

Why we are going to Orlando

Bill Teague, Langhorne Presbyterian Church

To the Session of LPC

December, 2011

We are going through hard times. The church, that is. Well, specifically the North American Church and the Presbyterian Church (USA) is illustrative of those hard times. Our numbers are down, our average age is up. Our once measurable cultural and political influence has seeped away and is all but dried up. Young people avoid us, powerful people ignore us and our own people marginalize us. This story has been told a hundred times over and few dispute it.

At least in the PCUSA, we all seem to agree that we need to be more missional – in service to and conversation with – the world at our doorsteps. There is some agreement about what that service should look like but no consensus as to how the conversation ought to go, what we need to talk about.

We agree that we ought to serve the world around us by responding to its needs. That often means feeding the hungry and housing the homeless; better yet, it means helping empower people to feed and house themselves. “A hand up rather than a handout” is a trite phrase, but one of the few threads still holding in the frayed fabric of our denominational life.

But the gospel is always an inseparable marriage of word and deed. We know that in the end it is the content of our preaching and our conversation, our words, that will determine the nature and the effect of our deeds.

So what is the good news, the joyful message, to which the risen Jesus would have us bear witness in our Jerusalem, Judea and Samaria, and with our world? It is here that the denomination seems most divided, and try as we might – and valiantly we have, we have been unable to reconcile our profound differences.

Some voices in the PC(USA) have argued for a welcoming and gracious love, a “generous orthodoxy” that celebrates diversity and holds inclusion and tolerance as highest values. Though those who make the case sometimes deny it, this message has come at the expense of a high view of Christ, a willing submission to the authority of scripture and a personal obedience to the demands of discipleship.

Sometimes, too, those of us who say we advocate a high view of Christ, submission to Scripture and obedience in discipleship have been heard as being judgmental, exclusionary, rigid, hypocritical and legalistic. “Our side” has not been without error.

But compromise between the warring parties or some “middle way” are not answer as we seek to navigate our way through the churning waters of our current disagreements to the calmer waters of peace, unity and purity. Compromise and “middle ways” have only exasperated our division during our decades-long disputes.

We need a new way.

The Fellowship of Presbyterians represents such a new way. It is not a reactionary response to the current direction of the denomination, nor is it an accommodation to but a temperate and cautious insistence that the work and person of Christ, the authority of Scripture as the Word of God and the call to personal discipline *and* social righteousness has been lost in our common life. It understands our denominational dialogue with the culture to have been compromised by our desire to be accepted by the culture or to accommodate the mores of the secular with the demands of the sacred.

The presenting issue is human sexuality – what else should be expected from a sex-obsessed world? The underlying issues are much deeper.

The Fellowship of Presbyterians represents what may be a once-in-a-generation opportunity to change the course of our denomination and free faithful congregations to give a more joyful and integrated witness to “the faith once delivered” (Jude 1:3). It is not an end-all or a solve-all solution to what ails us as North American Christians. It is not revival so much as it is correction. It seeks “adaptive change” rather than technical change. It is important, maybe critically important.

The Fellowship of Presbyterians may be our last best chance to re-integrate Word and deed and to leave the bureaucratic designs of the 20th Century in the 20th Century.

We are going to Orlando to declare our intention to be a part of something new and faithful. There are minor risks and some expense involved, but the risk and cost of doing nothing are far higher.