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Hello Friends -

As you move forward in your presbyteries to consider concurring with the Hudson River Overture or crafting one of your own to delete G-6.0106b and a New Authoritative Interpretation, I thought you might be interested in a little more background information on our meeting, earlier this week.

There were considerable efforts by some of our leadership to prevent the overture from coming to a vote. The overture was sent to the presbytery on August 18, twenty-three days before the meeting on the eighteenth of September. It arrived there the day (or maybe two) after the council had met to assemble the docket. There had been a mix-up on my end on the days when the council was to meet. As a result, there were some references stating how the overture had been submitted late and how the timing had been inconsiderate towards the presbytery and the planning for the agenda.

Nonetheless, the overture was received. It was sent to the Faith and Orders Committee for their recommendation. I requested that I be able to address the committee, since - as far as I knew - there would be no other LGBT folk present or on the committee. On September 10th, I was graciously given that chance.

Since the committee did not have a quorum present, they would not be able to make a recommendation for approval of the motion at the presbytery meeting. The committee did later inform the presbytery that those present were in favor of the overture. Correctly following procedure and avoiding irregularities, the committee decided to make their report to the presbytery, noting the lack of quorum, and recommending that a motion from the plenary be made on the overture.

Eight days to the meeting...

Over the next several days, it was clear from correspondence and discussions that several leaders in our presbytery were strongly in favor of following the procedures recommended by the Theological Task Force on Peace, Unity, and Purity and the 217th GA.

I should mention that everyone in the presbytery was sent a copy of the Palisades Overture with the rationale after it was sent to the presbytery. We wanted to be as open and transparent as possible.

Susan Andrews, our General Presbyter, former Moderator of the General Assembly, and strong advocate for a new way of working through controversial amendments supported a non-vote approach. Susan would have preferred that we give voice to every member of the presbytery on the overture, establishing small groups and discussions, following a different process of discernment on the overture. The overture would then be sent to a future presbytery meeting -- perhaps as early as December 4.

One of the main concerns of Susan and others was that the minority voices in our presbytery -- those who consistently vote against more inclusive status for LGBT folk -- were being excluded. Some in our leadership felt that another vote would further marginalize these groups. Additionally, there were concerns that following Robert's Rules to a vote would deny newer members of the presbytery a chance to have conversation on the implications of the overture. Susan, who has been a strong supporter for a path to inclusion for LGBT folks in the church, believed then and now that we were contributing to the divide in the church by adhering to the old ways of doing things.

While this may sound like the stage for a confrontation was being set, that is not so. It is difficult to disagree with advocates for a different way in the church, but we managed to do so (and continue to do so) with much grace. Fortunately, grace is freely given -- so there is always abundance at hand!

And we did disagree. The Session of the Palisades Church, now joined by a concurrence of the Session of South Church in Dobbs Ferry, felt that going forward was important for many reasons, including the following:

- (1) Intimacy: The Presbytery of Hudson River, as a body, is intimately familiar with what is at stake. Long a supporter of motions to the General Assembly for the deletion of G-6.0106b, we believed that we had already had the small group discussions and gone through enough discernment, to bring this forward for a vote. Our actions in ordaining qualified Elders, Deacons, and Ministers of the Word and Sacrament who were openly LGBT gave support to such a position. In other words, to a great majority, we were already there.
- (2) Exclusion of Others: The idea of excluding others is troubling and should always give one pause. Once considered, it becomes clear, however, that in this case we were not being exclusive. The LGBT community and its supporters in our church do not ask those with opposing positions to leave the church. Our call to work toward a more inclusive church has never been a call for those who disagree with us to leave. It is true, though, that those who oppose the ordination of LGBT folk - require that we change or be denied. This is really a form of self-chosen exclusion, rather than anything the LGBT community in the church seeks to impose on our sisters and brothers. It is a choice not in our control, nor one which should restrict us from seeking justice.

Perhaps the only real inclusive **and** equitable possibility in this scenario, would be for a moratorium on all ordinations – until our discussions and discernment processes were complete.

Otherwise, we need to keep seeking removal of G-6.0106b.

- (3) Healing: We also felt that moving forward on the Palisades Overture was far from an affront. It might be seen that way by some, yet it was really a call for this church to change. It was also a chance to have an extended period of time to work together so that we might arrive at GA218 following months of retelling our stories and extending our invitation to the full church to come together. We were not proposing the overture to split the church, although the spectre of schism was referred to more than once.

- (4) Regarding the recommendation of GA217 and the Theological Task Force's suggestion for a new process for discernment: We are grateful to the 217 GA and the Task Force for working to find a way to come to unity.

While some might feel that the Palisades Overture was in response to the Task Force's inability to create change, for me that is only partially true. The larger truth is that the only reason for bringing forward the Palisades Overture was to remove G-6.0106b from the Book of Order and for the call for a New Authoritative Interpretation (one not necessarily linked to the other). It was the sense of South Church, others, and Palisades that any report or overture which allows G-6.0106b to remain in the Book of Order and be "interpreted" was not acceptable. G-6.0106b, as Joe Gilmore has often called it, is "barbed-wire" around our sacred humanity. Until G-6.0106b is gone, LGBT persons and others will be kept out of this church by that barrier. It needs to go. That's why many have brought it forward in the past and we continue to do so now and until it is gone.

- (5) Robert's Rules: Regarding the use of the Task Force process and GA217's suggestion to do so, we questioned why the relatively "new" process had to be used to decide the fate of LGBT folk in the church. Robert's Rules continues to be used throughout presbyteries and Session, Synods and General Assemblies. The LGBT community already has enough on its shoulders without the burden of being the "test case" for changing the decision-making process of our church.

Also, we are not calling for an end to dialogue or discussion, quite the opposite. The discussion should continue across our church as we move forward. We are not saying, have never said – that we should stop talking with one another. We say this in spite of the fact that at times those conversations, frequently promised to be held in a spirit of safe-haven, have been used against members of the LGBT community. We still need to find ways to ensure that no longer happens.

- (6) Why can't we wait? During the weeks leading up to the meeting, there were questions about why we needed to be first. Why not have a first reading and then return at a later meeting for a second reading, following the discernment process outlined?

Having referred to the discernment process already, I'll speak for a moment to the "being first" idea.

This overture was not about being first, itself - but about taking a leadership and hopeful role for our LGBT community. It takes a lot of courage to be prophetic and present for LGBT and other oppressed communities in the face of a church with our history toward many marginalized groups. We hoped that by bringing this overture to our presbytery early in the church year that we would be able to assure our LGBT community - locally and nationally - that they would not be forgotten at presbytery or at GA218.

We also hoped that by sending an early overture to GA218 that other presbyteries would have more time to consider an overture, rather than crafting their own (unless they chose to) and comfortably meet the 120-day deadline for submission of overtures to the GA.

Further, it was hoped that this might make it possible to arrive at GA218 with fewer overtures and more concurrences on one overture to delete G-6.0106b, allowing us to speak in a louder and more unified chorus.

Lastly, we believed that our presbytery and others have a long history in seeking full inclusion for LGBT folk in the full work and worship of our church. Our voices of welcoming AND willingness to work with those who disagree with us -- is not a matter of strategy but call.

These were some of the reasons we worked to have the overture considered early in the year.

- (7) Not Winning. Why, according to some, would we bring an overture at this time when it was not possible for it to succeed at General Assembly based on where our church and its presbyteries are today?

Whatever the outcome at General Assembly (or odds of that outcome), we felt that our LGBT sisters and brothers needed to know that our commitment to a more just and loving church was not a strategy but a commitment to call. The outcome of General Assembly will be what it is -- and either way will never decide for anyone or any group whether or not they are created equally and loved by God, in this case sharing the same baptism as others who keep saying, "Not yet. Not us."

As Elder Bigelow Green of the Palisades Session said at the meeting: “If not us, who? If not now, when?”

For many of us, it’s about faithfulness, not winning.

At the Presbytery of Hudson River Meeting: September 18, 2007:

Shortly before the motion, Susan Andrews gave part of her General Presbyter Report, which can be viewed online at www.hudrivpres.org . In her comments, she encouraged us to consider strongly the guidance of the 217th GA and The Theological Task Force Report on Peace, Unity and Purity in making decisions regarding some of the controversial “issues” that were ahead in the evening’s work.

The Palisades Overture came up late in the meeting, which began at 2:30 P.M. It was around 8:00 P.M. when Faith and Orders gave their report.

Joe Gilmore of South Presbyterian Church made the motion to accept the Palisades Overture. It was seconded and discussion began. Several spoke in favor of the motion, including the Revs. Joe Gilmore, Paul Alcorn, Bruce Baker, Peggy Howland, Elder Bigelow Green of Palisades, and me. There were also voices who spoke against the motion, including the Revs. Allen Kemp and Jean Risley.

It seemed that we would be moving toward an early vote.

It was then that a member of the presbytery, the Rev. Ken Wonderland, proposed a substitute motion to send the overture back to the Faith and Orders Committee to devise a method of meetings, small groups, and discernment to further discuss the motion and bring its report to a future meeting of presbytery. The motion was seconded. Discussion continued along many of the points already considered in this report.

A process of perfecting the main motion and substitute motion followed. Next, there was a vote on whether the substitute motion should replace the main motion. That was defeated. We then returned to the main motion, which passed by a large majority with 3 or 4 abstentions. The presbytery decided on a hand vote, rather than a paper ballot.

The process took a bit more than an hour, as I recall.

Comments:

This information is offered to use in whatever way might be helpful. Some closing thoughts:

- (1) Celebration: Following the vote and in the days that ensued, it was once again made clear that this is not a cause for celebration – to me. What has been re-affirmed is how relentless we need to be, how so many are affected by our actions, and how there are no winners or losers when it comes to the deletion of G-6.0106b – it simply has to go for all of us, including its proponents. We have to return to dialogue not defined by unjust amendments or layers of recommendations that keep us from getting to the heart of the exclusionary practices and polity of our church.

In the process, not everyone will agree with us, many will be heartened and hopeful, many will be distraught and see their gospel being reduced to tatters. The idea that we could split the church to resolve these differences is counter to all we work toward. The idea that we could make a case for waiting more than we have for sacred justice – is unconscionable.

So our greatest gift in this and all we do is love – a strong, welcoming, unswerving, courageous, compassionate love – towards all, relying on the Holy Spirit for the rest.

- (2) Leaders: We need our leaders in this movement to be prayerful, clear, loud, present, compassionate, cooperative, and inspiring.

At the meeting, we were reminded that most of those who spoke were “the old guard” who had been speaking about this for twenty-five years. “Where were the newer voices?” we were asked (suggesting we had silenced them by refusing to follow the Task Force and GA’s recommendation for process).

Many of us know where they were: *they were hiding*. It is dangerous to speak out as a person who is LGBT, let alone ordained and LGBT – and, in many ways, it is dangerous to even be our supporters and align oneself against the powerful voices that call us to do otherwise or differently.

Yes, we need more voices and leaders, but that is no reason for the voices we have: the Gilmores, Alcorns, Bakers, Howlands, Kemps, Risleys, and Greens – to be quiet. We need ALL the voices – then maybe we can do better at speaking with one another.

“Will your voice be next?” I ask. “Will you be in our out?”

- (3) Us and Them: There is nowhere in these comments that you will find the words “conservatives, moderates, or liberals.” I do not use them. Not only do they divide, they are inaccurate in what they describe. I challenge us to find a new language that includes others, identifying our disagreements clearly and openly, but describing them and us – not as part of some demographic or political description – but as faithful seeking to serve the God that has called us all.

One of the things I like to remind people is that over the last two years of serving Palisades Presbyterian Church that I have led over 100 worship services, celebrated Communion, married folks, baptized children, brought children's' messages, installed and ordained elders and deacons, stood with families during farewells to loved ones, moderated Session meetings, attended committee meetings, and ate more than my fair share of strawberries at our Annual Strawberry Festival (to which you are all invited).

I have done all these things not because of who I am, but because I was called and given the opportunity to serve. I was cleared by the Presbytery of Hudson River and called by the Palisades Presbyterian Church as a gay man who refuses to abide by G-6.0106b.

In other words, I have served as every other minister in parish ministry does – and the church has not fallen apart!

Nor will it, once G-6.0106b is removed and all are given the same opportunity to serve.

Please let me know if there are any questions or things you would like to discuss based on these or other comments.

I hope it is helpful.

Thanks for all your prayers and support, even when we disagree! ☺

Peace,
Ray