

Following Session action, Virginia Davidson and Gail Mott met with Isabel Morrison, ACCT Coordinator, in order to consider possible implementation. First, however, they moved to add others to their number by inviting representatives from other parts of our Presbyterian network concerned with lesbian and gay issues to join them and form an Ad Hoc Task Force on the Church and Homosexuality. Those who joined were Joanne Poland and Bruce Billman, members of Presbytery's Task Force on Homosexuality; Isabel Morrison, ACCT Coordinator; Jean Losinger, DUPC's Christian Education Coordinator and member of Presbytery's CREATE:* Justice Task Force; and Mary Bookout, Session member

In response to Session's directive and mindful of Session's animated discussion of gay and lesbian issues at its September meeting, it was the Task Force's considered judgment that we recommend to Session laying aside the Petition of Affirmation for the present. Further, we recommended an educational program as an important first step in helping church members confront and begin to wrestle thoughtfully with the justice and faith issues focused around homosexuality and the church, and our own homophobia.

Consequently, the Ad Hoc Task Force asked Session, at its stated meeting of November 19, 1985 to approve plans for an educational study program to be held during the Season of Epiphany 1986, and to be called *Breaking the Silence*. Copies of the entire program series, names of the presenters and subjects addressed, goals set for the series, as well as a copy of the initiating petition, are included as *Appendix A* of this report.

C. A MORE LIGHT Congregation Defined

In an essay on "Piety, Godliness and Religion", John E. Burkhart refers to "the very nerve of Reformed theology":

[T]hat God is God means that no one experience of God could ever be definitive. "God alone is lord of the conscience, and hath left it free..." Those words are mandate to honor and to embrace a diversity of persons, views and styles of life as living testimonies to the manifold riches and glory of God. Indeed, it may even be, because of the unpredictable reaches of Christian freedom, that the Reformed style of piety is the recognition that there is no right way of being Christian. (Unpublished paper, presented to The Advisory Council on Discipleship and Worship, January 26-27, 1978.)

It was the 17th century Puritan divine, John Robinson, who Spoke words which have become the source and inspiration for 'what, since 1978, is referred to as a MORE LIGHT congregation or church in our denomination. Robinson said: "God hath yet more light to break forth from [God's] Word through the work of the Holy Spirit."

In a very real sense, then a “more light” church can be said to be one which believes God is constantly calling members to seek more light in understanding the meaning of God’s word for their times. Rooted in the acknowledgment of the sovereignty of God is the Reformed Churches’ maxim: “Ecclesis reformata sed semper reformanda” (the church reformed but always being reformed). The true reformed church is the always-being-reformed church – one which participates in “unceasing reformation.” (The Church and Its Changing Ministry, 22.)

There is as well a particular meaning attached to the phrase, a MORE LIGHT church, within the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), made clear in the following quote from *More Light Update*, monthly newsletter of Presbyterians for Lesbian/Gay Concerns, a Chapter 9 organization of ministers, elders, deacons and members of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), June 1985]:

MORE LIGHT churches are Presbyterian congregations which have declared, through actions by their sessions, that lesbian and gay persons shall be welcomed into the family of faith as full participants, with all the privileges and responsibilities of full and active membership, including ordination of deacons and elders if elected to those offices by their congregations. MORE LIGHT congregations strive to reach out to the lesbian/gay people, in accordance with mandates of recent General Assemblies (1978, 1982).

MORE LIGHT churches are found in all parts of the country – about (35) in all. Most are found in large cities, but several are in smaller towns. Some are just beginning to explore what it means to confront homophobia and engage in ministry, while others have well-developed outreach and ministry programs.

The full Statement made by the Downtown Church Session to be a MORE LIGHT congregation is found in *Appendix B* of this report.

II. OBSERVATIONS/REFLECTIONS

Attendance at the four Sunday morning programs in January 1986 ranged from 75 to 100 persons at each event. The evening programs, which provided opportunity for community building and table conversation, for small group discussion, and for substantive content similar to the Sunday morning series, drew others to the presentations. At all of the programs, the interest of the Rochester community beyond our membership was evident in the fact that 20 to 25% of those attending each event were visitors and not members of the Downtown Church. They were drawn to the series because of the issues being addressed.

In arranging the series, we found the lesbian/gay networking relationships to be very useful, both in generating interest outside our congregation in the series and in securing additional dollar resources to fund it. A financial report is included as *Appendix C* in this report.

Chris Glaser's trip from California was a good example of this networking support. Chris's first stop was Buffalo, where he met with a group of church people gathered by the Reverend Thomas Stewart, pastor of the Westminster Church in Buffalo. While in Rochester, Chris was guest preacher in a combined worship service at the Downtown Church. He also met informally with a Gannett Newspaper reporter (published interview, *Appendix D* of this report), with members of the local chapter of Presbyterians for Lesbian and Gay Concerns (PLGC), with the Session and Task Force of Third Church, and spoke at an evening meeting at Third Church which was open to the public. Chris then traveled to the Presbytery of Geneva at their invitation to meet with a group of concerned Presbyterians (gay and lesbian Christians who remain closeted) from the Southern Tier of that presbytery. This entire itinerary was planned and implemented by the Ad Hoc Task Force members, with the cooperation of individuals in neighboring churches and presbyteries, as well as staff of the Program Agency. We are grateful to them for being faithful partners.

A. Questionnaire Results

The Ad Hoc Task Force developed and distributed questionnaires to those attending the last of the Sunday morning and Sunday evening events. Although it is difficult to quantify their answers, the responses indicated both satisfactions and unmet needs. **Mentioned among the satisfactions and expectations met were these:**

- New facts, new understanding, new feelings
- Especially helpful to present homosexuality in the context of human sexuality
- Inspiration and courage gained from the presenters, especially the courage of those who shared their journeys as gay or lesbian Christians
- Excellent and understandable Bible study presented by one of our co-pastors Gail Ricciuti
- Appreciation for an introduction to our own denomination's work in education and interpretation, particularly for their new Homophobia Education Project: *Breaking the Silence. Overcoming the Fear*. [This publication was available throughout the series for anyone wishing to purchase it.]

Among the unmet needs and questions people were left with at the conclusion of the series were these:

- Need for further education, discussion in small groups and support systems for both gay and non-gay people together
- More Bible study and theological discussion
- Occasional newsletters to strengthen and enlarge the network of caring people
- Solidarity with and advocacy with and on behalf of lesbian and gay people, both church members and non-church people
- Strengthen our ministry as a MORE LIGHT church
- Influence our community to be more accepting of gay and lesbian people

Undoubtedly there were others in the church who wondered just how long we would continue to talk about homosexuality. However, these individuals were not among those attending the events and therefore did not respond to our questionnaire

III. Task Force Conclusion

Because the Task Force is aware of a very important ministry which has only just begun, we bring to the Session recommendations for future action.

IV. Recommendations

Whereas, the Session of the Downtown Presbyterian Church in May, 1979, having integrity as leaders of this faith community and being clear about its belief that the GOOD NEWS of Jesus Christ is for everyone who trusts the Savior and intends to follow him, made the following statement:

In harmony with the General Assembly of the United Presbyterian Church, the DUPC affirms the civil rights of all persons without regard to sexual preference. Further, in keeping with the General Assembly's guidelines, this community of faith welcomes as members all persons who both seek and have found Christ's love. This congregation will not select one particular element from a person's total humanity as a basis for denying full participation and service in the body of Christ. Nor will this community of faith condemn or judge our brothers and sisters who declare their faith in Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior and promise discipleship to Him. We affirm

that in meeting each other in Christian love, God's Spirit frees us all, to give and grow, liberated from the oppression invoked upon ourselves and others.

The implication of the above is that all persons who choose to unite as members of the DUPC will have extended to them the full privileges and responsibilities of membership, including the right to hold office as an ordained elder or deacon if elected by the congregation; and

Whereas, the Session formed a task force in 1985 to design and implement an educational program concerning homosexuality and the church; and

Whereas, the program once again confirmed to us the human cry of gay/lesbian/bisexual persons for justice and inclusion in church and society, as well as our calling to implement in concrete ways our ministry in response to that need; and

Whereas, believing that the Scriptures must be studied and interpreted in the context of human need as well as God's mighty deeds in the world and our calling to participate in those mighty acts of God; and

Whereas, our recent educational series has confirmed our calling to proclaim educate, advocate, join in solidarity with others and do this MORE LIGHT ministry;

Therefore, we RECOMMEND the following actions in order to begin to implement the long-standing position of the Session of the Downtown church in clear and concrete ways:

1. That the Session, through its Moderator and Clerk of Session, and in consultation with members of the Ad Hoc Task Force, appoint a Committee on the Church and Homosexuality by June 15, 1986, to be a continuing committee of the Session.
2. That the Moderator and Clerk of Session name the individual who will convene the Committee initially, and that the Committee members will subsequently choose their own chair and notify the Session of that election.
3. That the Committee membership consist of 7 to 9 persons, including active elders and at least one openly gay and one openly lesbian member of the Downtown Church.
4. That the Session, through its Personnel Committee, appoint the Reverend Gail Ricciuti to serve as consultant to the Committee.

[A consultant is a member of staff who is kept informed of the work of the Committee, is consulted as necessary regarding

the work of the Committee, and is a resource for the Committee in its work.]

5. That the Session request the Committee, when formed, to address the issues and questions raised at the conclusion of the education series, *Breaking the Silence* (see Questionnaire data in *Appendix E*), as well as addressing the information gathered by the Ad Hoc Task Force during its study and program implementation.
6. That the Session understands that the work of the Committee on the Church and Homosexuality will be implemented during the remainder of 1986 without adding a line to its 1986 budget.

May 20, 1986

Revised and received by Session, June 17, 1986

Ad Hoc Task Force on the Church and Homosexuality membership:

Bruce Billman, Mary Bookout, Virginia Davidson,
Jean Losinger, Isabel Morrison, Gail Mott.

Editor's notes (added March, 1998)

Although the text refers to Appendices A through E, MLCN has only Appendix A.

Downtown United Presbyterian Church is located at
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Jim Tiefenthal transferred this document from paper to electronic format in March, 1998, at Rochester, NY. Betty Iwan proofread the text. Although loving care was taken to preserve the original text, MLCN cannot guarantee accuracy.

Downtown United Presbyterian Church, Rochester, NY

Report to Session from the **Ad Hoc Task Force on The Church and Homosexuality**

Appendix A A Study Series during the Season of Epiphany January, 1986

Sunday Mornings, 9:50 a.m. - 10:50 a.m.

1/5 Human Sexuality and Homosexuality within that Perspective - Creation Centered

Charles Piersol, New York State licensed clinical social worker and certified sex therapist; for many years a staff member of Family Service of Rochester, now retired and in private practice as a psychotherapist.

1/12 Storytelling Panel

A gay man, parents of a gay man, and a lesbian woman will discuss sexual orientation and its impact on one's life.

1/19 Biblical/Theological Presentation and How We Interpret the Church

The Reverend Gail A. Ricciuti, Co-Pastor, Downtown Church.

1/26 The Church's Ministry: What It Means to be a More Light Church

The Reverend Bruce E. Billman, Counseling Center and member of the Pastoral Care team at the Downtown Church.

A discussion of:

- Pastoral concerns
- Support systems
- Equipping the Saints
- Being a MORE LIGHT church

A primary reference will be *Breaking the Silence, Overcoming the Fear: Homophobia Education*, published by the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.). Copies will be available at the Gleason Library and the Presbytery Resource Center, as well as at each of the sessions

**Sunday Evenings, 6 p.m. - 9 p.m. Pot Luck Supper at 6 p.m.,
Program at 7 p.m.**

1/19 Biblical/Theological Presentation and How We Interpret Scripture

H. Darrell Lance, Professor of Old Testament and Biblical Interpretation at The Divinity Schools, Rochester, New York.

2/9 The Church's Ministry: What it Means to be a More Light Church

Chris Glaser, M.Div., Director, The Lazarus Project, West Hollywood Presbyterian Church

Ad Hoc Task Force members: Bruce Billman, Mary Bookout, Virginia Davidson, Jean Losinger, Isabel Morrison, Gail Mott., Joanne Poland

At its October 1985 meeting, the Session of the Downtown Presbyterian Church approved a Task Force on Homosexuality that was authorized to develop a proposal for study and consideration of issues surrounding the church and homosexuality.

The Task Force developed, and presented to Session, the following goals for the study series, *Breaking the Silence*:

1. Open our minds to learning about issues relating to homosexuality.
2. Help us come to terms, in some degree, with getting in touch with our own sexuality.
3. Focus on pastoral care issues: families, friends, the closeted.
4. Equipping the Saints: our ministry within and outside the church
5. Offer resources for study.
6. Address biblical/theological issues and interpretation of Scripture.
7. Address the psycho-social, anthropological and historical issues.

8. Identify what is a MORE LIGHT church.

9. Make a beginning which may lead to an ongoing dialogue support group.

As much as possible, at the conclusion of the series, it is hoped that everyone will feel valued.