

## *Reflections on “Marriage Equality”*

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September, 2005

Since the July 4, 2005 action of the General Synod affirming “marriage equality” I have received many letters and emails ranging from affirmation and appreciation to bewilderment and anger. Conversations with United Church of Christ members in several local churches have revealed a similar range of perspective. Several local churches have expressed through a formal vote their dissent from the position of the General Synod. A few local churches have voted to leave the United Church of Christ. Some local churches, not currently affiliated with the United Church of Christ, have expressed interest in affiliation. Many local churches are studying the General Synod’s action and many more will be entering into study processes this fall. The following reflections are one contribution to this dialogue taking place in the life of our church and seek to respond to some of the questions frequently asked by those who have corresponded with me.

Many have asked, **“How did we arrive at this decision in the life of the United Church of Christ?”** Quite frankly, some, though by no means all, have felt shocked, even “blind-sided” by this decision, and assume it is a response merely to the current national political debates in our nation. In fact, this decision of the General Synod, while obviously responding to a pressing social and moral question, is part of a long trajectory going back as far as four decades. It was not an “issue” or the alleged “gay agenda” that caught the attention of the church. It was the presence of gay and lesbian persons in our churches, as well as their families, who began to be unwilling to be silent about their sexual orientation, and who began to say to us that it is wrong to ask our gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender members to choose between their baptismal identity and their sexual identity.

A study on human sexuality commissioned by the Synod in the 1970's explored emerging understandings of homosexuality from a moral, theological, biblical, and scientific perspective. While a significant minority in the church dissented from the perspectives offered in *Human Sexuality*, the General Synod affirmed these perspectives which called in part for a more welcoming stance toward persons of all sexual orientations, and challenged the church to incorporate them into our common life. Also in the 1970's, local churches began to participate in the “Open and Affirming” process which invites congregations, after careful study, to declare that they are open and affirming to the membership of gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender persons in the life and ministry of the church. Local churches were not forced to participate in this initiative, but over the years several hundred have made this commitment.

At about the same time, Committees on Ministry in our Associations (which have the responsibility for examining candidates and ordaining on behalf of the whole church) began to be approached by openly gay and lesbian persons who were discerning calls to ministry and

presenting themselves for examination as candidates for ordination. Over time this experience led the General Synod in the early 1990's to encourage Associations to no longer consider sexual orientation, in and of itself, as a bar to ordination. Associations were, of course, free to accept or reject this advice, and some determined that they would not follow the Synod's encouragement on this issue. But increasingly most Associations have demonstrated their readiness to ordain openly gay or lesbian candidates who have received a call to an authorized ministry in the UCC and who meet the qualifications for ordination set forth in *Manual on Ministry*. Many of these persons have been called to serve as pastors by local churches and are now serving with distinction in all settings of the United Church of Christ.

Also in the late 1990's, ecumenical conversations and proposals led to dialogue on the various churches' convictions about the membership and ministry of gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender persons. While it is clear that the position of the United Church of Christ differs from that of many other denominations, in our partnership with the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ), our participation in Churches Uniting in Christ, and in our full communion agreement with the Presbyterian Church (USA), the Reformed Church in America, and the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, views on homosexuality have consistently been deemed important and significant, but not "church dividing." In particular, an extensive formal dialogue on this matter with the Reformed Church in America determined that one could hold positions affirmed by the General Synod while remaining faithful to Scripture.

Finally, in recent years many same sex couples have approached their local churches requesting services of "blessing" for their covenantal partnerships or holy unions. Due to the autonomy of each setting in our polity, this decision, as with all other matters related to the worship and sacramental life of the church, remains the prerogative of a local church and its pastoral leadership. However, as these services of blessing have occurred, congregations have begun to experience the value of bringing the same sex relationships of their members within both the blessing and the discipline of the church where those relationships, like those of heterosexual couples, can be nurtured and shaped in healthy ways.

Affirmation of same gender marriage is, admittedly, a new step in this journey, one that is deeply challenging to many in our church even as others celebrate it. But it is a step that is part of a much longer theological and pastoral journey, a journey prompted not by political considerations, but by the gift and the challenge of gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender persons in our midst. I know that the action of the General Synod did come as a shock to many of our members. But those who have been attentive to our life together for these four decades were not surprised, regardless of whether they agreed or disagreed with the decision.

Many who have written to me, while acknowledging all that I have written, continue to be offended by an action that, to them, appears to ignore or demean the Bible. **"How can we square this action of the General Synod with what the Bible says about homosexuality or about marriage?"** Those who raise this question typically point to six or seven passages in Genesis, Leviticus, and the letters of Paul. These texts have been the source of intense debate among scholars, though in recent years a consensus is emerging. First, it is now no longer clear that the passage in Genesis associated with Sodom refers to homosexuality at all; most scholars

believe the “sin of Sodom” was a failure to exhibit hospitality to strangers. Indeed, the issue is not merely failure to offer hospitality; it is the attempt by the men of Sodom to assault the visitors to Lot’s home. The sexual relations judged in Genesis 19 are not homosexual acts between loving adults, but violent abuse and rape committed by some citizens in Sodom against Lot’s guests. Curiously, Lot’s solution - offering his daughters to the mob for sexual violation - goes unchallenged in the story and, by inference, is affirmed. This affront to our modern sensibilities ought to caution us about too easily translating an ancient story into a contemporary ethical position. Just because the name “Sodom” has been associated with homosexuality in history should not deter us from a much more critical reading of the text. Throughout the Old Testament the injunction to show hospitality to strangers is lifted up as a high value. Many thoughtful readers of the text now believe that the sin of Sodom is violent treatment of the stranger, the abuse of the guest, not homosexual behavior between two loving partners.

Prohibitions in Leviticus are mingled with numerous other prohibitions about dietary, liturgical, sexual, and ethical matters which no one today believes are binding for Christians. On what basis do we select a verse or two on homosexuality as valid when there are no special criteria offered in the text itself for doing so? Why do we privilege some passages in Leviticus, while dispensing with many, indeed most others? No one has shown a reasonable criteria within the text itself, leaving us wondering whether we are using external cultural values to determine which text remains in effect, and which texts do not.

Paul’s admonitions against homosexual behavior seem clear, but he was writing in a time when no one had any concept of anything called sexual orientation. For Paul, only heterosexual activity was “natural.” But today there is a growing consensus among scientists of many disciplines that there is a percentage of the population that is oriented toward same gender sexual attraction. Thus it appears that, for some, homosexual relationships are “natural.” Paul writes with no knowledge of men or women involved in life-long, monogamous homosexual relationships. What he does know about is homosexual relationships between men and boys, a not uncommon practice in the ancient world. If this is true, then what appears to be so clear in Romans or Corinthians may not, in fact, be clear at all for us today.

Frankly, the Bible says very little about homosexuality and, as shown above, much of our traditional interpretation of those few texts is, at the very least suspect. The Bible does say a great deal about covenanted relationships. Fidelity, not homosexuality, is at the heart of the Gospel, and the call to fidelity is a gift and a discipline that makes as much sense for same gender couples as for heterosexual couples. Isn’t this what the church should focus on?

Over the years the church has heard the scripture speaking in new ways. There was a time when Christians believed the Bible condoned slavery. There was a time when Christians believed the Bible prohibited women from offering certain kinds of leadership in the church. In each case a few passages were identified to “prove” the point. But as Christians began to listen more carefully to the whole of Scripture, new insights emerged. Recently I saw a magnificent tomb stone behind an Episcopal Church in Georgia. It marked the grave of a prominent church member in pre-Civil War America. The inscription reads, “A profound statesman who laboured faithfully for the public good. A man gentle and true, a devoted husband and father, a kind

master.” Today no one would praise “a kind master.” As the hymn puts it, sometimes “time does make ancient good uncouth.” Not every new theological and biblical insight is true or valid. But we must recognize that interpretations change in light of new understandings, that to embrace new insights is not necessarily to abandon scripture but rather to read scripture in the light of life’s new challenges and opportunities under the guidance of the Holy Spirit. And it is to read every text in Scripture against the highest law which is the love of God and the love of neighbor.

If we are at least open to the possibility that our traditional reading of some texts in the Bible may be challenged, **are there other passages which encourage us to embrace a theology of inclusion?** Several stories in the Acts of the Apostles are suggestive. The baptism by Philip of the Ethiopian eunuch would have jolted the reader of Acts in Luke’s day with the story of welcome for a person doubly excluded because of his nationality and his sexual deformity. The story of Cornelius and Peter centers on the religious laws and purity codes prohibiting Jews from associating with Gentiles. Peter’s dream of being told to eat ritually unclean animals - “what God has made clean you must not call profane” - prompts him to determine that “God shows no partiality.” And the experience of the Holy Spirit being poured out on the Gentiles at the end of this story so astounded Peter and the others among the circumcised, that Peter moves to offer baptism: “Can anyone withhold the water for baptizing these people who have received the Holy Spirit?”

These stories are not about homosexuality. They are about the central question challenging the early church, a question as bitterly debated as today’s questions about homosexuality. Not all will find in these stories a persuasive argument for welcoming gay and lesbian persons into the full blessing and discipline of the church. Even so, they are a powerful reminder that inclusion, not exclusion, is the core trajectory of the Gospel witness from the very beginning. This becomes especially compelling when we look at the life and ministry of Jesus.

A thoughtful reading of the Gospels reveals time and again that Jesus was willing to share in table fellowship with those who were condemned or rejected by the cultural and religious norms of his day. Throughout his ministry Jesus challenged those who exclude. **But didn’t Jesus say even to those he welcomed, “Go and sin no more?”** Yes, but this begs the core question: “Is homosexual behavior sin?” Some behavior certainly is. Abusive or manipulative behavior is sin as it is for heterosexual couples. Promiscuous behavior is sin as it is for heterosexual couples. But is a commitment to life long fidelity by two persons sin simply because they not only share love, but also their gender? Can we not see that same gender couples who enter into the covenants of marriage are bearing witness to fidelity, not “living in sin.”

**But what about the Bible’s affirmation of marriage?** Actually, the Bible doesn’t say much about marriage either, particularly if we think only of the “traditional marriage” of one man and one woman of the last few centuries. The same Hebrew Bible that includes prohibitions about homosexuality in Leviticus offers models of family that include multiple wives. Jesus own genealogy in Matthew is filled with non-traditional relationships. The New Testament does include strong admonitions against divorce, including Jesus’ words that to divorce and remarry is

to commit adultery. While divorce is certainly not celebrated in our churches today, it is clearly accepted as a difficult and deeply disappointing step that is sometimes necessary and that should not separate a Christian from the care and love of the church. And no one who discovers new love after the pain of divorce is accused by our pastors of being an adulterer. Do Christians who divorce fail to take the Bible seriously? Or do they read the texts about divorce in the context of the whole Biblical message about a Gospel of forgiveness and grace? The phrase from one of the creation stories about “a man leaving his father and mother and clinging to his wife and becoming one flesh” is repeated several times. It is included in our marriage services as well. The Bible doesn’t talk about two men or two women becoming one flesh. But this is hardly surprising since the Biblical writers would never have experienced a committed, life-long covenantal relationship between a same-gender couple. The Bible describes, but does the Bible proscribe in this instance? To argue that the Bible’s silence about same gender marriage must be read as prohibition is like saying that because the Bible says nothing about new medical procedures allowing some women to conceive a child outside of “normal” sexual intercourse, such a procedure must be prohibited on Biblical grounds.

**So if the Bible is not quite so clear about homosexuality and marriage as we sometimes want to think, what does the Bible say about relationships?** At the center, of course, is the story of God’s faithfulness to a people, a fidelity that endures in spite of human sin and betrayal, a fidelity that is as intimate as the relationships within the Trinity, a fidelity that honors the flesh and its passions and pain through the Word made flesh of the incarnation. It is a fidelity that is to be lived out in our relationships to all that God relates us in covenant: the creation, the poor and the vulnerable, the stranger in our midst, and those who become our intimate partners in life. Sexual orientation, by itself, offers no inhibition to fulfilling these covenantal responsibilities. In our marriage service we describe marriage as a sacred covenant so that couples can “come to know each other with mutual care and companionship and share their new life with others as Jesus shared new wine at the wedding in Cana.” Theologically it is a sign of the “image of the union of Christ with the church.” These are vocations same gender couples are just as able to fulfill as heterosexual couples.

Even if one agrees with all or much of what I’ve said, some wonder **why we couldn’t talk about “blessing” instead of “marriage” for same gender couples.** Indeed, some same gender couples may prefer to have their union “blessed” by the church. It is clear, however, that marriage confers specific and important rights and responsibilities in the civil society and in the church. To deny some access to the name of marriage, and to some or all of the rights and responsibilities afforded heterosexual couples is to permanently relegate them to a lesser status, including the ability to care for life-long partners in a terminal illness, or to adopt children. Obviously there are many in our country today, and some in the church, who believe that such a lesser status is appropriate. Such a belief is strange in a country that “pledges liberty and justice for all.” Even if we could guarantee the same rights and responsibilities, separate has seldom meant equal in our society. Some same gender couples may prefer the blessing of a union to a marriage. But many yearn for a marriage equal in name and status. Throughout the Bible we are told to welcome the stranger. We in the United States have an ambiguous history when it comes to the stranger or the alien. Those who are different have received an uncertain welcome. But throughout the Hebrew texts we are reminded to welcome the alien in our midst as a “citizen.”

A marriage license is a sign of citizenship, just like a driver's license, a passport, and a social security card. In this land that honors freedom and equality, on what basis can we deny some this important sign of citizenship?

Finally, and quite apart from anything I've said thus far, some ask how the General Synod could take such an action without first asking our members their views. **Why wasn't I asked what I believed? Shouldn't each local church have gotten a vote? Shouldn't the action of a General Synod be submitted to the churches to be ratified?** There is nothing inherently wrong in any of these proposals. Some denominations do function in this way. Our polity, our way of decision making, is different. Does that mean the Synod or its officers don't care what our members think? No. In fact, there were numerous opportunities for local churches and individual members to study this issue well in advance using resources prepared by the national setting. Resolutions were published well prior to Synod on our web site and in *UCNews*. Delegates were encouraged to hear the views of the churches in the conferences they represent. In a representative polity, persons elected by local churches make decisions in Associations and Conferences; persons elected by Conferences or Associations make decisions at the Executive Council or the General Synod. In each case local church members are the ones who act, basing their vote on their own conscience, on their own interpretation of the Bible, on their own knowledge of what is good for the church, on their own conviction about what is just and right. Every Synod delegate I encountered in Atlanta was very aware of the diverse perspectives in the church. Those diverse perspectives were shared and discussed thoroughly. They were heard with respect. The discussion on the floor was prayerful and thoughtful. This discussion was no political debate in which one side tried to dominate the other. It was a time when the diverse views of the church were shared, tested, and heard. Our vote was followed not by celebration, but by prayer asking for God's presence in the weeks and months to come.

**What difference will this vote make?** Many members of the United Church of Christ, and many local churches, are thinking about marriage in a more intense and thoughtful way than ever before. Often this is in the midst of conflict and diverging views and, quite frankly, many do not appreciate the discomfort such conflict causes and wonder if having this particular question pressed right now is helpful to the church. I understand that concern and want you to know that I, too, wrestled with that question prior to the Synod. No time ever seems like the right time. Such has been the case throughout our history when the church has been asked to speak on an issue of compelling moral importance. Would local churches have had the conversation about marriage had some states not offered to marry same gender couples and the General Synod not spoken on the subject? I think it is likely that only a very few would have engaged their members on this question of such importance to both the church and the state.

Along with prompting needed dialogue, I have heard from countless people inside the United Church of Christ and beyond who experienced our vote as a witness to the Gospel, a word they had despaired of hearing from the church, a word that felt graciously liberating when what is often heard from the church sounds rigid and excluding. I don't think this vote will make us much bigger or much smaller. New members have been attracted by the vote in some places, something we celebrate. But in other places some members have felt they must leave. Those decisions are terribly painful for those congregations and for me. Also painful are

decisions by churches to withdraw mission support through Our Church's Wider Mission. While such an action may make a statement, it also deprives Conferences and the National Setting of dollars that nurture and support the church in countless ways, ways that unite us around common concern for the poor, for the vulnerable, and for the health and vitality of our congregations.

**Does this vote make us a "one issue church?"** No, in 2005 alone we have helped raise and distribute over \$4 million for tsunami relief, have started new congregations, have produced an exciting array of new worship resources, have placed ads on national television raising the visibility of our church, have advocated for peace and justice in the Sudan, in Israel/Palestine, and in the Philippines. I personally helped dedicate a dormitory for impoverished high school girls and a peace institute for a conflicted community, both in India, both made possible by gifts to Our Church's Wider Mission. Just a few weeks after Synod churches and members holding diverging views on marriage joined together in great generosity for the survivors of Katrina. If we are a one issue church, the issue seems to be compassion. **Does this vote lead us toward becoming a "gay church?"** No, our new members and our newly ordained ministers are gay and straight. What this vote does do is say we are a church seeking to extend an extravagant welcome, a church that is willing to follow its forebears in acts of evangelical courage. It does say that today the issue of equality is important to this church, that today those in our community who often feel most excluded and sometimes most vilified, particularly those who are gay, lesbian, bisexual, or transgender, are welcome here.

These reflections are intended to be a witness to my own conviction, convictions I believe were shared by many at our General Synod. I understand that many who read them will not be convinced. Deep differences remain between us. Because of that we will need to continue to listen to each other and to others who offer insight. In that spirit let me commend to you a new book on this subject: *What God Has Joined Together? A Christian Case for Gay Marriage* by David G. Myers and Letha Dawson Scanzoni (HarperSanFrancisco). This book begins not with individual rights, but with the importance of marriage, and argues that the church should do everything it can to strengthen marriage and extend it to all. Let me also commend to you the resources on marriage found on our website at [ucc.org](http://ucc.org).

I close with the prayer I offered immediately following the vote on marriage equality at General Synod. It was a prayer that attempted to include all, regardless of how they voted. It continues to be my prayer for the church today:

Lord Jesus, to you we live, to you we suffer, to you we die. Yours will we be in life and in death. Today, as in ancient Bethlehem, the hopes and fears of all the years are met in you. We give thanks for your presence during these days of prayer and discernment, and especially for your presence here this morning. We have felt your warm embrace, stilling us as we tremble with joy, with hope, with fear, with disappointment. Remind us that as we are tempted to run from each other, so too we run from you. We know that every choice confers a cost, so let us attend in the coming hours and days to those for whom this decision confers a particular burden. Let us find words that comfort rather than congratulate; let us seek to be a community of grace and forgiveness rather than organizing constituencies of protest, let us use our hands not to clap but to wipe away

every tear. And in all this may we know in surprising new ways the comfort of belonging to You. This is our prayer. Hear us, Lord Jesus. Amen.

Note: These reflections are a slightly revised version of a paper written and circulated informally in August, 2005.