message has been heard. During the class we studied and analyzed the writings and oral presentations of great Christian and secular leaders. We visited Los Alamos National Lab Bradbury Museum and the former Gov. of San Ildefonso Pueblo to observe and contrast how their stories are told. The following is a summary of the major topics covered during the week that we found especially useful for better communication."

When speaking to diverse audiences:

1. Build bridges
2. Talk about shared ideals & mission-
3. Evoke a call to a higher ideal

When writing or speaking: tell a story with specific detail, narrative, use repetition, establish a cadence. Ask yourself the following questions:

1. What do I believe?
2. Why do I care?
3. Who is my audience?

Gary emphasized that these three questions are far more important than: What do I know?

Consider the kinds of authority that you bring:

1. Experience
2. Office
3. Balance – being even-handed
4. Rhetorical authority – combining intellect with emotion

When writing or speaking:

1. Begin by engaging the audience with my personal narrative.
2. Then progress into stating the problem,
3. Followed by questions,
4. Then the solution.

More good suggestions: Ask yourself “What are the obstacles to mutual understanding on this issue?” It’s good to reference external sources both mainstream and progressive. Read articles and books that disagree with your point of view. To write effectively, you must focus. Never more than 3 major points. Asking questions in your article is a device to get your audience to think about the topic or issue.

During this week together the class gained good experience and helpful advice about how we can better communicate our faith and values, particularly when our subjects are controversial.

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Susan Letizia shares her perspective on ***Moving to Wholeness***, a class led by Jean Richardson, who introduced the week with this quotation:

*New leadership is needed for new times. It will come as we who lead find the courage to take an inner journey – a journey that, faithfully pursued, will take us beyond ourselves to become leaders in a wounded world. – Parker Palmer*

“How can we connect who we are with what we do?” is the question that intrigued me as a person committed to social justice for the long haul.

Others in our group of nine participants were pastors, teachers and a nurse who learned new ways of relating as a circle of trust. The early invitation to give 100% of ourselves to each other every time we met, the letting go of personal agendas and desire to “fix” each other, allowed us to begin to listen to one another without judgment and to not be afraid of silence, to welcome silence as a participant for reflection in our moments together. Using Parker Palmer’s book *A Hidden Wholeness* enhanced our understanding for considering this journey toward an undivided life as possible and now that

I am home even practical! The poetry we interacted with and journaling we shared were enlivened by our convener, Jean Richardson. She modeled the way to listen to our inner teacher – that of God in each one. I am so grateful for this time and space for our spirits to be renewed.



### Help others get to know us!

Especially at this time as our two progressive Presbyterian groups to form one strong new voice, we need to let people know about us.

*And you can help!*

If you would like to spread the word about Witherspoon/Voices, we can provide you with membership brochures and copies of previous copies of *Network News*.

If you want to form a local chapter, we can provide you with multiple copies of our newsletter, and perhaps even find an active Witherspoon/Voices member in your area who could pay you a visit.

For help in forming a group, contact Gusti Newquist, our Membership Coordinator, at [gustinewquist@mindspring.com](mailto:gustinewquist@mindspring.com)

For brochures and newsletters, contact Communications Coordinator Doug King at [douging2@aol.com](mailto:douging2@aol.com)

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## Plan now for next summer!



Photo courtesy of Ghost Ranch

### **GHOST RANCH SEMINAR**

**July 26-August 1, 2010**

### **WE'RE ALL IN THIS TOGETHER: CONFRONTING THE STRUCTURES OF INJUSTICE**

In partnership with The Witherspoon Society/Voices of Sophia  
and The Presbyterian Peace Fellowship.  
Jane Hanna, Coordinator

If it seems there are many critical issues confronting us, it is because there are. How do we respond to the biblical call for justice in a world facing deepening global inequality, environmental challenges, and the escalation of violence in human relationships? We are fortunate to have three eminently qualified people prepared to address these questions. We will use *A Social Creed for the 21<sup>st</sup> Century* to discern a moral, ethical and spiritual response to the many challenges humankind must meet. In presentations and discussions we will search for the prophetic spirit to guide our efforts toward a more just and humane world.

**Gary Dorrien**, Reinhold Niebuhr Professor of Social Ethics at Union Theological Seminary and Professor of Religion at Columbia University. An Episcopal priest, he was previously the Parfet Distinguished Profes-

sor at Kalamazoo College, where he taught for 18 years and also served as Dean of Stetson Chapel. He is the author of 14 books and approximately 225 articles that range across the fields of ethics, social theory, theology, philosophy, politics and history. Prof. Dorrien has a long record of involvement in social justice and anti-war organizations. His most recent books are *The Making of American Liberal Theology* and *Social Ethics in the Making*. His next book, due in 2010, is *Economy, Difference, and Empire*. ([www.utsnyc.edu/garydorrien](http://www.utsnyc.edu/garydorrien))

**Grace Yia-Hei Kao** is an Associate Professor of Ethics at the Claremont School of Theology, where she teaches and researches issues related to human rights, religion in the public sphere, feminism, environmental ethics, and Asian American Christianity. She was previously Assistant Professor of Religious Studies and Women's Studies at Virginia Tech. Dr. Kao has published chapters and articles on a variety of topics, including ecofeminism, the relationship between religion and violence, and the prospects and challenges for interreligious cooperation and peace. Georgetown University Press will soon publish her first book, *Grounding Human Rights in a Pluralist World*, in their Advancing Human Rights series. ([www.cst.edu/academic-resources/-faculty.kao.php](http://www.cst.edu/academic-resources/-faculty.kao.php))

**Elizabeth Hinson-Hasty** is Associate Professor of Theology at Bellarmine University in Louisville, KY where she teaches a broad range of courses including *Theology from the Margins* for which she was recently awarded a Kentuckiana Metroversity Instructional Development Award. She is also a Minister of Word and Sacrament in the Presbyterian Church (USA). Much of her work has bridged the gap between church and academy. Dr. Hinson-Hasty currently serves as an elected member of the Advocacy Committee for Women's Concerns (ACWC) and was part of the PC(USA) committee that drafted the Social Creed for the 21st Century. She is the author of *Beyond the Social Maze: Exploring Vida Dutton Scudder's Theological Ethics* and co-editor of *Prayers for the New Social Awakening*, with Christian Iosso and *To Do Justice: A Guide for Progressive Christians* with Rebecca Todd Peters. ([www.bellarmino.edu/cas/theology](http://www.bellarmino.edu/cas/theology))

**Note:** Just follow the links after the speakers' bio sketches for more about them.

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## Task force approves final Form of Government report

### Two Witherspoon/Voices board members offer comments

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Presbyterian News Service reports – using a story written by Leslie Scanlon of *The Presbyterian Outlook* – that the new Form of Government Task Force of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) has The Form of Government Task Force has submitted the final draft of its report to the 219th General Assembly (2010). The task force voted unanimously at its meeting in Louisville last month to approve the report.

The new proposal makes some changes from the recommendations regarding the Form of Government (FOG) that the General Assembly considered in 2008, but it keeps intact some key recommendations from that first plan, including some considered controversial.

For the full story, please go to <http://www.pcusa.org/pcnews/2009/09815.htm>

The complete report of the new Form of Government Task Force is also available online, at <http://www.pcusa.org/formofgovernment/>

Gene TeSelle offers these thoughts:

For several years committees have been working at a new and supposedly shorter Form of Government. The first draft was sent back to the drawing board by the 2008 General Assembly. Now a new draft has been circulated.

First, we should note that no changes were to be made either in G-6.0106b or in the “trust clause.” Re-drafting was not to be a smoke screen for making basic policy changes.

But of course there will always be questions about changes in emphasis that could have major consequences. A careful comparison might be made between the summary of the Reformed tradition and the one we already have in chapter 3 of the Form of Government.

I notice that there is a reversion to the old language of “teaching” and “ruling” elders, abandoning the ecumenical language of “ministers of Word and Sacrament.” At first glance it seems to be an abandonment of ecumenicity – and perhaps a new assertiveness on the part of elders. Governing bodies are called “councils.” In the history of the church, councils were always temporary gatherings for a specific purpose. The English language has led to some confusion, since we use “council” for a group whose function is “counsel.” But there’s a difference between concilium and consilium, concile and conseil, that should not be lost. The Catholic Church calls the ongoing organizations “conferences.” But why don’t we just continue our language of “governing bodies”? If we want something really classy, we could follow the Dutch and call a presbytery a classis.

Finally, a basic caution. The call for a new Form of Government seems to be motivated by impatience with the detail of the existing one. But those details have been added through the years, usually judiciously, as a result of procedural confusions that inevitably arise and need clarification. The new mood is that “the church is mission,” that “form follows function.” The danger is that it might encourage an impatience about procedures and minority rights in order to “just get the job done.” If that happens, then there will be a new round of amendments to fill gaps that did not need to be created in the first place.

Mitch Trigger adds these comments:

I have looked forward to the culmination of the work of the Form of Government Task Force as they have shown some interesting developments along the path of its development. It seems to show the flexibility and singleness of direction that it was asked to develop.

That’s why I was disturbed, though, by its use of the word “standards” in regard to the confessions of the church. As a minister of Word and Sacrament, I take seriously my vow to be “instructed and led by the confessions.” The FOG draft, however, has added something I can’t agree with. “While confessional standards are subordinate to the Scriptures, they are, nonetheless, standards. They are not lightly drawn up or subscribed to, nor may they be ignored or dismissed. The church is prepared to instruct, counsel with, or even to discipline one ordained who seriously rejects the faith

expressed in the confessions.” (FOG draft, F-2.02)

This use of the word “standard” raises more problems than this section would have otherwise engendered. Does this mean I must ascribe to the concept of original sin as it is found in the confessions? Must I now advocate substitutionary atonement? And do we have to delve into predestination again? By using the word “standards,” and the sentence where the church is “prepared to instruct, counsel with, or even to discipline one ordained,” the Task Force has created a very different meaning than the vows I took in my ordination.

There are many other areas where the work of the Task Force was clear and concise, areas where they did an exemplary job of illustrating our shared faith. I hope this can also be made to be one of those areas, but not as it currently stands.

Those are a few brief thoughts from two of our Board members. And now we’re interested in finding out about your questions and concerns – and your favorable comments – about the draft Form of Government.

Please just send an email note to Doug King at [douging2@aol.com](mailto:douging2@aol.com), or to Gene TeSelle at [teselle@bellsouth.net](mailto:teselle@bellsouth.net) We’ll post all comments on our website.



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## More Light Presbyterians meet in Nashville, celebrating “God’s Whole Family”

by **Gene TeSelle**, former Issues Analyst for the Witherspoon Society

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More Light Presbyterians held its 2009 conference September 4-6 in Nashville at Second Presbyterian Church, one of two More Light churches in the Presbytery of Middle Tennessee (a third congregation is considering affiliation). The local team, chaired by Trice Gibbons, was impressive in both its planning and its hospitality.

Other Presbyterian organizations were invited to participate and be exhibitors, and the Witherspoon Society/Voices of Sophia was glad to be among them. Several times it was noted how constructive the diversity of organizations has been, reaching people through different networks and highlighting the many reasons people have for supporting the removal of obstacles to ordination.

The conference was designed to be participatory, and there were various workshops around the theme of “God’s Whole Family.” It is difficult, then, to convey the richness of what the participants brought, experienced, and took away with them.

Certainly one aspect was music. Much of it was planned, led, and performed by Patrick Evans, who teaches at Yale Divinity School and Institute of Sacred Music. And on Saturday night there was a concert by Nashville in Harmony,

described as A City Chorus for GLBT People and Allies.

There was also the world premiere of MLP’s new film, “God’s New Family,” with Jan Leo and Michael Adee.

Moderator Bruce Reyes-Chow spoke to the group on Saturday morning, emphasizing the need to find “postmodern” ways of being the church: making sure that communication is two-way, without the “layers of protection” that secretaries and recorded messages have offered; recognizing that authority does not come automatically with degrees and status (in fact the Presbyterian system, he said, is “open-source” in its approach); being “all things to all people,” finding unity in diversity; not putting too much reliance on “restructuring,” since communication never stops flowing; and getting beyond ideological loyalties, since the entire community can never hold the same things, and mutual conversation is a sign not of weakness but of strength.

During opening worship there was a reminder of the past year’s experiences with Amendment 08-B. If you were from one of the 34 presbyteries that transformed no votes to yes, you stood. Then if you were from one of the 44 that continued their history of inclusiveness, you stood. If you were from one

of the 3 that tied, you stood. If you were from one of the 2 that voted yes in the past but voted no this year, you stood. Finally, if you were from the presbyteries that continued to vote no, you stood. All were affirmed as part of God's whole family.

In all, the "popular vote" on Amendment 08-B was around 21,000, and the difference between yes and no votes was less than 500. There was also the encouraging news from the Episcopal Church and the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America. Several people who had made phone calls to ministers and elders prior to the votes in presbyteries said that the response was often, "I'm glad that you called." Even some opponents of Amendment 08-B had admitted that its approval was coming; the only question was how long it will take and how it will happen.

Thus there was an optimistic tone throughout the conference. One "star" of the conference was Kevin Henderson, an elder who spoke during the debate on Amendment 08-B at the Presbytery of Sheppards and Lapsley — which then voted in favor. During one of the preparatory dialogues, he said, several people in the small group said, "I've never known a gay person." When his turn came he said, "Now you have." After the initial shock there was a constructive discussion that obviously changed some minds and hearts.

In the opening service of worship, the Rev. Ray Bagnuolo read — or rather "preached," from memory — the "by

faith" passage in Hebrews (11:29-12:3). The Rev. Debra Peevey, first openly gay minister in the Disciples of Christ, who coordinated MLP's outreach in the presbyteries, took as her text the story of Gideon in Judges, which is full of issues of trust, and faith, and hope. She suggested that when people heard that the Presbytery of Western North Carolina, home of Parker Williamson, had voted in favor of 08-B, they, like Gideon, checked the fleece, not once but twice, to see whether it was so; and many in the congregation nodded.

Peevey's theme was that "The Future is Now." She noted that many Lutherans, after the ELCA's vote this summer, seemed surprised and asked what they should do now, as though they were simply accustomed to things as they have been. Beyond "working for change," then, it is important to be "ready for change." And there is no point in just waiting for the amendment to pass. "When we stop marginalizing ourselves," she said, "others will stop marginalizing us."

That same message was reinforced several times by Michael Adee, Executive Director and Field Organizer of MLP. We do not claim to *have* more light, he said; we are *seeking* more light, along with others. We need to "shift the paradigm," he said, looking at *all* obstacles to a loving community. Thus what we need is not a microscope, asking only about the status of gays or expecting a "gay church," but a magnifying glass, asking *who else* does not feel welcome among God's

people, and this will be attractive to many different kinds of people.

Adee led a session with people from congregations thinking about joining the More Light network. He reinforced the need for open and transparent discussion, not only in a committee or the session but with members of the congregation. One helpful move is to ask people to remember a time when they felt loved by the church. Answers can vary: acceptance and affirmation, pastoral care in times of crisis or need, service in the church (including becoming an elder!), special ceremonies or events. Such times of acceptance have often been denied to LGBT persons.

Adee noted that the Institute for Welcoming Resources has an assessment tool ([www.welcomingresources.org](http://www.welcomingresources.org)) for congregations to evaluate their readiness to affiliate with the More Light network. The decision-making process may be characterized by some people as “difficult.” More appropriately it should be called “important,” and it is likely to become constructive and transforming.

By the end of the conference it was clear, then, that the impetus toward a more inclusive church will continue. We can be sure that there will be overtures from presbyteries to the 2010 General Assembly in Minneapolis, though no “grand strategy” has been manifested. What we do know is that there will be hope-filled activity throughout the church, focused primarily at the local level and with an awareness of

God’s whole family, and that it will lead, sooner rather than later, to change at the national level as well.

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The Rev. John Shuck, pastor of First Presbyterian Church in Elizabethton, Tenn., has posted a good blog note about the conference.

His conclusion: “The theme was God’s Whole Family. It truly was.”

You’ll find it at:

<http://www.shuckandjive.org/2009/09/celebrating-gods-whole-family.html>



**Our new “Holy Union”  
means we need a new  
name and a new logo.  
Check pages 38-39, and  
see what ideas  
you can offer!**

## For the continuing debate on ordination ....

**Two theologians offer substantive reflections on the issue of authority (Scripture and Tradition) that underlies much of the discussion on the ordination of LGBT members of the Presbyterian Church.**

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### AFTERTHOUGHTS ON AUTHORITY

by Eric Mount

Transylvania Presbytery's preparation for the vote on G-6.0106b offered seven regional gatherings that included ten minute presentations by an advocate for each position. I was tapped to speak on behalf of "New B" at several of the gatherings, and the issue of biblical authority was central to the disagreement between the spokesperson on the other side and me. He insisted that anyone who believed that "Scripture alone" is authoritative for the belief and practice of the church would reject the proposed change, and he distributed a list of biblical references as proof. I took the position that people could support the change because of the Bible and not in spite of it, and I also made reference to the "Wesleyan Quadrilateral," which includes tradition, reason, and experience as sources of authority along with the Bible. How is that for biting off too much to chew in ten minutes

Albert Outler, who coined the term "Wesleyan Quadrilateral" in 1964, later rued the day that he did so because many concluded that "quadrilateral" meant "equilateral." John Wesley

clearly did not intend that recognizing other sources of authority should compromise the centrality of biblical authority. In asking that the contributions of tradition, reason, and experience be recognized, I too did not mean to question the uniqueness and indispensability of biblical authority for Christians. The pivotal role of the Bible in defining our identities as Christians and informing our faith and practice is not an elective but an essential requirement, but that deference does not mean that biblical authority is exclusive or that it is infallible on every subject in contemporary debates. At issue for me and many others who share my position is the locus of biblical authority (whether in a list of rules and regulations, for example, or the workings of the Holy Spirit), the focus of biblical authority (on the sovereignty of God or the Lordship of Christ as opposed to the sentences on the page), and the ways in which it can work in tandem with the other sources of authority. My opponent in the discussions seemed to believe that biblical truth and human experience are airtight compartments, and that one

must choose either one or the other as one's authority—Scripture alone or experience alone. I beg to differ.

For starters, let us consider the probability that drawing bright lines of separation between the four cited sources of authority is an oversimplification. Beginning with Scripture and experience, I would first acknowledge that making one's experience a shield against encounter with unwelcome news from Scripture is a danger to be reckoned with. However, it is also true the readers of Scripture cannot avoid bringing their experience to that reading and that a message that does not ultimately make sense in the light of our experience will not be heard and appropriated. Furthermore, the experience of biblical writers is reflected in their varied, even at times contrasting, understandings of God and in the variety of ways in which they understand "why bad things happen to good people." In turn, our experience will shape what explanations of suffering we can fathom and embrace. The various liberation theologies show us that the Bible is read differently from the underside than from a position of privilege. I, for one, would not want to argue that the spectacles of that marginalized experience are blinders to biblical truth. We could say then that we, bringing our experience, enter into a conversation with biblical writers, speaking out of their experience as well as out of divine inspiration. The faith community that produced and selected

canonical scripture from its experience is a dialogue partner with today's faith community with its varied experiences.

Mention of reading from the underside moves us nicely to a blurring of lines between Scripture and tradition as authorities. Martin Luther's protest against the papacy's rendition of the biblical faith (one example of tradition) does not mean that the unfolding tradition of biblical interpretation after the era of biblical events and communities does not produce "the breaking forth of more light and truth from God's holy Word," as John Robinson put it. The conversation mentioned above continues. And that conversation even starts within the Bible itself as Scripture converses with Scripture and differing interpretations and accounts emerge and are preserved. The editors of the canon seem willing to include varied and even contrasting accounts of pivotal events in the sacred story. Thus we have two creation stories side by side, the merging of two flood stories, the merging of two differing accounts of the exodus from Egypt, the inclusion of two renditions of the receipt of the Torah by Moses, two differing renditions of the occupation of Canaan (Joshua and Judges), two renditions of David's reign (the Deuteronomic history and the Chronicler), four gospels, etc. Galatians and James offer different interpretations of the Abraham story, I Timothy derives a very different understanding of the status of women

from Genesis than Paul's view in Galatians would approve, and the views of Paul and James on faith and works are both included despite their seeming differences. What we would call tradition already begins in Scripture as Scripture interprets Scripture, and the continued unfolding of tradition has brought breakthroughs on slavery, the equality of women, and other contentious issues. A conversation that includes variation, contrast, and corroboration is ongoing. The faith community continues to check and balance itself through the authority of the Holy Spirit.

And then there is reason. Martin Luther had some harsh things to say about reason, terming it a prostitute in at least one instance, because people can employ reason in the service of both noble and ignoble ends. Notice, though, what he said when asked by Pope Leo X to recant his Reformation-launching writings: "Unless I shall be convinced by the testimony of the Scriptures or by clear reason, I must be bound by these Scriptures which have been brought forward by me. ... [T]o go against conscience is neither safe nor right." Reason was evidently consulted. Faith informs the way we reason, but reason can also contribute to our analysis of the Bible and theology. John Calvin, the humanist as well as the Christian theologian, thought that wisdom was forthcoming even from pagan writers. Is it not possible that science can enlighten us about matters that the

writers of scripture did not fully fathom or, in some instances, even consider? Given the dearth of attention to homosexuality as an orientation in the Bible, might we have something to learn about it from the American Academy of Pediatrics, the American Anthropological Association, the American Association for Marriage and Family Therapy, the American Counseling Association, the American Medical Association, the American Psychiatric Association, the American Psychoanalytic Association, and the American Psychological Association? They have findings to report and considerable consensus to relate.

In *Homosexuality and the Bible*, Walter Wink makes a salient point about the problem of authority. He finds the Bible rejecting incest, rape, adultery, and bestiality and thinks virtually all modern readers would agree. However, he finds the Bible condemning seven sexual behaviors that we would generally allow and permitting seven behaviors that we would condemn. These disparities lead him to say that the Bible does not provide us with a sex ethic, but only with a love ethic. We could debate individual items on his lists, but he effectively challenges claims that the Bible is infallible in its assumptions and directives about sexuality.

We can say that biblical authority is central. After all, what gives us Jesus? But it is also problematic. It presents

Jesus as saying that “not one letter, not one stroke of a letter, will pass from the law until all is accomplished” (Matthew 5:18) and also saying, “But I say to you . . .” (in contrast to ancient authorities). The Gospel of John (16:12) has Jesus saying that he has others things to teach his disciples, but not now. The Spirit of truth will take up that educative function. Only God is an absolute authority, and regarding every word of the Bible as infallible is idolatry. In this regard, James Gustafson writes in the introduction to H. Richard Niebuhr’s *The Responsible Self* about how Niebuhr’s radical monotheism relates to biblical authority in Christian ethics. In relation to authority of the One who is absolute, the authority of Scripture is “mediate derived authority.” And although the Bible occupies a unique role, the church has other mediate authorities, such as nature (as understood by reason in the natural law tradition, for example). Other communities also have a pluralism of mediate authorities, as evidenced in science and politics. This pluralism forces a balancing in which no one authority is absolute.

As Gustafson continues, in a way the church stands *under* the Bible because of what it mediates; but in another way the church stands *beside* the Bible, and rank orders are a mistake. The several sources of authority are dialogue partners in a community held together by a common Center of Value and inspired by the continuing influence of

the authority of the Holy Spirit. Thus our experience may interrogate the Bible and tradition and conventional wisdom, and the Bible may interrogate our experience, our traditions, and our conventional wisdom. Both the Bible and our experience may have what Niebuhr calls “corroborative authority” in an ongoing educational dialogue, in a continuing corporate effort at discernment (as recommended, for example, by the Theological Taskforce on the Peace, Unity, and Purity of the Church). It is important to remember that this is community activity and that in a community, authority is jointly acknowledged, jointly debated, and jointly corroborated. And the process should never become frozen in time and place.

Before my friendly opponent and I made our presentations at the regional gatherings, we ate supper together along with our general presbyter (who preached at each session) and the person presiding at the gathering. We got to know each other pretty well and even joined in the leadership of the communion service prior to the final vote by the full presbytery. We could probably have given each other’s presentation with precision if the other had been deterred from showing up. As we sat together following our final effort, he remarked that he appreciated the tone of our exchanges and that neither of us had apparently budged the other even an inch. I agreed. I don’t know how much we budged anyone

else either. Although our presbytery changed its stance on the original Amendment B vote and supported G-6.0106b, I am under no illusions about how many minds I changed. The debate on the floor of presbytery did not last very long, and the most steam emerged in one commissioner's effort to reverse the decision to have a written ballot. People seemed to arrive knowing where they stood, but the balance of positions on the nature of biblical authority had shifted. Although the balance also shifted in more than thirty other presbyteries that voted as we did and many more that voted against "New B" by narrower margins

than before, the overall outcome supported the retention of Amendment B. The conversation/argument will no doubt continue. Based on my experience this time, I remain convinced that some widespread assumptions about biblical authority still need to be challenged without ceasing to acknowledge its indispensable and inescapable importance.

**The author:**

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## **"Biblicism: Protestantism's Distinctive Form of Idolatry"**

**by Paul E. Capetz**

Those of us who work with a progressive or liberal understanding of Protestantism and the Reformed tradition are always being criticized by fundamentalists and conservative evangelicals for our alleged lack of fidelity to what the Bible teaches. In the pressing issue of homosexuality that divides our denomination as well as the other mainline denominations into two warring camps, the constant refrain on the lips of those opposing any revision of inherited sexual ethics is that homosexual practice violates "the clear teaching of scripture."

Since I am not only a liberal Protestant theologian in the Reformed tradition but also a gay man who has experienced at first hand the effects of this ecclesial battle in his personal and professional life, I have given a great deal of thought to the question of a proper and an improper use of the Bible in theology and ethics. After observing the Presbyterians engaged in battle for thirty years (from the 1978 General Assembly in San Diego that issued the first "authoritative interpretation" pertinent to the question of the ordination of gay persons, to the 2008 General Assembly in San Jose that swept away

all such previous authoritative interpretations), I have concluded that our church is plagued by a form of idolatry that is distinctive to Protestantism, namely, "Biblicism."

Biblicism approaches the Bible as an unquestionable authority, presumably on account of its divine inspiration or authorship. I say this is idolatry because it treats the Bible as though it weren't really a human document at all but a compendium of the divine opinions. Hence, to disagree with the biblical writers in any way is to oppose the very Word of God. But I call this form of idolatry distinctively Protestant since it differs from the forms of idolatry that characterize the other major forms of Christianity. Whereas Eastern Orthodoxy claims to have an unbroken tradition going back to the apostles that can never be revised, Roman Catholicism identifies the true church with an institution headed by the Roman pontiff who claims the authority to speak infallibly as Christ's vicar on earth. It may be easier for Protestants to see the idolatry in these other forms of Christianity while failing to recognize idolatry in our own midst.

Let me illustrate this from my experience at the special meeting of the Presbytery of the Twin Cities Area, which was convened on January 26, 2008, to vote upon my request to be restored to ordained status while declaring a scruple against a vow of celibacy. One of the things that struck me was that there were no actual ethical arguments put forward by

conservatives as to why we should rationally consider homosexuality to be immoral. No one argued a traditional Roman Catholic argument about the natural law or appealed to modern psychology and science to suggest that these sources lead one to treat homosexuality as some sort of pathology.

All we were given was a simple appeal to the Bible, which is to say nothing but an appeal to authority. That's what Biblicism is, a sheer appeal to biblical authority that is designed to shut down the possibility of rational theological and ethical debate. Now, if our denomination were a fundamentalist denomination that took this line with respect to every issue facing it, such Biblicism would at least be consistent with standard practice. But this is not how we have historically used the Bible. (Jack Rogers' historical studies of the use of both the Bible and the Confessions are superb in this respect and deserve more attention than they have yet received.)

What most astonished me was to see how many ordained women voted against my restoration on the grounds of biblical authority alone. Do these women not remember the argument of those who opposed the ordination of women? It was exactly the same as that put forward against accepting the moral legitimacy of homosexuality: "But the Bible says...." When I raised this inconsistency with one woman, who is a recent graduate of Princeton Seminary and now a minister in this

presbytery, she denied that the statements found in the Pauline epistles had any bearing on the question of women's ordination and even hazarded the statement: "If I thought Paul would be opposed to me being a minister, I would give up my ordination." Aside from the fact that this is such an obviously self-serving reading of the passages in scripture dealing with women, I was dumbfounded that she would grant to the apostle Paul – a finite, historically conditioned, and even sinful human being like the rest of us – the ultimate authority to determine whether it was good and right for the church to ordain women. Her statement is an utter denial of the fact that in deciding for the ordination of women, the church set aside those passages used by opponents of women's ordination as no longer having binding authority on us anymore. Paul's opinions are not the views of God!

A hypothetical example crossed my mind. Let's imagine that a pastor, opposed to homosexuality on biblical grounds, has a woman in his congregation whose husband beats her up every night. This woman confides to her pastor that she is seeking a divorce in order to escape the abuse. Now what is this biblically-based pastor going to say to his parishioner? "No, you can't divorce your abusive husband because the only exception admitted by Jesus to his absolute prohibition of divorce is the sexual infidelity of your spouse." I seriously doubt that any conservative or evangelical pastor in

our denomination would take that stand today, and yet it is "the clear teaching of scripture" (Matt. 19:9).

When I was accused of not taking scripture seriously, I read a statement made by an Episcopal bishop who defended his advocacy of slavery with these words: "If it were a matter to be determined by personal sympathies, tastes, or feelings, I should be as ready as any man to condemn the institution of slavery, for all my prejudices of education, habit, and social position stand entirely opposed to it. But as a Christian ... I am compelled to submit my weak and erring intellect to the authority of the Almighty." If ever there were an argument against Biblicism, this is it. God gave this bishop a mind and a conscience to determine what is right and wrong, good and evil. He knew that slavery was wrong but, instead of following his conscience, he abandoned it for the sake of an uncritical, indeed idolatrous use of the Bible. After reading this passage, I wondered aloud how God will judge this man on the Last Day.

Biblicism is the distinctive form of idolatry in Protestantism because, while it purports to be a continuation of the Reformers' *sola scriptura* (scripture alone), it actually fails to attend to the nuances of the Reformers' own use of the Bible in the sixteenth century. The Reformers frequently called the Bible "the Word of God," not because they had abandoned their intellects or reasoning capacities when approaching it, but rather because the Bible is the

original, and hence classic, witness to the gospel which alone is the Word of God in the strict and proper sense. For them, it was not the Bible *per se* that is the Word of God but the gospel to which the Bible bears testimony and that bestows on scripture its normative status. Furthermore, careful study of the Reformers more than amply illustrates that their commitment to biblical authority was no anti-intellectual Biblicism but, instead, represented a serious commitment to a theological wrestling with the message of the gospel to be found therein, precisely so that they might reshape (i.e. reform) both the practice and the doctrine of their contemporary churches.

Ironically, the rhetoric of the conservative opponents of homosexuality in these past thirty years has only served to obscure and falsify the true heritage of the very Reformed tradition they so badly want to claim for themselves. For if Luther and Calvin appealed to the Bible to criticize the forms of idolatry they claimed to find in medieval Catholicism, they certainly had no intention of setting up a new form of idolatry in its place based on the Bible. It is sad when a church loses touch with the proper use and purpose of the Bible in its own tradition. It is now up to those of us who are progressives or liberals to see if we can help the church recover its authentic heritage, including how the Bible is supposed to be used in contemporary theology and ethics. God alone is to be worshipped, not the Bible.

**The author:**

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## Are you a Witherspoon/ Voices of Sophia member?

### Let's keep in touch!

Join our members' e-mail list to receive occasional notes on matters that the Board considers truly important to be shared.

This will probably not be more than half a dozen during a year - so we won't overload your already bursting email box.

Just send an email to [douging2@aol.com](mailto:douging2@aol.com)

Please put  
"Witherspoon Voices elist"  
in the subject line.

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## Calling all artists, doodlers, creative thinkers, feminists, progressive Reformed theologians & independent minds

We are merging two progressive Presbyterian organizations —  
Voices of Sophia and the Witherspoon Society —  
and now we need to live into a new identity.



Sooo ... we're looking for a new  
name and a new logo!



You can help.  
Join one or both of these contests and win huge  
prizes!

### LOGO

Your logo submission should express the mission and character of the new, united organization. (These include peace, justice, affirmation of women's distinctive experience and perspectives, and an inclusive and hospitable community of faith in the Reformed tradition.) Please submit an image that **will fit within a 3" by 3" square** (though it does not need to be exactly that size), and that can be reproduced in a variety of formats – black and white, grayscale, and in one, two and four colors.

### NAME

Please suggest a name of one to four words that will reflect the mission and character of the group, as outlined in the "Logo" paragraph. If you wish, feel free to add a brief explanation of your suggestion, in **no more than 50 words**.

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**AND THE WINNERS WILL RECEIVE . . . !**

The winning entry to each contest will receive:

Your choice of a \$50 cash award,

OR your choice of free tickets to any three of our events during the 219<sup>th</sup> General Assembly (July 2 - 10, 2010) in Minneapolis: the pre-Assembly "Reformation 2010" conversation, the Voices of Sophia Breakfast, the Commissioner Orientation, the Witherspoon Luncheon, and (ta-daa!!) the Witherspoon Dance.

All entries will become the property of the Witherspoon Society/Voices of Sophia.

**PLEASE SEND YOUR ENTRIES BY DECEMBER 31, 2009**

ONLINE with "Name and Logo Contest" in the Subject line, to Mitch Trigger at [mitch@revtrigger.org](mailto:mitch@revtrigger.org)

OR BY MAIL to  
Mitchell Trigger  
First Presbyterian Church  
35 Church Street  
Rockaway, NJ 07866

***Got questions?***

Please call Mitch Trigger at (973) 784-4818, or send him an email: [mitch@revtrigger.org](mailto:mitch@revtrigger.org)

To receive regular e-mail notices of additions to the Witherspoon website, just send a note to [dougking2@aol.com](mailto:dougking2@aol.com)

Please put "web updates" in the subject line.

# News of Witherspoon/Voices

## Thanks to Jake and John!

Two long-time members of the Witherspoon board are “retiring” this year, and I would like to acknowledge their service and say just a bit about their contributions.

The Rev. Jake Young was still attending “young pastors seminars” when he joined the Witherspoon board in 2003 as our membership coordinator. He then became vice president of the group, and shortly was transformed into the co-moderator when we shifted our arrangement of officers a bit. I’m not sure whether he still qualifies as a *young* pastor, but clearly he *is* a pastor – showing a steady concern for people, along with sensitivity to both personal relationships and larger issues of peace and justice. He has led our sometimes squirrely business meetings with patience and good humor,

always gently bringing us back to the task at hand.

The Rev. John Harris joined the board in 2004, taking over the role of membership coordinator, and continued in that vital role until 2008, when he moved to an at-large position. For years before that he has assisted his wife, the Rev. Vicki Moss, in hosting and managing the Witherspoon booth at each General Assembly. He has brought to the board his wisdom and knowledge gained from service as a presbytery stated clerk as well as pastor of congregations in West Virginia and now in Queens, NY. His analytical mind and patience for detail have been immensely helpful.

Both of these friends will be missed, not just for their skills and talents, but as friends.

Doug King

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## Some blogs worth visiting

**Voices of Sophia blog**

<http://voicesofsophia.wordpress.com/>

**Witherspoon’s Facebook page**

<http://www.facebook.com/group.php?gid=50517709365>

**John Harris’ Summit toShore blogspot** <http://summittoshore.blogspot.com/>

**John Shuck’s Shuck and Jive**

<http://www.shuckandjive.org/>

**Book note:****Religious Collaboration for Social Justice**

By Barbara Mauk, Librarian,  
Westminster Presbyterian Church,  
Minneapolis, MN

A new book, *Journeys into Justice: Religious Collaboratives Working for Social Transformation*, by Westminster [and Witherspoon] member Nile Harper, explores ten successful religious collaboratives to discover the ways in which they changed public policies and social systems to greatly improve the lives of thousands of people. This is a book of hope based on experience.

What is a religious collaborative? Harper defines it as an organization of organizations rooted in religious values. It builds mutual trust and the sharing of human and financial resources. It is characterized by commitment to long-term carefully planned action to serve the common good. Collaboration has existed in various forms through much of human history. But now in the midst of present-day social-economic-political crises that give rise to a widespread sense of personal powerlessness, collaboration is rising as an effective form of organization to deal with pressing issues that affect so many people.

*Journeys into Justice* documents how ten religious collaboratives dealt creatively with issues of affordable housing, economic development, juvenile justice, family empowerment, worker justice, a living wage, immigration, the care of creation, and the promotion of civic leadership. Dr. Harper draws together the rich experience of local, regional, and national level collaboratives working in a variety of

different settings. The final section of the book focuses on putting ideas into action. It provides resource materials for creating new collaboratives and strengthening existing ones.

Dr. Walter Brueggemann says about the book, "This is an enormously important book coming just at the right time as our society moves toward new public possibilities for social justice." Dr. Clifton Kirkpatrick, former Stated Clerk of the Presbyterian Church (USA) and now President of the World Alliance of Reformed Churches, says, "I recommend this very readable book for all whose spiritual and social quest leads them to seek a more just and peaceful world."

The book is available online at [www.journeysintojustice.com](http://www.journeysintojustice.com) or [www.amazon.com](http://www.amazon.com)

### The next issue of *Network News*

will bring you news and analysis of the Presbyterian Church (USA) and our shared calling to serve peace and justice in the world.

#### We welcome your news and reflections!

Please contact *Network News* editor Doug King:

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Deadline for the Fall issue is  
November 10, 2009.

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