

Like Those Who Dream

A Reflection on the End of the PCUSA's Definitive Guidance

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*This piece was written for private distribution,
but at our request Ken has permitted us to publish it.*

I am still trying to wrap my head and my heart around one particular action of the 218th General Assembly. The so-called “definitive guidance” adopted in 1978 by the UPCUSA is suddenly no more! While the proposed constitutional revision of G-6.0106b must be ratified (or not) by a majority of the presbyteries, the new Authoritative Interpretation rescinding the old “definitive guidance” was an act wholly within the bailiwick of the General Assembly, and took immediate effect.

If anyone needs reminding, the definitive guidance was the policy statement that said “unrepentant self-affirming practicing homosexuals” were sinners excluded from ordination in the Presbyterian Church. For many of us, that label “unrepentant... self-affirming... practicing” has weighed on our souls all these many years. We had a special definition of sin and an institutional exclusion that was ours, all ours. It didn't matter if our “practicing” was in a long-term covenantal relationship or not. It was simply sin, and we were defined as automatically disqualified from service as deacons, elders, and ministers.

I watched the live feed of the debate when the vote was taken at General Assembly. After it was announced I wept, and continued to do so as I shared the good news with a variety of loved ones and friends via the telephone and e-mail. The tears came, I think, particularly because of the rescinding of the guidance. It played such a major role in my life.

I was a senior in college during the original church-wide discussions of homosexuality in 1978, and that was when I got the first glimmerings of awareness that I might have “homosexual tendencies.” I was utterly horrified, fearful that I was truly bound for Hell, and I spent the next seven years struggling to come to terms with what it meant for me. It took lots of prayer and intense study of the scriptures to find my peace with God and my own soul. The definitive guidance was thus the “adversary” (I use the term advisedly) that drove me into a deeper seeking and knowing of God's love and acceptance. For that I have to be ironically grateful.

I saw that to try to stay in the PCUSA and to live with integrity while doing so would be costly. Like answering the call of Jesus in ancient Palestine, it could

conceivably cost employment, reputation, friends and family, and — if one was wrong — even salvation itself. (“Are you willing to be damned for the Glory of God?” asked the old minister to the weary candidate being examined for ordination. “Aye sir, and I'm willing for the entire presbytery to be damned as well!”) For me it has meant a number of broken relationships and nearly twenty-six years of hovering, somewhat timidly, on the peripheries of the church, but that has had its own benefits — such as discovering the work of ministries of spiritual direction and spiritual formation.

It is disorienting to have the familiar burden of this longstanding piece of ecclesial stigma suddenly ripped off my back. Am I cleared of being a sinner (in this particular matter)? I remain unrepentant, self-affirming, and practicing, now in the twenty-second year of committed relationship with my beloved partner. The rules have already changed, even if other nasty bits remain on the books for now. But old frustrations and fears don't just evaporate with the dawn of a new day. I suspect that, as with racism, the way has been opened for a variety of subtler modes of homophobia to be embraced by those who still view me as an “unrepentant” threat.

We still face the struggle to ratify the proposed constitutional change that would remove the last remaining legal bar to full inclusion of GLBT folks into full membership rights, privileges, and responsibilities in the PCUSA. How to effectively present this to the full church as an invitation of grace and not as a perceived threat is a huge challenge that lies before us.

Now is still a time of amazed rejoicing for many of us. June 27, 2008 was a day of partial liberation for GLBT Presbyterians, a day when the wind of the Spirit blew through the General Assembly and inched us reluctant mortals a bit further down the road toward the heart of Jesus' teachings.

Maybe God's realm really is coming, even among the Presbyterians, and mayhap we queer folks (and our allies) really do get to be a part of it. It's at least a start. So, as one of the psalmists once said:

*When the Lord turned again the captivity of Zion,
We were like them that dream.
Then was our mouth filled with laughter,
And our tongues with singing:
Then said they among the heathen,
The Lord hath done great things for them.
...They that sow in tears shall reap in joy.
He that goeth forth and weepeth, bearing
precious seed,
Shall doubtless come again with rejoicing,*

-- Psalm 126, KJV