



gala **news**

THE LETTER

May 2007 – Volume 18 Issue 2

**Excerpts from the “Counsel to the Church”
presented to the Community of Christ World
Conference by President Stephen M. Veazey on
March 29, 2007**

2. Jesus Christ, the embodiment of God’s shalom, invites all people to come and receive divine peace in the midst of the difficult questions and struggles of life.... The restoring of persons to healthy or righteous relationships with God, others, themselves, and the earth is at the heart of the purpose of your journey as a people of faith....

3 c. There are subtle, yet powerful, influences in the world, some even claiming to represent Christ, that seek to divide people and nations to accomplish their destructive aims. That which seeks to harden one human heart against another by constructing walls of fear and prejudice is not of God. Be especially alert to these influences, lest they divide you or divert you from the mission to which you are called....

7 a. Scripture is an indispensable witness to the Eternal Source of light and truth, which cannot be fully contained in any finite vessel or language. Scripture has been written and shaped by human authors through experiences of revelation and ongoing inspiration of the Holy Spirit in the midst of time and culture.

b. Scripture is not to be worshiped or idolized. Only God, the Eternal One of whom scripture testifies, is worthy of worship. God’s nature, as revealed in Jesus Christ and affirmed by the Holy Spirit, provides the ultimate standard by which any portion of scripture should be interpreted and applied.

c. It is not pleasing to God when any passage of scripture is used to diminish or oppress races, genders, or classes of human beings. Much physical and emotional violence has been done to some of God’s beloved children through the misuse of scripture. The church is called to confess and repent of such attitudes and practices. ...

10 a. Collectively and individually, you are loved with an everlasting love that delights in each faithful step taken. God yearns to draw you close so that wounds may be healed, emptiness filled, and hope strengthened.

b. Do not turn away in pride, fear, or guilt from the One who seeks only the best for you and your loved ones. Come before your Eternal Creator with open minds and hearts and discover the blessings of the gospel anew. Be vulnerable to divine grace....

*The entire document can be found on-line at [cofchrist.org/
World Conference Archives/Doctrine and Covenants 163](http://cofchrist.org/World_Conference_Archives/Doctrine_and_Covenants_163)*

Once Again, World Conference Renews

Dear Friends,

Just wanted to share some thoughts and feelings surrounding this past Community of Christ World Conference experience. I guess I feel like a World Conference junkie....Since 1974 I’ve attended every possible Conference. It’s a great place to gather with friends and family to renew ties and relationships.

When GALA became a presence during Conference, the GALA booth was a busy hub of sharing, connection and expanding possibilities of ministry in home congregations. We offered a light in a religious world limiting the worth of persons.

After several Conferences working the GALA booth, I could always expect one gentleman to come in to express his displeasure at GALA’s presence, and to offer me “the way to God”—His God, not mine. His God could heal me. Well, this time, one of the first people I saw entering the Auditorium was this same gentleman. He saw me, came over and said, “You’re back. Here again.” I responded, “Yep, I’m back.” He looked at me and replied, “Good, I need to be challenged.” He smiled and walked away. WOW! No attack, no trying to convert. I was amazed. I guess the seeds long planted have begun to sprout.

The focus of this conference was Discernment. We were each assigned a small discernment group. During guided meditations and focus questions, I found a loving, nurturing group of Saints from around the world, willing to listen to everyone’s story. I felt loved and embraced by each one. People listened without judgment or challenging my ideas. A new experience.

The “Counsel to the Church” (see preceding excerpts) offers new hope for the GLBT community, who have long struggled with the use of scriptures to bash us.

Our GALA/WCN worship service offered opportunities to reconnect with our GALA family and friends, and to worship together (see excerpts on page 3). The reception was attended by over 125 people. Great snacks, conversation, hugs and renewing of friendships...and even more, offering an avenue of ministry needing the safe environment we have to offer.

This time I came with some personal baggage, so wondered if I’d enjoy this Conference as much as others. But within a few short hours my baggage was lifted, and a week-long spiritual renewal began. Once again, though I shouldn’t be surprised, this World Conference junkie got his “spiritual fix.” Hope to see all of you at my next “fix” event... our Labor Day retreat!

*Love always,
Allan Fiscus, GALA President Pro Tem*

GALA Board Nominations

During President Alan Zimmerman's on-going cancer treatment, Allan Fiscus is willing to continue as President Pro Tem. At the Sept. 2007 Retreat we will vote for President Elect (who serves one year, followed by two years as President and one as Immediate Past President), as well as a member-at-large serving a three-year term. Please send nominations and bios of persons willing to serve in either position to PO Box 2173, Independence, MO 64055, or by e-mail to carol.cavin@sbcglobal.net.

Treasurer's Report, 10/1/06 to 4/15/07

	Actual FY'07	Budget FY'07
Cash on Hand 9/30/06.....	\$11,003	
Income		
Memberships	\$1,338.....	\$1,500
Contributions	210.....	13,000
Grants & Foundations.....	800.....	200
Commissions (Amazon)	153.....	600
Special Projects: Book of Stories	0.....	4,000
Special Projects: Book Presales.....	0.....	1,000
Special Projects: WCN.....	0	
Interest	3.....	
Total Income.....	\$2,504....	\$20,300
Expenses		
Administrative	138.....	3,575
IWR Sponsorship.....	1,000	
Retreat Reserve Fund	0.....	2,500
Newsletters	872.....	1,550
Region/Mission Centers	0.....	3,000
Welcoming Community Network	106.....	1,000
Book of Stories	0.....	6,000
All Other Expenses.....	500.....	2,675
Total Expenses.....	\$2,617....	\$20,300
Expenses in Excess of Income	\$113	
Cash on Hand 4/15/07	\$10,891	

Note: Other expenses included amounts paid to Chihowa Retreat Center in October 2006 for Retreat lodging costs.

2007 GALA Retreat

August 31 – September 3, 2007
at Chihowa Retreat Center outside Lawrence, Kansas
"Wings on a Prayer"

(During World War II when the planes were all shot up, they just prayed their way home. We are like the planes; we need to make it home.)

Banquet: 40's swing music and uniforms

Talent Show: USO Radio Talent Show

If you would like to help with the planning, or for more information, contact Kip Dawson, kdawson316@aol.com

Affirmation Conference, October 5-7, Washington, D.C.:

Velton Peabody, member of GALA and secretary of WCN, has been invited to present an update on treatment of GLBT issues in the Community of Christ at the "Affirmation" Conference this fall.

After four and half awesome years together, we've decided to make it official! **Larry Pickering and Billy VanSteinberg will celebrate their Holy Union in Wichita, KS, on June 10th, 2007, 3:00 p.m.**, in the Wichita State University Memorial Chapel. We will be married by Jackie Carter (our local MCC minister) with both of our mothers assisting by reading scripture.

We regret that we are not able to invite each of you, due to limited seating, but we would ask that each of you participate in our special day by remembering us with cards and especially in your prayers. Our address is: Larry Pickering & Billy VanSteinberg, 729 N. Cedar Park, Wichita, KS 67235

PASSOVER: The Fifth Question

In the recent Lenten and Easter season, we remembered observances particular to our own beliefs. On the night of Passover (April 1 this year), why did we come together, young and old, straight and gay, free and oppressed, hopeless and hopeful, believers and skeptics, Christians and Jews, to remember a Jewish observance?

The question above is one that GALA and Welcoming Community Network members have been asking themselves for the last 14 years. It is not one of the four traditional questions included in the traditional Passover Seder asked by the youngest member of the family, but it is the question that arises in peoples' minds when we invite our friends to attend our Passover observance.

The response to the fifth question is given as: *We do so because the Sanhedrin, in their debates about Passover, recalled the declaration in the Torah that all are to partake of the Passover and that no one should be alone during this time.*

We are all prisoners, prisoners of discriminatory legislation and court rulings, harassment on the job and in the community, division in the church. We need the support of each other, friends and loved ones, whether they be male or female, gay or straight, believers or skeptics, Jews or Christians. We are commanded by God to remember this festival. Yeshua (the name of Jesus in Hebrew) observed this festival before His death. As God has commanded, and in memory of Yeshua's 'this do in remembrance of me,' we celebrate Passover.

Observing the Passover, retelling the Exodus story, and relating it to our own fears, hopes and dreams is gay liberation theology in action. No one should be alone or feel disenfranchised from the possibility of creating an environment where all are loved and accepted just as God created them to be.

So yet again, 22 persons-- young and old, straight and gay, free and oppressed, hopeless and hopeful, believers and skeptics, Christians and Jews representing GALA, the Welcoming Community Network, family and friends, including members of five congregations--joined together with the Anaheim and Basileia: An Open Door Community of Christ congregations to celebrate our 14th annual observance of the Passover Seder.

If you would like to celebrate the Passover Seder next year, contact Meredith Bischoff at merigrll@merigrll.com for a copy of the haggadah (order of service), written with a strong call to social justice, that has been developed over the last 14 years.

Still a Family

by Carol Cavin

One of the memorable occasions in my life was a youth prayer service at the 1960 World Conference when I decided to go back to Graceland for the religion curriculum as the result of a message delivered by Doc Cheville. Larry Cavin was persuaded to do the same thing at the same time, and I still believe after 35 years of marriage that God pointed us in each other's direction, even though in March 2000 Larry told me he is gay, and moved out to live with his new partner in April 2001.

You may wonder how I can still believe that God guided Larry and me into each other's lives. Maybe it's God's grace that has motivated me to participate in GALA and WCN and to bear this witness. Larry was operating out of the cultural standards of the 1950s and 60s, and thought that getting married and living a straight life was the appropriate thing for him to do as an honorable, religious, gay man. For 35 years we had what I consider to be an excellent partnership. We worked hard together, raised two children to the best of our abilities, struggled to survive the death of our daughter Kelley in 1990, and were privileged to share in the lives of seven exchange students. We both grew a lot through the years, to the point that Larry was finally able to openly acknowledge his sexual orientation and move on independently.

Does that mean our life together was a mistake? I don't think so. I have always trusted Larry completely, and believe him to be one of the most gentle, nurturing, honest people I have ever known. I suppose you could say that trusting him has led to the pain I still experience as I honor Larry's freedom to live openly as the person he has always been. But I continue to find support in many places, especially in my church family, as I live with the results of Larry's and my choices.

We continue to be close friends and members of a newly-defined and evolving family. Our son Chris and I reluctantly helped Larry move out of our family home and into the home he established with his partner Bobby. We occasionally share a meal or movie, trade recipes, dishes and cooking equipment, furniture, photographs, and numerous other things accumulated during our 35 years of marriage. I help him with sewing projects, and he reciprocates when I need a handyman. Along with Bobby and members of his family, Larry and I celebrated Chris and Shannon's marriage, just as Chris and Shannon and I celebrated Bobby and Larry's commitment ceremony. We all bade farewell to Bobby's grandmother, Larry's mother, and Bobby's aunt. Holidays and family gatherings move from house to house, enhanced by the joy we share in our two beautiful grandchildren.

Such activities have contained elements of pain as well as joy, and may be hard for you to imagine, but continuing to love and honor each other is the only choice we have ever wanted to make. Anger, estrangement, judgment and isolation would bring nothing but pain to all the parties involved. The members of our congregation at Walnut Gardens, with one painful exception, have always loved and supported us, following our lead as we grieved Kelley's death, and as we

have struggled to develop new and different ways to be a family.

Grant McMurray said in his sermon at the 2002 World Conference:

We must not succumb to our fears nor fail to respect those who disagree with us. We must instead be voices of reconciliation and ministers of healing.... Gay and lesbian brothers and sisters are walking with us on the path of the disciple. They have chosen to be there because they feel God's call to them.... Ministry is not just about calling. It is also about acceptance of that calling by those who will receive the ministry.

And Grant then quoted Henri J. M. Nouwen:

We are not the healers, we are not the reconcilers, we are not the givers of life. We are sinful, broken, vulnerable people who need as much care as anyone we care for. The mystery of ministry is that we have been chosen to make our own limited and very conditional love the gateway for the unlimited and unconditional love of God.¹

¹In the Name of Jesus: Reflections on Christian Leadership,
(New York: Crossroad Publishing, 1989), 43-44.

"Peace of Jesus"

Tune: Nettleton, 8.7.8.7. Double

Peace of Jesus burn within us; Fan the flames of equity,
Melt the walls of separation; Sisters, brothers all are we.
Let your Spirit breathe within us Far beyond our daily talk
Finding voice through loving actions, Echoed in our daily walk.

Peace of Jesus boldly venture, Unafraid of conflict's face
Enter into life's arena Where the work of peace takes place.
May formation of our spirits Deepen meanings of God's grace
Seen in living demonstration Of the gospel's full embrace.

Peace of Jesus spark within us Zeal for Zion's true Shalom.
Let its call for love embrace us; Every nation, tribe, & home.
All are welcome, all are honored, No one's value under-priced.
This our call and this our mission: "Go and share the peace of Christ."

--Danny A. Belrose, ©2005, Community of Christ

"Walking Rainbows"

A rainbow is not just a symphony of colors
Sent to calm the storm in our souls; it is a talk with God,
A mysterious, miraculous conversation with God,
Heart to heart, the very heart of God saying to our hearts:
"I remember I am your God. Be my walking rainbows,
So that the whole world will know to whom you belong,
I am the God who keeps promises."

This is the hope of the body of Christ,
That God created our diversity in divine likeness.
[Our] mission is to walk among the suffering and serve.
For we are covenant keepers, walking rainbows,
Bringing the hope of the good news to the oppressed.
Go from this place, a piece of the walking rainbow.
God has empowered you. Go.
Live the good news of God's covenant!

--Adapted from *Searching for Shalom* by Ann Weems

Excerpts from Committee on Homosexuality in the Church Report

See complete report on-line at cofchrist.org/World_Conference_Archives/Legislation/H-6.

Introduction of Listening Circles as a Useful Tool

From the beginning, the committee has been prayerful and hopeful that the potential divisiveness of this issue could be avoided within the loving body of the Community of Christ. We are convinced that our approaches to dealing with the issues of homosexuality should be consistent with the ministry of Jesus Christ and the counsel in D. & C. 122:17b: "Let nothing separate you from each other and the work whereunto you have been called...."

With these things in mind, therefore, the Listening Circles process was introduced to the church as a tool for members to use for engaging sensitive and controversial issues. The Listening Circle approach, though coming out of this committee, is presented to the church as a supportive tool to help members listen to the perspectives of each person and to increase the capacity of members to better understand each other in the midst of differing points of view.

Listening Circles develop and deepen relationships. They enhance understanding between participants and develop our capacity for discernment. The process facilitates communication, and is suited for a variety of topics. Although Listening Circles were at first focused on the topic of homosexuality in the church, other topics have been added in order to encourage participation and to use this communication tool more comprehensively.

Update on Listening Circles: The first organizational meeting occurred in October 2003. Since that time, 34 mission centers in the United States have held organizational meetings with mission center leaders and interested members to implement Listening Circles. As of December 2006, 29 mission centers had completed facilitator training, with 574 people trained in the United States and the Netherlands. Twenty Listening Circles have been completed, i.e., groups of no fewer than four members who have met for at least six sessions. At least 200 people have participated in Listening Circles, though some of those participants attended fewer than six sessions....

Experiences of Other Denominations: The committee has sought to explore the issues related to homosexuality in the church through a variety of approaches. One area of study has been the review of the experiences of other denominations.

It is important to understand that Community of Christ is not alone in considering the issue of homosexuality and its impact on church life. Some denominations have strongly decided the matter. These include denominations that have policies that are both broadly inclusive (United Church of Christ, United Church of Canada, Uniting Church of Australia, etc.) and broadly restrictive (Southern Baptists, Assemblies of God, Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, etc.)

Our experience is more like those denominations with widely diverging perspectives, which have typically generated more controversy and internal tension. These denominations include the Presbyterians, United Methodists, Lutherans (ELCA), Anglicans, Disciples of Christ, American Baptists, and others.

Although these denominations have differing structures of governance, they have generally formed study committees, drafted reports, and made recommendations to church officers and/or legislative bodies, but they have yet to fully resolve the issue.

Recent controversy in the Anglican Communion (which includes the Episcopal Church in the U.S.) demonstrates how a denomination with a strong international character can experience conflict resulting from widely varying cultural perspectives. Anglicans have dealt with many issues of a controversial nature by adopting culturally appropriate approaches within each nation. The ordination of a gay bishop in the United States has created a significant rift in the denomination in recent years. This raises questions about whether any denomination can address the issue of homosexuality by adopting different standards on a national or regional basis.

In general, denominations that have widely varying perspectives on homosexuality have not been able to resolve the matter definitively without significant division and the threat of schism. On one hand, this could be viewed as being very discouraging in that it seems to forecast continued division. On the other hand, it suggests that our inability to resolve the matter in a final way is not because we have handled the issue poorly, but because resolving the matter of homosexuality in a denomination with diverse perspectives on the matter is an extraordinarily difficult task. In fact, one could argue that, to this point, we have come to the current moment with far less ill will and divisiveness than many other denominations have experienced. We value our common call to mission and our sense of community, and this has helped us listen to each other and seek mutual understanding....

Affirmation of Values and Principles for the Future

Although it is common for committees such as this one to provide a set of recommendations for action, we have chosen not to do so. It is not that we have no ideas, but rather we have concluded that there is no specific set of actions that will suddenly take away all of the disagreements about this issue that exist in the church today. Instead, we suggest the following values and principles to lead us into a future of mission and further learning about the meaning of love and community in the world.

Values

1. The church continues to value the inestimable worth of each person. ...
2. All of us stand in need of redemption, ...
3. We value the teachings and healing ministry of Jesus Christ as the example of how we should live our lives....
4. We trust in the power of the Holy Spirit to both unite and transform us....

Principles: 1. The church's disagreement about the issue of homosexuality is an example of the church's woundedness. We seek to share in a community in which all disagreements have peaceful out-comes, in which every person feels loved and accepted, and in which the gospel is always shared clearly, compassionately, and without distortion. We recognize that this does not always happen in our life together, and the church depends on the mutual forgiveness of its members, as well as the grace and mercy of God.

2. The best way to address our differences is to express them openly and clearly with respect and caring for those who hold a different point of view....
3. We currently lack unity regarding the issue of homosexuality and other issues, so we depend on mutual forgiveness and forbearance....
4. This issue raises significant questions about how the Community of Christ can best reach decisions on such matters....
5. It will be difficult for the church to move beyond the 2002 statement of the World Church Leadership Council titled "Community, Common Consent, and the Issue of Homosexuality." ... We rely on the love and forgiveness of God and each other to help us move forward from this point.
6. We can feel encouraged that we have been able to address such a topic as openly and directly as we have. We are in the minority of Christian denominations in the world that have engaged the topic seriously. That is a prophetic response by the church. We must do better, but we have taken important steps through creating a study committee, exploring the issues, and adopting the Listening Circles approach as a caring and respectful way to deal with controversy among us....

After our study and consideration of the issues related to homosexuality in the church, we would hope for

- ongoing dialogue and careful listening to one another;
- extending Listening Circles and other appropriate tools into nations throughout the church;
- prayerful consideration for each one of us, along the continuum of our differing viewpoints;
- intentional seeking to discern God's will and the leading of the Holy Spirit as to how to best proceed as a loving community of Christ.

Welcoming Community Network applauds the call to uphold the inestimable worth of persons of all sexual orientations and gender identities in Community of Christ congregations.

As an international grassroots organization that exists to enable full participation of persons of all sexual orientations and gender identities in the life and ministry of Community of Christ both in policy and practice, Welcoming Community Network (WCN) ¹ commends the Committee on Homosexuality in the Church for aspects of its report submitted on March 28, 2007, during the biennial World Conference.

A review of the experiences of other denominations as they struggle with the acceptance and inclusion of gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender (GLBT) members is included in the report. It makes note of struggles experienced by the Anglican Communion and the possibility of schism with its American arm, The Episcopal Church. The Episcopal House of Bishops has responded to such a possibility in strong and direct language, saying it views the Gospel as teaching that "all God's children, including gay and lesbian persons, are full and equal participants in the church." They also noted that to accept the charge from the Anglicans to marginalize the membership of gay and lesbian persons "would be injurious to the church and could well lead to its permanent division." WCN calls for the Community of Christ to respond in a similar fashion.

Although the Committee on Homosexuality and the Church has had only minimal input from gay, lesbian, or bisexual members in its investigations, the report does acknowledge a "...significant number of members who are homosexual and who want to work and serve and have fellowship in the Community of Christ." The report also recognizes the 20 years of effort by GALA (Gay and Lesbian Acceptance) and others who "have chosen, at least for now, to stay, to educate, to be patient, to hope, and to work for change."

WCN also honors the committee's recognition of the church's woundedness, and the pain that GLBT persons experience in the church when they are marginalized. The life blood of a number of congregations is seeping out as they lose the participation and ministry of their GLBT members. Many choose to attend and offer their gifts and talents to welcoming and affirming denominations such United Church of Christ, the United Church of Canada or the Metropolitan Community Churches. Others seek out and attend congregations in their area that are intentionally welcoming and affirming, such as those affiliated with More Light Presbyterians, the Reconciling in Christ program in Evangelical Lutheran Churches of America, and United Methodist Churches that are part of the Reconciling Ministries Network.

WCN applauds the church leadership for continuing to proclaim the Christ-modeled belief in the inestimable worth of all persons including persons of all sexual orientations and gender identities. It is also heartening to see stated in the report the goal that all Community of Christ congregations be welcoming and inclusive for all GLBT persons. This goal is the same for the Welcoming Community Network and similar denominationally-based organizations that collectively recognize themselves as the Welcoming Church Movement.

Although no recommendations were offered in the report presented at World Conference, the Welcoming Community Network calls for the Committee on Homosexuality in the Church to develop strategies that will assist congregations in becoming welcoming and affirming of GLBT persons.

In the meantime, the Welcoming Community Network encourages congregations to explore the possibility of becoming intentionally welcoming and affirming on their own. This process includes study, discussion, prayer, and the development and adoption of a welcoming covenant made public by the congregation. WCN has a cadre of volunteers trained to assist congregations in this process. Recommendations for video and study materials for congregational exploration are available on the WCN web site at:

www.WelcomingCommunityNetwork.org.

--Meredith Bischoff, WCN President

¹WCN is not officially affiliated with the Community of Christ, but its board of directors is made up of church members.

For more information about the Welcoming Community Network visit WCN's web site listed above.

World Conference Conversation

by Ellen Frye

"I did not know this. Thank you for telling me this," the African brother replied to my rather long explanation of how a young man could be a gay elder accepted by his congregation within the Community of Christ.

Our conversation started on the Wednesday of the 2007 World Conference. During the discussion meeting on the report from the Committee on Homosexuality and the Church, Brother ZB had repeatedly raised his hand to ask a question. But because he was sitting on the end of a row with people standing against the wall, the moderator did not see his raised hand among the shirts, blankets, and jackets of the people standing against the wall. I raised my hand and pointed to him several times to help him get recognized. As a member of the Committee on Homosexuality and the Church, I wanted to hear his questions and/or comments. Since all of the committee members are Americans who are often told by church appointees that members in Africa are intolerant of homosexuals because 'there are no homosexuals in Africa' (according to African members), I wanted hear what this brother had to share.

"When does revelation expire?" he asked when he was finally recognized. "If we have scripture in the Old Testament that says that such behavior is sinful, why are we even discussing this? Why does this revelation no longer apply?" I saw some heads shaking in frustration as he finished his question, and no one offered any response or explanation to it.

As the meeting ended, I leaned over to him and softly offered, "I can answer your question. It may not be THE answer you want, but I can give you ONE answer."

"Please do," he replied. He pointed to another African delegate with him and eagerly added, "We want to know. Please tell us." Before I could begin any explanation he asked "Are you...one?" It took me a few mini-seconds to understand he was asking if I was a homosexual. I told him I was happily married.

In the next few minutes, I tried to explain how all the admonitions in the Leviticus Holiness Code were not considered relevant nowadays. We eat ham and pork, wear two, sometimes more different kinds of cloth at the same time, and violate the kosher eating rules with no expectation of condemnation. "If we are supposed to continue to respond to those laws, please excuse me because I must go home and kill my children for disobeying me," I stated.

"And have you done that?" he inquired.

"Not yet, but I have certainly been tempted at times," I replied with a laugh. At the time, I assumed he was joking. Later I wondered that he may have been serious.

At the end of my explanation, both of them seemed unsatisfied, but all three of us were expected to be at the next legislative session. I had the impression that they had heard similar explanations before. We promised to talk again.

I had quickly been impressed with how clearly this well-dressed (in a business suit) young man had expressed himself. He appeared self-confident and was very articulate for someone speaking a second language.

A day or two later when I realized I probably talked too much and listened very little during that first conversation, I

dropped off a note to Brother ZB in the seating area of his African delegation offering to continue the discussion. He eagerly responded to my offer and we met for lunch at the Laurel Club. The discussion was extremely enlightening.

I tried to use simple language, and I gave a better explanation of how revelation 'expires' due to its cultural context, complete with a simple drawing to show that a revelatory experience always includes more than what one can comprehend, and what one perceives is dependent on his/her experience, background, and culture. "Therefore, the admonition to 'not lay with man as one lays with women' could have had a different meaning in the culture and experience of the Hebrew people at that time. Their meaning does not compare to our experience of homosexual people today," I explained. "The best information we have today suggests that Leviticus was referring to actions that took place in fertility rites associated with the worship of other gods."

"I understand what you're saying," he eagerly replied. "And I like this," he added as he pointed to my crude drawing. "This is helpful. Like the tradition, experience,...I have heard before." Apparently the Wesley quadrilateral was not new to him.

I listened as Brother ZB related that the church has much work to do in spreading the message of Christ. To him, bringing up homosexuality is something that Satan is doing to distract us and keep us from feeding the hungry, healing the sick and rebuilding people's lives. He emphasized that he believes homosexuals should be accepted into the church as members, but priesthood members should make a stronger effort than members to avoid sinning. He added that if he wanted to become 'physically intimate' with any woman other than his wife, such actions would undoubtedly be considered 'sinful' by fellow church members and leaders in Africa. For him, sexual behavior between two men is equally sinful. "Why do Americans want to allow homosexuality?" he inquired. "I do not understand why a man wants to be with another man. It is not logical!"

"Again, I am not sure I have THE answer to that question," I answered. "I can only tell you what I have learned from talking to gay and lesbian persons and the research I have read. I may someday change my mind. But based on what I know so far, this is what I can tell you." And I proceeded to explain that the gay and lesbian men and women I have known have felt 'different' their entire lives. Being attracted to members of their own gender is 'normal' to them. I clarified that their commitments and relationships were acceptable to me as long as the relationships were monogamous. "I do not approve of anyone 'sleeping around' as we say here," I added (somewhat surprised that he understood the slang). I also explained the current policy from 1982 of allowing homosexual priesthood members who are celibate.

"But that's not true!" Brother ZB countered. "The man in the discussion said he was an elder, a homosexual, with a partner. You ARE ordaining them. How is this?" Slowly and carefully, I explained that some gay men and lesbian women were ordained when they were celibate single members or when they were married. Only later did they acknowledge they were unhappy in those relationships, divorced, and later found same-sex spouses. He remained interested as I detailed how President McMurray's 2002 World Conference sermon had impacted many congregations in the southern United

States, as well as Africa and Haiti. He understood the compromise of allowing homosexuals who had already been ordained to maintain their priesthood while not allowing further ordinations of 'practicing' homosexuals (again, I was surprised he understood what I meant by 'practicing' even though I told him I do not like that term).

"I do not know the man who was in the discussion meeting, so I do not know when he was ordained, the congregation he attends, or when he met his partner," I emphasized. "But my guess would be that he was ordained at a time when he was living in a situation 'acceptable' to his church leaders. He keeps his priesthood now under the current compromise."

"I did not know this. This is important to know. Thank you for telling me," he gratefully responded.

We discussed some other issues. I intentionally asked him about polygamy, trying to understand why his culture accepts a practice that, to me, is degrading to women and does not recognize the worth of all persons. I expected that the reasons for polygamy in Africa are totally different from the reasons for polygamy in our church history. Brother ZB inferred that polygamy is not as widespread as I believed. He said that it happens more in rural areas than in larger cities. It surprised me to learn that sometimes the men with the most wives are respected as leaders because they are able to manage the women and their large families. When I asked how other Christian churches handle the polygamous families, he revealed that there are some indigenous Christian denominations in Africa created specifically to allow polygamy.

I asked specifically how the members in Africa would feel if the church allowed each mission center or congregation to decide for itself whether or not to accept gay and lesbian priesthood members. "How would the members in Africa feel knowing there are homosexual priesthood members in the U.S. and Canada even though these priesthood members will probably not ever come to Africa? And I ask this knowing it is a problem for the Anglicans."

"They would not be comfortable," he responded. "It would be difficult, very difficult for them. They would not like it." I had to admire his honesty to someone he had known for such a short time.

Brother ZB wanted to know who was on the Committee for Homosexuality and the Church and where they lived. I listed the names, but none was familiar to him. Learning that the committee has no international members troubled him. I told him, "I don't know why there are no members from outside the U.S. But I know I am usually the only person who flies in from outside the Iowa and Missouri area to come to meetings. And those trips are at my own expense. Flying in members from Europe, Africa, or other places would be expensive for meetings that last only one or two days."

"But if this is a problem we need to deal with, the church should pay for it to happen," he forcefully stated.

As the dinner hour was coming to a close, I offered a silent prayer and took a leap of faith. I explained to him that not every congregation in the U.S. and Canada accepts gay and lesbian persons, even as members. "Sometimes, when a church member 'comes out of the closet' as we say here, his parents have made him leave their home. Church members who have loved and nurtured them all their lives reject them and do not speak to them or acknowledge them at church. If

families do accept the homosexuality of their child, brother or sister, sometimes the family is rejected. Other church members wonder what the family did to make a person homosexual. So, even though you believe it is alright to accept homosexuals as members, that is not always happening in the U.S. congregations."

"That is sad," he sympathized. "It will take time for people in Africa to understand this. Time. It takes time."

"I know it will probably be a long time before people in Africa understand how we Americans think about homosexuals," I added. "But I want you to know that the gay men, lesbian women, and their families in the U.S. have been waiting for 15-20 years to be accepted by their home congregations, local pastors, and other church leaders. Being told that they still need to wait until the people in Africa, India, and Haiti understand things the way we do does not give them any encouragement to stay with the church. Many times, it is easier for them to find a different church that does accept them. Personally, I don't want to lose the members in Africa over this issue. But I don't want to lose any more homosexual members and families here either."

He again added sadly, "I did not know this."

We exchanged e-mail and snail-mail addresses and made sure we could read each other's writing and spelling. "Maybe someday I can come to Texas," Brother ZB suggested.

"I would love for you to come to Texas," I replied. Tentatively I added, "If you believe it would be helpful for me, or someone like me, to come to Africa and have this kind of discussion with the church members there, let me know. I'd love to come."

His fast response startled me: "WHEN?"

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