

let justice roll down

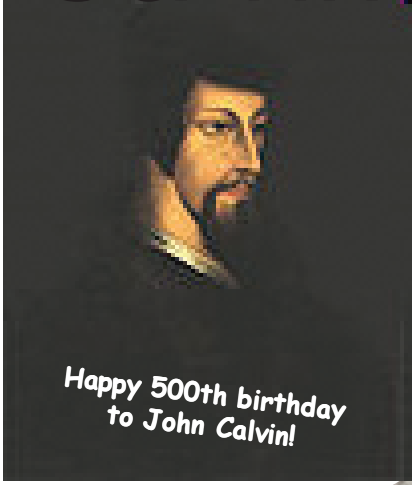
Witherspoon Network News

Winter 2009

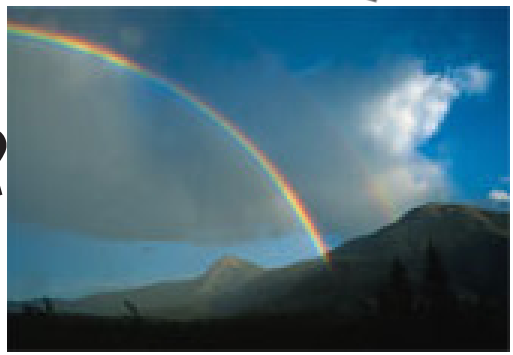
Volume XXIX, No. 1

www.witherspoonsociety.org

Calvin and Crisis



and Hope?



The Co-Moderator's Column



Re-Imagining the Witherspoon Society

by Jake Young

Officers of the Presbyterian Church (USA) vow, among other things, to serve the church with imagination. That's a wonderful idea. It reminds us to pursue creativity in our service to God and one another. Theologian Matthew Fox says that human creativity is the Holy Spirit at work in and through us. In this sense, the activity of creatively imagining—indeed, reimagining—new ways of being the church is exactly where the spirit of God leads us. Likewise, attempts to squelch imagination are akin to what our Pentecostal sisters and brothers might call “quenching the Spirit.”

Board members of the Witherspoon Society are excited these days about the prospect of serving you and the PC(USA) with imagination. You may not think of excitement and imagination when you think of Witherspoon (especially if you have

not attended one of our General Assembly dance parties), but that's about to change. For several months we have been in conversation with the leadership of Voices of Sophia about a merger. Today we are proud to publicly announce that merger. The WS Board has been expanded to include four gifted and creative leaders of VOS. (See Sylvia Thorson-Smith's article on the next page, for further details on this development.) Together, the different strengths of VOS and WS will enable our new organization to serve the church more effectively, with greater energy and imagination. We are grateful for your support of each organization and invite you to join us and renew your vow—so to speak—to serve the church with imagination.

Jake Young, Co-Moderator

NETWORK NEWS (ISSN 0745-418X) is published quarterly at St. Paul, MN, and additional entry offices, by **The Witherspoon Society** of the Presbyterian Church (USA), 2198 Vining Dr., Unit B, Woodbury, MN 55125-7575
 POSTMASTER: Please send address changes to Network News, Douglas King, 2198 Vining Dr., Unit B, Woodbury, MN 55125-7575

Announcement of a Holy Union.

Voices of Sophia and the Witherspoon Society Merge

by Sylvia Thorson-Smith

For about a year, the idea of a merger between the Witherspoon Society and Voices of Sophia has been in the works. Thanks to the efforts of many dedicated people in both groups, we are now happy to announce that this union is a reality.

Since this article appears in what has been the communication piece of the Witherspoon Society, it might be helpful to review a bit of the history of Voices of Sophia. VOS was organized in 1995 in response to the backlash against the 1993 feminist theological event known as “Re-Imagining.” It was felt by many who were active in the PCUSA at the time that those who advocated feminist values, particularly women staff, were under siege and needed a critical mass of support outside the structures of the church. For 13 years, Voices of Sophia has been an untamed witness on behalf of women and women’s issues, working in partnership with other progressive justice-loving groups in the Presbyterian Church, like the Witherspoon Society.

Discussions between these two groups began in conversations at General Assembly in 2008, and the serious work of exploring a merger commenced in the fall and early 2009. I came on the Witherspoon Board, in part as a liaison between the groups. Basic agreement was

reached between the leadership of WS and VOS on steps that would be taken, including the following:

- 1) four new members would join the WS board as a VOS caucus, participating fully in decisions of the board and providing a particularly feminist perspective to its work;
- 2) the VOS caucus would be responsible for continuing some previous VOS work, such as breakfasts that feature women theologians at General Assembly;
- 3) at least for now, the balance of VOS monies would be (and have been) kept in a separate account, managed by the WS budget officer, and available for GA breakfasts and other particularly VOS/feminist-related needs; and
- 4) other details of the merger would be worked out by the newly enlarged board.

An email was sent to VOS members seeking three interested persons to join me in forming the VOS caucus of the board, and the following women enthusiastically offered to serve: Colleen Bowers, a nurse who lives in Baltimore, MD; Sylvia Carlson, a retired minister in Redstone Presbyterian; and Molly Casteel, who until recently held a position as staff for women’s advocacy in the Racial Ethnic and Women’s Ministry Program of the church.

In addition, Heather Reichgott (former board member of More Light Presbyterians) will be an adjunct member of the caucus and will manage a new feminist blog on the Witherspoon website. Heather is working with Doug King and her blog is now operational (check it out at <http://voicesofsophia.wordpress.com>).

There are still issues to address regarding this merger, and these will be discussed at a board meeting in Minneapolis in May. For now, though, we are moving forward with energy and enthusiasm in this (hopefully) holy, justice-seeking union. It's exciting to see it actually become a reality, because we all agree on the importance of maintaining a progressive/feminist voice in the PCUSA – even from the margins. We'll want to keep communication flowing with the members of both groups, so this unified group can become an even stronger witness for peace and justice than we were separately. We hope that current members of WS and VOS will want to maintain your ties and new members will want to join.

We ask for prayers and all forms of support as we re-imagine a united Voices of Sophia/Witherspoon Society. Feel free to ask questions, give us input, and share ideas about how to strengthen our work together. I welcome emails regarding this merger (sylviats@cox.net), and you may direct them to other board members as well. We look forward to reporting more progress in upcoming issues of Network News and on the website.

We invite you to join us!

**If you're looking for a
community of progressive
Presbyterians,
witnessing and working
for peace and justice in
God's world,
we can help provide you
with information,
theological reflection, and
companionship on the
journey.**

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The Legacy of John Calvin for a World He Could Never Have Imagined

by the Rev. Dr. Clifton Kirkpatrick,
President, World Alliance of Reformed Churches

July 10, 2009 will be John Calvin's 500th birthday. For many it is not a very big thing. For others it brings up connections that we would just as soon forget – such as the (erroneous) connection between Calvinism and modern capitalism and the sad chapter of Calvin and Servetus in Geneva. But for Reformed Christians it has a much deeper significance – and a great promise for the renewal of our church and our witness in the 21st century.

John Calvin, a native of France, a Reformer of Geneva, is truly a son of the world. This movement of Reformation that started among the French and the Swiss has literally spread to the four corners of the earth! As we enter this

year of jubilee, we do not celebrate or seek to replicate everything that Calvin did, but rather we seek to make come alive his vision and legacy:

- A vision of the priesthood of all believers, where everybody counts and where mutual respect and shared leadership should be the norm in churches and societies,
- A vision of the sovereignty of God over all the world, which calls all of us to work for a world filled with justice, compassion and peace,
- A vision of the creation as God's gift, which needs to be respected and nurtured for future generations,
- A vision of the grace of God available through faith in Jesus Christ to every human being on the face of the earth.

Calvin's Geneva was a very different world from that of the 21st century. However, he too came on the stage of human history at a time of deep turmoil and change, and the wisdom he shared is remarkably contemporary in our time.



Cliff Kirkpatrick at Witherspoon
Conference, Sept. 2007



At a time when the law was being used to convict of sin or control one another, Calvin offered a vision of “the third use of law” in which the law would serve not as a weapon for one group against another but as a moral compass and a gift for the redeemed to live a more holy and righteous life.

At a time of both clergy dominance and anti-clericalism, Calvin offered a pattern of church order that broke down the barriers between clergy and lay with multiple offices in the church (pastors, doctors, elders, deacons) and where some might be clergy and some lay but where all are called of God and share in the ordering of church life.

At a time of theocratic states and of states wanting to privatize religion, Calvin developed a political order where church and state are separate but are to respect one another and each be obedient to the will of God.

At a time when religion and privilege went hand in hand, Calvin upheld the sovereignty of God and the dignity of the creation and of each person created in God’s image. Justice and respect for all was a hallmark of Calvin’s revolution. At a time of biblical fundamentalism and biblical despisers, Calvin took seriously the bible as a light to our path and an instrument to lead us to Jesus Christ as Word of God.

At a time of ethnic conflict and ethnic cleansing, Calvin led Geneva to become a haven for refugees and immigrants, many of whom would later take this vision of a church and community as one that is “reformed and always being reformed by the Word of God and the power of the Holy Spirit” to the whole world.

A different time, but a vision that reflects the heart of God’s will for our time – and for all time.

This vision – these dreams – are what we celebrate in the Calvin Jubilee.

There are a number of resources and events to aid us in reclaiming Calvin’s legacy for our time. The World Alliance of Reformed Churches has put out a special study book, *The Legacy of John Calvin: Some Actions for Churches in the 21st Century*, which is a very helpful resource for local congregations. It focuses on three aspects of Calvin’s legacy, the gift of communion, the passion for social justice and respect for God’s creation, and his warning to stand against violence and destruction.

The Alliance, along with the Federation of Swiss Protestant Churches, has set up a special Calvin Jubilee website, www.calvin09.org that is filled with materi-

als and notices of events to make Calvin come alive in our time. The Alliance is also inviting Reformed Christians from around the world to join together in a special Calvin Celebration in Geneva on Pentecost weekend, and the PCUSA has a Calvin Jubilee conference at Montreat from July 8-11, 2009.

Through all these ways – and many more in local congregations – 2009 needs to be a year, not when we try to replicate Calvin and 16th century Geneva, but when we claim the best of Calvin’s legacy to live faithfully in our time. A couple of years ago I was in Mexico City meeting with the presidents of the seminaries related to the National Presbyterian Church in Mexico, and I was amazed at the enthusiasm they had for the Calvin Jubilee. Given that 21st century Mexico is so different from Calvin’s time and reality, I ask them why this enthusiasm. Their response was quick and to the point when they said, “We have no intention of replicating Calvin’s world, but what we desperately need is a Calvinist revolution for Mexico in the 21st century.” Friends, so do we! I encourage all of you to reclaim the best of Calvin’s legacy to live faithfully and justly in our 21st century reality.

Clifton Kirkpatrick

President, World Alliance of Reformed Churches

February 27, 2009

“Let Justice Roll Down” The Witherspoon Society Mission

We are a network of concerned Presbyterians responding to God’s call to let justice roll down, and to work for healing in a wounded world.

Our mission is:

- To listen and learn from those who have been silenced as we seek solidarity with them;
- To nurture the prophetic voice of the church;
- To equip Presbyterians for faithful participation in the church and world;
- To challenge unjust relationships of power;
- To advocate for peace, justice, the integrity of creation, and the full inclusion of all God’s people in church and society.

We seek to revitalize the church’s proclamation and action, informed by the whole gospel, and living into the promise of God’s reign.

Commemorating John Calvin — Halo, Warts, and All

Gene TeSelle

This year is the 500th anniversary of John Calvin's birth. There hasn't been a lot of preparation, or a lot of celebration, but the event is well worth noticing.

The date reminds us that Calvin was a second-generation Protestant, still a child when Luther announced his 95 Theses. That does not mean that he had an easy time of it. In France there were the competing attractions of Renaissance humanism (which was honored) and religious reform (which was

opposed), and Bouwsma finds in Calvin an ongoing tension between leisurely exploring the "labyrinth" of nature and culture and countering the "abyss" of sin and disorder through rigid doctrine and authoritarian control.

If Calvin is an ambivalent figure, so are we Presbyterians at the beginning of the third millennium, caught between love and justice, freedom and authority, comprehensiveness and desire for order. Brian Gerrish has always taken pains to remind us that the Reformed tradition is much more than Calvin and

Barth. Barth himself noted that the Reformed tradition does not elevate Calvin in the way that the Lutheran tradition elevates Luther to a distinctive

status. H. Richard Niebuhr loved to quote Barth's dictum that "we cannot do with only one church father." Not even Barth. Not even Calvin.

So let's take an "on the one hand" and "on the other hand" look at Calvin.

Calvin was an articulate *spokesperson* for the Reformation, starting soon after

his mysterious conversion, probably late in 1533. (He may have thought of himself as specially called, for there is no evidence that he was ordained by anyone else to the ministry, unless his minor orders as a Catholic are to be counted.) By 1536 he had published the first edition of his *Institutes* as a defense or apologia for the persecuted Protestants in France. It had only six chapters, but they furnished a reliable foundation for the other three editions, and the work has generally been admired for its coherence and comprehensiveness.



Gene TeSelle at Witherspoon commissioners' breakfast, General Assembly 2008

He was a loyal *ecumenist*, who early in his career had cordial contacts with Luther and Melancthon. Along with Bucer and Melancthon he took part in dialogues with Catholic reformers in Regensburg (1540-41), looking toward a reforming council. (No one yet thought in terms of permanently divided churches. That would come two decades later.) They knew that it could be a reforming council only if it were within the German Empire, and the Pope undermined their efforts by convening his own Council of Trent in 1545, south of the Alps.

He was an effective (if often acerbic) *controversialist*, not only defending his own views but challenging others and, when necessary, exacerbating tensions (he usually found it necessary, although he was tolerant of diverse modes of governance among the Reformed churches). When Charles V put forward the “interim” solution of keeping the Mass and bishops while discussion continued, he urged Melancthon to “spill less ink and more blood.” When some of the French Reformed advocated attending Mass without communing, he condemned them as Nicodemites, improperly trying to keep their relationship with Jesus a secret.

He quickly became a *scapegoat* or a *stumbling block*, targeted by both Catholic and Lutheran controversialists (it was a rough-and-tumble age, when every tradition thought that it was the only correct one). They called the Reformed “Calvinists,” and it is a designation that has stuck, not only in

popular usage but among historians, since many people find this more understandable than the mysterious label “Reformed.”

Himself an outsider in Geneva, he *welcomed exiles* from the Interim in Germany (1547-48), from Bloody Mary in England (1553-58), and from other persecutions around Europe. As a result he and Beza helped to shape theology everywhere in the Reformed world, although it should be noted that Bullinger in Zurich was more widely read in some regions and Calvin was not regarded as the authoritative figure that he later became.

Calvin was concerned about the *whole gospel*. He agreed with the Lutherans that the marks of the true church are the proclamation of the gospel and the right administration of the sacraments, but he (following others before him) added a third mark, discipline in accordance with New Testament principles. And he made much of the “third use of the law” - law not as external command, not as driving sinners to despair, but as guidance to those who are justified and have the freedom of the children of God. (That’s why, in the Heidelberg Catechism, the “law” in the first part is the twin commandment of love for God and neighbor, and the Decalog is placed at the end, as part of thanksgiving.)

Geneva became in many respects a *model city*, though Calvin had serious conflicts with the “libertine” party. Rousseau, who grew up in Geneva, always had a soft spot in his heart for his native city and regarded it as the ideal

community, even defending its prohibition of theatrical entertainment. His contemporary Voltaire, who found refuge there, ungratefully called it a city that knew how to calculate, like money changers, but could not laugh, and where nothing could be sung except the songs of David, under the impression that God liked bad verses.

It was also the city that *burned Servetus* in 1553. Calvin himself had no political power, and, tempering justice with mercy, he asked the council to change the penalty to decapitation. But he still had a role. Servetus and Calvin had corresponded concerning the Trinity for several decades, and Calvin vowed that if Servetus came to Geneva he would not get out alive. Calvin detected his identity as the author of some heretical writings, and information from Calvin reached the Inquisition in Lyons. (Intelligence networks, then as now, did not always observe the official rules.) Servetus headed toward Italy but, perhaps guided by destiny or a mischievous unconscious, went through Geneva, attended church, and was recognized. Calvin was an expert witness for the prosecution. The other Swiss cities confirmed the condemnation, to maintain the glory of God. Castellio soon published his polemic against Calvin, with the famous observation that “To burn a heretic is not to defend a doctrine but to kill a human being.” Geneva, quicker than some other persecuting powers, erected an expiatory monument in 1903.

We in the Reformed tradition take pride

in our system of *representative government*. In part it comes from Calvin, who found a role for both ruling and teaching elders and did make Geneva an exception to the Swiss pattern of control of the church by city councils, the “Erastian” theory that was the first Reformed approach to church governance and still continues in other Swiss cities (the council in Basel still decides who will be Karl Barth’s successor). He was quite willing to support episcopal governance as it developed in the Reformed churches of England, Poland, and Hungary.

The full presbyterian system was developed by the persecuted or exiled churches of the Netherlands and France. They were the ones who enunciated the principle “no church above any other church, no minister above any other minister,” and the full pyramidal system of “ascending courts,” with all officers elected for fixed terms, was first adopted by the French Reformed in 1559 when they founded an underground church on a national scale. They had probably learned it from the Dominicans, for they and other religious orders had been a vigorous laboratory of self-government during the middle ages.

We in the Reformed tradition also take pride in our tradition of *resistance to tyrants*, and we like to contrast ourselves with the Lutherans and their tradition of subservience. But it turns out that the Lutherans have priority here. As Quentin Skinner has pointed out, the Lutherans needed to defend their legitimacy within the German

Empire, and so they developed both the “constitutionalist” theory that looked to the lower magistrates and the “private right” theory that one may defend oneself against unjust encroachments. In political matters you can’t just act; you have to find good reasons, reasons that might be acknowledged by others.

Then in 1555 Lutheranism came to be tolerated within the Empire. About this time the Marian Exiles in Geneva — John Ponet, Christopher Goodman, John Knox — were motivated to develop the same ideas even further, and more raucously, since they were outside their native lands. Two decades later in France the persecution of Protestants and the rise of royal absolutism led a number of thinkers to develop impressive theories of the mutual responsibilities of ruler and people, buttressed by medieval traditions about rights that limited the power of the ruler.

And so the Reformed tradition came to be the one that encouraged political resistance in Scotland, the Netherlands, and England, not in the form of unlimited revolution but with careful attention to legal arguments. When they overstepped (and they often did), they were corrected by opponents like Grotius and Locke, and thus our modern theories of natural rights and democratic government evolved, sometimes because of, sometimes against, Reformed zealots.

If we today find ourselves puzzled or conflicted, we can find solace in remembering that Calvin and his

contemporaries, and the whole Reformed tradition, faced similar puzzles and conflicts. The answers are to be found not by looking to a single authority but by working through those conflicts — perhaps in debate with others, perhaps in the hurly-burly of political life, and perhaps (most difficult, but also most constructive) in internal conflict with ourselves.



Register for the Big Tent

"and the Word became flesh . . ."

June 11-13, 2009

Hyatt Regency Downtown
Atlanta, Georgia

The Psalmist looks toward the day when love and faithfulness meet, justice and peace will embrace (Psalm 85:10).

Bring your hopes and yearnings for peace and justice to Atlanta and network with Presbyterians at the Big Tent - a first ever gathering of 10 PC(USA) conferences. The Presbyterian Peacemaking Program and the Presbyterian Health, Education & Welfare Association will each host one of the conferences. (Note: Early-bird registration has been extended through March 30.) Register now and join us at the Big Tent. Just go to <http://www.pcusa.org/bigtent/>

Theological musings

The State of our Church in a Time of Hope

A regular column by Dr. Douglas F. Ottati,
Distinguished Professor of Reformed Theology and Justice Ministry
at Davidson College, Davidson, N.C.

The state of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), or indeed of any church, can be difficult to get hold of. Important matters of polity and worship occupy our various communities and structures, e.g. questions concerning gay ordination and marriage, and the frequency and scope of participation in the Lord's Supper. The state of any church, and particularly of one with a strongly participatory heritage such as ours, is also intertwined with wider cultures and societies, their current possibilities, patterns, and limits. And then, of course, there is the perennial and also decisive question of the gospel and our faithful witness to it.

Some Matters before the Church

The communities and structures of the PC (USA) face no shortage of important, often contentious issues. The recent General Assembly took some significant actions – voting to eliminate old authoritative interpretations of G.60106b, sending an amendment of same to the presbyteries, calling for a new and more accurate translation of the Heidelberg Catechism. These actions all but ensure that our church will continue to face the question of what counts as normative human sexuality. It is true, of course, that some of those who favor the amendment theologically and in principle believe now is not the time for our church to decide the theo-

logical question of what counts as normative sexuality, and therefore urge no action on overtures to amend. (To date, interestingly, the amendment has done surprisingly well in many presbyteries.) In any case, it seems certain that the basic issue is *not* going away.

At the same time, the PC (USA) faces other important questions. Consider the frequency and also the scope of participation in the Lord's Supper. How shall congregations prepare their members to receive the Supper? How shall they educate persons into its deep realities, mysteries, and meanings? Shall participation be restricted to baptized and confirmed members, or opened to all who are baptized and profess the faith? Shall it be opened to all the baptized or perhaps even simply to all people? There is also the question of a faithful Christian estimate of other religions. Shall we view other faiths as false and pernicious or, perhaps, as false and benign? Shall we look upon them as alternative wisdoms having to do with God, the world, and ourselves that we also know and approve as true? Shall we look upon them as other avenues that *may* also be true? How, in the light of the way we resolve these questions, shall we understand Christian missions?

Then, of course, there are issues and challenges before us that have emerged

from our wider cultural, social, and political circumstance. Among these are questions surrounding patterns of human activity and the health of natural environments, questions about immigration, the availability of good quality health care, retirement and social insurance. There can be little doubt, moreover, at least in the near term, that our society's responses to these and other matters will be shaped in part by the current economic crisis – something that itself will need to be addressed and, if possible, also ameliorated with effectiveness, justice, and compassion. And then, there are also the deadly serious matters of widespread poverty, starvation, and disease, two wars, and the treatment of prisoners at Guantánamo Bay and elsewhere. Not to mention the question of how to deal with failed states, genocidal conflicts, and the prospects for humanitarian military interventions, the strengthening of tolerably equitable and effective international structures for cooperation, the question of nuclear proliferation, and so on.

A Time of Hope

Despite their daunting cumulative effect, we should also note, I think, that our church faces these questions and more at a particular point in history which, for many in our society and elsewhere, can only be described as a *time of hope*. The dynamics are extraordinarily complicated. Even so, we can point to a comparatively simple and symbolically articulate fact. *The citizens of the United States of America, the world's most powerful nation, have elected Barak Hussein Obama President.*

At least two things about this seem es-

pecially significant.

- Consider the President's name. At a time when some say we are engaged in a clash of civilizations, it has unmistakably Muslim overtones. After hundreds of years of slavery, oppression, and discrimination, it is the name of a mixed race man of color who is the son of a black man from Kenya. It is the first name of a President-elect of the United States to end in a vowel. These are only some of the more obvious ways in which the name of the President signals an apparent broadening of American attitudes and horizons, perhaps even a down payment on the enfranchisement of historically oppressed and marginalized persons and communities as fuller participants in American civil society.

- President Obama often speaks publicly, as he did in his victory speech at Grant Park, of being a president for all Americans. Nothing particularly new there until we hear him mention Hispanic Americans, Black Americans, white Americans, and (importantly) also gay and lesbian Americans as the people he intends to be President of. He invokes the idea of a changed society in which there will be greater attention to national service and also better access to education and health care. He tries to articulate a new stance for the nation that combines a resolute commitment to resist enemies with a renewed preference for international diplomacy and cooperation. In short, he seems to promise a more inclusive sort of politics.

Having noted these things, of course, we also do well to remind ourselves of their anticipatory, provisional, contin-

gent, vulnerable, and certainly unfinished character. Ours is a time of hope. But, especially in the church, we ought to remember that hope in things that are seen is not hope, and that, if we hope for what we do not see, we also wait for it with patience (cf. Romans 8:24-25). Moreover, should also we recognize that no person, community, or nation brings in the kingdom. All fall short of the kingdom and its glory. All are at present and shall also remain subject to criticism in the light of what remains corrupted and unfulfilled.

The Gospel of Grace

We can meet the issues and matters before us with integrity and we can meet them as we participate faithfully in a time of hope, if we are clear about the most important single question before us, namely, the question of the gospel.

Gospel means good news and glad tidings. It is the message of grace that moves the Apostle Paul to say "Rejoice in the Lord always; again I say rejoice" (Phil. 4:4). We might summarize the Gospel by saying that Jesus Christ reveals the true God to be the faithful God of grace. But perhaps we do better to stick with the Apostle who, in Romans 5, links Adam and Christ. "For if the many died through the one man's trespass, much more surely have the grace of God and the free gift in the grace of the man, Jesus Christ, abounded for the many" (Rom. 5:15). And then, famously straining toward a good and *universal* hope for all, "Therefore just as one man's trespass led to condemnation for all, so one man's act of righteousness leads to justification and life for all" (Rom. 5:18).

Again, as Paul says in Romans 5:8, "But God proves his love for us in that while we still were sinners Christ died for us." John Calvin took this and similar verses to summarize the word of faith. He took them to indicate that God always already is faithful and that, in Jesus Christ, the divine faithfulness is decisively impressed upon us. There not only may be, but surely are, additional angles of vision on the gospel besides this one. For example, there is also the perspective of the Anabaptist wing of the Protestant Reformation of the 16th century that emphasizes the new law in Jesus, a reign of Christ that opposes all earthly powers and that calls for a radical and pacifist discipleship. But for those of us who stand in the Reformed tradition the bottom line and the fundamental point of the Gospel is this. *God is faithful.* The Gospel therefore is a word of grace founded on the apprehension that, in Jesus Christ, the true God is the faithful God of grace.

Calvin never tired of pointing out that this same message also permeates the law and the religion of Israel. God elects Israel by free grace alone, and in demonstration of free grace and faithfulness, God blesses all the people of the earth in Abraham, and brings up Israel out of Egypt (not to mention, as Amos does, the Ethiopians, the Philistines, and the Arameans). We don't have time to dwell on all of this here. Suffice it to say that, for Calvin, there is one covenant of grace in two dispensations, and this one covenant finally extends all the way back through Abraham and even to Adam. The Gospel is a word of grace, and there never was a time when God was not the God of grace.

The basic theology that emerges from this can be outlined easily enough in a few broad strokes. The great God of glory who creates and bears all things in nature and in history is the good God of grace who redeems. Thus, we begin by noting that God is both Creator and Redeemer. As Redeemer, the faithful God reconciles and renews by grace alone and thus bestows new life. But, of course, redemption implies, presupposes, and points toward a difficulty, a fault that needs to be set right. This is where sin comes in and it is also where God as Judge comes in. So, we obtain an outline of a basic theology.

- God = Creator, Judge, and Redeemer.
- Humanity = good, capable and limited creature; corrupted good who suffers consequences of sin; and beneficiary of reconciliation and renewal.

Each of these affirmations is keyed, in turn, to the fundamental apprehension in Jesus Christ that God is faithful or that the true God is the God of grace. This means that, as Creator, the God of grace freely gives and bestows the good gifts of creation, existence, and life. Creation, then, is an act of grace. As Judge, God turns persons and communities away from corrupted loyalties, loves, and patterns toward new possibilities. (Thus, Calvin understood repentance as mortification + vivification, a turning away from evil and a turning toward good, or the death of the old person and the emergence of the new. In *A Christmas Carol*, Scrooge – literally an old man made new – is blessed with the right nightmares.) Judgment therefore is not simple destruction. To judge is not to vaporize, but to turn re-

calcitrant persons and communities. As Judge, the God of grace bestows the *grace* of repentance. Finally, as Redeemer, the God of grace bestows reconciliation or forgiveness and renewal or new life. (Justification and sanctification, as Calvin says, are “a double grace.”)

One feature of this theology and its typical human reception within and also beyond the church that bears mentioning here is this. *Much of the time we find the news both too good and too bad.*

If the true God who always already stands in relation to all as Creator, Judge, and Redeemer is the faithful and good God of grace, then God is faithful and gracious to all. But much of the time, we find this news too good to be true, and also too good to accord with our cherished devotions to ourselves and to our own in-groups. Therefore, we try to diminish it. We say that the faithful and good God of grace disclosed in Jesus Christ is faithful and gracious only to some. We claim that God is faithful and gracious only to those whose righteous behavior merits or deserves divine favor. Or, perhaps we claim that God is faithful and gracious only to those who hold correct beliefs. Perhaps we will even maintain that the faithful God of grace is only faithful and gracious to us. But the point is always the same. The good news of the Gospel of the God of grace is too good.

Of course, it follows, too, that if God is faithful and gracious to all, then all must stand in need of grace and redemption. All must be mired in a difficulty from which they cannot escape. All stand in need of help. The Gospel of the God

of grace therefore presupposes and points to a radical and universal human fault. It presupposes that all fall short and that none is righteous, no not one. Sin is persistent, radical, and universal. Persons and communities cannot overcome it either by their own wisdom or their own efforts. Therefore, human agents and communities, and indeed the entire human project, are unavoidably skewed. But much of the time, we find this news too bad and too difficult to bear. So we qualify it. We tailor it to our most cherished devotions and commitments. We maintain that, while many may be corrupted, some are not; some are not sinners and are not skewed. Perhaps we claim that the best people, the best communities, the best movements, or the best institutions are without fault. Perhaps we say that the true politics or the true church is without sin. Perhaps – like a parishioner offended at having to say a corporate prayer of confession – we may even maintain that, while there are many nefarious and chronic sinners in the world, we are not among them. Or perhaps we shall claim that there really is no radical and persistent human fault at all; there is only misguided immaturity followed by dynamic growth toward goodness.

By contrast, to hold together the too good and too bad – grace alone and abounding as well as a human fault that is radical and universal – is to adopt a posture or stance I call *hopeful realism*. Hopeful realism refuses both easy

optimisms and cynical pessimisms. It suggests that we do not really know ourselves when we concentrate on our abilities apart from our limits and our faults. However, it also claims that we do not truly know ourselves when we consider our limits and our faults apart from our created abilities and apart from the traces of grace and renewal we find in God's world. Hopeful realists recognize the chronic constriction of human spirit and its destructive, even death-dealing consequences, and they know that it calls for strategies of restraint. They accept what others find too bad. At the same time, however, they also remain at the ready for possibilities for truer life and renewal. They also affirm what others find too good.

Our Church's Witness in a Time of Hope

If this is correct, then clarity about the Gospel of the God of grace does not immediately resolve the many issues

When we turn to questions of ordination and marriage, a faithful witness to the Gospel of the God of grace ... does anchor an unshakably strong bias toward inclusion and toward a capacious and generous church ...

and challenges before us. Instead, a commitment to witness in word and in deed to the faithful God of grace lends us a basic orientation or posture. It *disposes* us toward the many issues and challenges in certain ways.

Being clear about the Gospel of grace does not immediately tell us which particular energy policy is best. It does

not tell us which agricultural practices are most helpful, and it does not tell us how to go about urban planning. But it does tell us that environmental questions have to do with our stewardship of God's good gift of creation, and so it disposes us to take these questions very seriously. Indeed, when we look at it theologically, we recognize that God's good creation is not simply all about us humans. Clarity about the Gospel therefore also disposes us to recognize that, when it comes to the natural environment, human welfare is not the only good at stake.

Clarity about the Gospel of grace does not, in and of itself, formulate an appropriate immigration policy. It does not tell us whether and how to combine a documented worker program with amnesty and / or paths to citizenship. Again, clarity about the Gospel does not tell us just how to formulate international agreements about human rights or how to structure and oversee fair courts and tribunals. It does not immediately tell us just who should and should not be afforded the status of prisoners of war. But, as the Gospel insists that all persons have worth in relation to the God of grace, a faithful witness to it disposes us to treat the immigrant with hospitality and fairness, and also to take seriously the question of how we treat prisoners. It encourages us to recognize that we have duties toward the strangers within our gates and even toward our enemies. It tells us that oppression and torture are simply wrong.

When we turn to questions of ordination and marriage, a faithful witness to the Gospel of the God of grace does not tell us precisely how to write our

rule books. It does not furnish a detailed reading of the sensibilities, possibilities and limits of Presbyterians in America in 2009, and so neither does it specify which practical and political strategies are likely to be most effective in our present particular circumstance. But it does anchor an unshakably strong bias toward inclusion and toward a capacious and generous church that recognizes the needs and talents of all and that also invites their faithful contributions to the church and its leadership.

We can make a similar point about the question of world religions. You and I may ask what we must do and / or believe in order to be saved. We may ask whether one or another person, group, or community can be saved. What if we behave badly? What if they believe differently and do not confess Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior? Can other religions be saving? What about secular and even atheistic philosophies? These are important questions, particularly in a time when some speak of a "clash of civilizations," and when some Americans mimic the earlier rhetoric of Christian crusades against the infidel. But the apprehension of a gracious God cuts against the grain of all of them. Now the question is no longer whether human actions and beliefs (our own or anyone else's) can be saving. Now it is simply about the God of grace. How far do the faithfulness of the faithful God and the grace of the gracious God extend? The classical answer is even to the sinner, even to the betrayer. If we believe this, then we have little reason to exclude ourselves or anyone else from the scope of God's grace and redemption.



There are also implications for worship and prayer. Here, again, clarity about the Gospel of the God of grace does not give us detailed directions so much as an orientation and disposition. Take prayer. While we remain alive to its many forms and functions, theologically speaking, we will be disposed to view it much as the writers of the Heidelberg Catechism did, namely as an effort at communion with God undertaken fundamentally out of gratitude and thanks. We will understand baptism, at least in part, as a sacramental acknowledgement of what is always already the case, namely, that persons are children of God, participants in the one covenant of grace. We will be disposed to look upon the Lord's Supper as a remembrance of Jesus Christ, his sacrifice, last supper, and table fellowship that is also a sacrament of spiritual presence, nourishment and empowerment for true life. And, I believe, we will be inclined to open it to all without qualification, and so ensure that it enacts sacramentally the reality of being swept up into a single community before the faithful God of grace who always stands in relation to all. (As Jonathan Edwards' father-in-law, Solomon Stoddard, once maintained, the Lord's Supper is not a gift only to the faithful, but "a converting ordinance" to be shared with all.)

With respect to participating faithfully or both constructively and critically in the present time of hope, clarity about the Gospel will help to render us – indirectly by our sacramental practice, efforts at an inclusive polity, and our estimate of the question of world religions, and directly by our disposition toward immigration, health-care, the treatment of prisoners, etc. – supportive of the

hopeful rhetoric and politics of inclusion and diplomacy. At the same time, it will dispose us to be realistic about the domestic and international challenges of the present age, to recognize that, of necessity, many of the most important steps will be piecemeal compromises. It will also dispose us to acknowledge the continuing importance – with respect both to defense and to humanitarian interventions – of a well-trained military that is responsive to civilian leadership and to international law.

Finally, clarity about the Gospel of grace should dispose us to say to American progressives some of the same things we also should have been saying to neo-conservatives. The danger of naïve idealism is that, attending too little to constraining realities, it underestimates the extent to which relevant outcomes depend on factors (including our own interests and the interests of others) that remain largely beyond our control, and so it overestimates our capacities to enact moral goals and ideals. Overly idealist and ideologically-committed political leadership is therefore especially prone to miscalculate consequences. A second danger of naïve idealism is that it sometimes tempts those who occupy positions of leadership to believe that they do so as the result of their own virtue. It tempts people to self-righteousness. But, in the light of the Gospel, all persons and political movements need to be reminded that they fall short of true righteousness and that much depends on accident, fortune, grace, and providence. This is true not only of social and political conservatives, but also of American progressives who now find themselves nearer the seats of power than they have been for some time.

The World's Witness in a Time of Hope

Let me make one further point. When estimating the state of the church it is almost never enough to discuss the church's witness to the Gospel; it is often also necessary to mention the strange testimony of the world on behalf of the Gospel. I say strange because, so often, we think of witnessing to the Gospel as something that the church does. But it is also possible for the world to witness to the Gospel and to do so even over against the church.

In our own time, there really is no place for a Christian exceptionalism that continues to regard all other faiths as false and perhaps even pernicious.

It has happened before. Diverse communities and groups in the world have sometimes and quite justifiably criticized inordinately partial loyalties, visions, practices, and prejudices that have captivated and corrupted the church. One thinks of churches in America and elsewhere finally relinquishing the ideal of a state church in favor of a politics more tolerant of religious diversity. Again, one thinks of churches in this country and the issue of slavery. More recently, one thinks of Protestant churches that finally altered long-standing traditions which excluded women from ordained leadership. These were changes that accord with the Gospel of grace, and they were made, at least partly, in response to broader cultural, social, and political pressures and currents.

Now, it may be that the rhetoric and the politics of inclusion during this time of hope will inspire a new "culture-Protestantism." It may be that a new cultural climate will press our often altogether too reluctant church finally to take some decisive steps. In our own time, there really is no place for a Christian exceptionalism that continues to regard all other faiths as false and perhaps even pernicious. In fact, such a stance can only have the most highly destructive consequences in a pluralist society of Christians, Jews, Muslims, Hindus, and others. It also corrodes whatever fragile prospects we may have for a more stable and responsible community of nations. Perhaps, during this time of hope, the wider culture will push us to clarify and to change some of the more destructive positions we sometimes take.

I should also not be surprised if we experience increasing cultural pressures on the question of ordination. And so, among other things, in this time of hope I hope that the world's strange witness will help to make our church more faithful. I hope that it will help us to avoid the studied irrelevance we too often embrace, and I hope that it will drive us toward a more profound appreciation for the Gospel of grace.



GHOST RANCH PEACE & JUSTICE WEEK **July 27 - August 2, 2009**

Now is the time to make reservations to be a part of the 2009 Peace & Justice Week at Ghost Ranch, July 27-August 2. There are eight seminars to choose among, including the Witherspoon-sponsored class "New Eyes for Peace & Justice from the World Church" led by Clifton Kirkpatrick.

Other seminar opportunities include "Organizing Alternatives to Military Service" planned by Rick Ufford-Chase, "Faith in Action & Stone Building" led by brothers David William Abazs and Andrew Kang Bartlett. Mark Koenig and Joel Hanisek will be guiding "Chariots & Horses: Weapons of Mass Destruction, Weapons of No Discrimination" and Jean Richardson is providing opportunity for renewal in "Moving to Wholeness."

Three other classes are designed to provide ways to respond to some of today's challenges. Greg Garrett offers "Speaking Out for Peace & Justice: Writing, Preaching & Speaking that Make a Difference." Amy Franklin and Kay Pranis will lead "Fundamentals of Peacemaking: Exploring Connectedness" and "Climate of Fear, Climate of Hope" will be led by Kolya Braun-Greiner and Pamela Sparr.

You can read descriptions of all these classes at www.ghost ranch.org, along with information about the "camp culture" alternative for lower-cost housing and food. The Rev. Corey A. Nelson will serve as Worship/Music Leader for the week as well as working with the children/youth program. The Rev. Nancy Copeland-Payton will be available all week for one-on-one sessions of spiritual discernment. There will also be an opportunity to attend the commemoration at Los Alamos of the bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki.

Family members seeking other kinds of classes can choose from among a wide variety in the Creative Arts Festival lineup, plus several other opportunities including Casa del Sol Retreat Center or just rest and relax.

Note: Send your registration in now, to get your housing choice. Also, the registration fee is \$250 until May 15, when it goes to \$350. It pays to sign on early. For details on each of the seminars, go to

http://www.ghost ranch.org/index.php?option=com_oscommerce&osMod=index&cPath=93



As our part of the
Ghost Ranch Peace & Justice
week,
Witherspoon is sponsoring:

New Eyes for Peace and Justice From the World Church

with Dr. Clifton Kirkpatrick

Years ago Robert McAfee Brown reminded us of the important "gift of new eyes" that we receive from the world church, which help us see our calling to Christian faithfulness in witness for peace and justice in North America. That has never been more true than today! This course will explore several recent global, ecumenical developments that have the potential for reshaping our witness for justice in the 21st century.

Each day we will focus on a different development and what it might mean for our work for justice and peace and will use our final session to pull the threads between these movements together. These developments include:

- The Accra Confession (WARC's call for Covenanting for Justice in the Economy and the Earth);
- Decade to Overcome Violence (WCC-sponsored movement of Christian communities around the world seeking alternatives to violence that lead to justice);
- Calvin Jubilee (2009 is Calvin's 500th birthday and churches around the world are exploring what it means to have a Calvinist revolution in the 21st century);
- A Common Word Between Us and You (the dramatic call from 138 Muslim scholars and leaders to find common ground around our common calling to love God and neighbor).

The Rev. Dr. Clifton Kirkpatrick, of Louisville, KY, serves as President of the World Alliance of Reformed Churches (WARC). He has completed forty years of service as an ordained minister in the Presbyterian Church (USA). For the last twelve years he has served as Stated Clerk of the General Assembly Council, and at the conclusion of his term of service in 2008, was elected by the General Assembly as Stated Clerk Emeritus. On January 1, 2009, Rev. Kirkpatrick became a Visiting Professor of Global Ministries and Ecumenical Studies at Louisville Presbyterian Theological Seminary.

The Editor's Spot



How shall we respond to this time of crisis?

by Doug King

Well, we're living in interesting times, aren't we? A time of crisis, it's been called. We've heard about hope and fear and much more. Too much, maybe. But I'd like to invite you to think now about how we as a church, as part of the people of God in the world, might respond to this time.

John F. Kennedy is frequently quoted as saying, "When written in Chinese, the word 'crisis' is composed of two characters – one represents danger, and the other represents opportunity." The election of our new President seems to many of us to open a new time of opportunity – for change, for truthfulness, for greater hope for justice for our people, for greater hope for peace for the world.

In this issue of *Network News*, theologian Doug Ottati offers his thoughts on the state of the union, and the state of the church. (See p. 12 ff.) He offers great insights on both, but I'd like to look a little more specifically at how we might live and act in this crisis time – both in our church and in our society.

Perhaps we should start with facing our fears and naming our anxieties. Many of us are threatened very directly with unemployment, illness for which we can't afford treatment, loss of our homes, decay of our communities, and the radical shrinkage of our savings and investments. For many of us – including those who have felt secure and comfortable – the future looks bleak and frighteningly uncertain.

Of course we've always had things to worry about, and perhaps this makes a nice change from our worries about Marxists, and now "terrorists" and Muslims and migrants.

Whatever it is that raises our anxiety level, we tend to react by protecting ourselves – defending our homes, our loved ones, our way of life. And one of the most reassuring ways we do that is by building walls. Whatever the threat, we try to shut it out. In many cases that makes good sense. Sometimes it even works.

But what happens when we build walls? We may shut out the threats – the strangers, the enemies – but we pay a price. Recently I heard a meditation on walls, given in a Lenten worship service in a Mennonite fellowship that my wife and I happened to attend. I think it offers thoughts about walls far better than mine, so I'll share it here, with the kind permission of the authors. (See pages 28 ff.)

In a time of crisis, when the threats loom so large and so close, what can we as people of faith offer to our churches and our communities? Hope, of course! Hope is the answer, right?

But what can we do or say that will offer authentic hope and not just platitudes or nice sentiments?

Doug Ottati in his essay reminds us that “Ours is a time of hope. But, especially in the church, we ought to remember that hope in things that are seen is not hope, and that, if we hope for what we do not see, we also wait for it with patience (cf. Romans 8:24-25). Moreover, we should also recognize that no person, community, or nation brings in the kingdom.” His thoughts have led me to pay more careful attention to the proclamations of hope that we have been hearing from President Obama, and there’s a very interesting difference.

In his first address to a joint session of Congress, on February 24, Obama used the word ‘hope’ just three times, by my count. (Well, four if you include one use of ‘hopeless.’) At just one point he addressed the meaning of hope explicitly, warning that in these very difficult times we may easily give in to cynicism and pettiness. “But,” he went on, “in my life, I have also learned that hope is found in unlikely places; that inspiration often comes not from those with the most power or celebrity, but from the dreams and aspirations of Americans

who are anything but ordinary.”

Then he told his concluding stories of people who have demonstrated that kind of practical hope: the bank president from Miami who took his \$60 million bonus and shared it with over 400 people who had worked for him; the town Greensburg, Kansas, that is rebuilding from the devastation of a tornado, aiming to rely on clean energy – and so to provide a model for others; and of course he introduced Ty’Sheoma Bethea, the girl from Dillon, South Carolina, who attends an impoverished, decaying school, and who took the trouble to write a letter to Congress asking for help. She and her fellow students, she wrote, simply want to “make a change to not just the state of South Carolina but also the world. We are not quitters.”

So where’s the hope? Our Reformed theological perspective warns us (rightly!) against putting our hope in persons or institutions. But our new President is calling us to recognize that *it is*, after all, human beings, one by one and together in communities small and large, who do make change happen.

So if we in our own communities of faith are to offer anything to our troubled nation in these hard times, it may be in holding together the Reformed and the pragmatic in our own actions: finding concrete ways to enact the divine calling to being good neighbors, while never putting all our

hopes in what we think we're doing for the world.

But *action* there must be, or we'll be merely hearers of the Word and not doers, clanging gongs and crashing cymbals, not partners in God's work to make the world a better, fairer place.

And many of you who read this little journal are doing things already, as you've been "doing" for years. But what do we need to be doing in these days?

Let's talk about this! On our website, on our Facebook page where chatting is even easier and more direct, or by sending a note to your editor to be shared in the next issue of Network News and on our website as well – however you do it, please let us know what you're doing (or what's been done in your city or neighborhood even if you're not directly involved in it) so we can help each other find our way through these hard times.

And if you're looking for ideas, you might check out the resources on the next 9 pages.

Some resources for responding to the current economic crisis

A letter to Congress

Sara Pottschmidt Lisherness, Director of Compassion, Peace and Justice Ministry for the PC (USA), sent a letter to members of Congress on October 1, 2008, as the economic crisis was beginning to gain national attention, in which she set forth a clear Biblical perspective on economic justice and the moral imperatives of the present time. (See her letter on page 26 f.)

Doing What We Can Where We Are

The Rev. Bill Dummer, a retired minister and member of the Witherspoon board, tells his own story of growing involvement in various efforts to deal with specific issues of poverty in Milwaukee, Wisconsin, which he describes as having "the seventh highest rate of poverty of the major cities of the U.S. (See page 31 ff.)

Interfaith Worker Justice provides a congregational toolkit for helping unemployed workers

The IWJ website describes this helpful resource as a response to "the need for all sectors of our society to

support unemployed workers and to encourage employers to treat all workers justly in times of economic crisis.

“Interfaith Worker Justice (IWJ) has recently prepared a Congregational Toolkit to help unemployed workers. Available free of charge from the IWJ website, the toolkit outlines what resources are available to unemployed workers, suggests how to establish support groups for unemployed workers, and offers worship aids for lifting up unemployed workers and employers in this time of crisis.”

For links to all the pieces in the Toolkit, go to <http://www.iwj.org/template/page.cfm?id=201>

Or to download the whole kit, 16 pages in PDF format, go to http://www.iwj.org/template/guard_process2.cfm?where=inline

A *Christian Century* blog on Ministry in Economic Crisis

The *Christian Century* now has an interesting group of bloggers commenting on various issues.

One of the bloggers, *Christian Century* staffer Steve Thorngate, posted this invitation for a sharing of resources and experiences in dealing with the economic crisis. See the next column:

Ministry in economic crisis by Steve Thorngate

A number of people from my church have lost their jobs since the economy turned downward, and the church neighborhood leads Chicago in home foreclosures. Earlier this week, Senator Dick Durbin visited the neighborhood to give a press conference promoting a bill he’s sponsoring that would allow homeowners to renegotiate their mortgages in bankruptcy court. My pastor and other community leaders appeared with the senator and spoke of the hardship the recession has brought—and of how they are responding.

In New York State, a Catholic parish runs a monthly networking group for the unemployed (via Gary Stern). Elsewhere, churches are rallying to feed more people with meal programs and church food banks. Churches everywhere are struggling to address the recession’s effects, not only on their own finances, but on the lives of their members and neighbors.

How is your church doing this? Are you or others you know finding effective ways to minister to people’s needs in hard times? If so, we’d love to know about it here at the *Century* — tell us about it in the comments.

For the *Christian Century* blog, go to <http://theolog.org/2009/03/ministry-in-economic-crisis.html>

**WASHINGTON OFFICE
PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH (U.S.A.)
GENERAL ASSEMBLY COUNCIL**

October 1, 2008

Members of the United States Congress
Washington, DC 20510

Dear Member of Congress,

As the nation struggles with the current financial crisis, **I write to urge you to find a solution that will move our economy closer to a vision of a just economy, where human worth and the common good are valued above economic self-interest, personal wealth and greed.**

Presbyterian General Assemblies, over the past sixty years have expressed concern about federal economic priorities, calling for an economic policy that is humane and sensitive to the needs of all persons; taxes on the basis of equity; and, while supporting private initiative, does not allow private interests to trample the poor, disenfranchised or unemployed. These concerns are equally relevant today as you consider legislation designed to undergird the U.S. economic system.

It is not only corporations and large banks' livelihoods that are at stake. More important are the lives and livelihoods of the majority of Americans who work hard, save carefully, and yes, rely on the credit industry, which is in such turmoil.

Particularly endangered by this crisis are those who already live on the financial edges of society – low-income Americans who have been hit hardest by the recent souring of the economy and upturn in food and gas prices. Low-income families will feel the impacts of further economic

recession even more heavily than those with enough disposable income to be directly affected by a fallout on Wall Street, even though they are the least able to bear the burden. Even now, over fifty percent of our churches already support food pantries and homeless shelters – how many more will they have to serve?

While the details, price tag and even certainty of government action loom large, we nonetheless acknowledge that government action in this crisis is likely. Given such a likelihood, we call on you to reject sending a “blank check” to Wall Street, but rather ensure appropriate transparency and accountability that will rebuild trust and financial security. In 1995, the 207th General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) expressed its support for the Community Reinvestment Act, which requires lenders that receive deposits to meet the credit needs of the communities in which they operate. In other words, the 207th General Assembly expressed a wish that banks and communities would place in each other mutual trust to build the common good and financial health of the community. In view of the current crisis in the financial markets, it is clear that there has been a breakdown of that mutual trust between the bankers on Wall Street and the national community. In crafting the solution, it is incumbent on Congress to ensure appropriate safeguards to reestablish that mutual trust.

I urge you to incorporate the following provisions into any “bailout” legislation:

- Protection for homeowners in danger of foreclosure
- Ensure more equitable and just financial practices in our market
- Public oversight to ensure accountabil-

ity of whatever program is created

- Safeguards on public funds to ensure that future generations will not bear this debt burden
- Eviction protection for renters who are living in properties being foreclosed-upon and new ways to fund affordable housing programs, such as the National Housing Trust Fund, now that Freddie Mac and Fannie Mae revenues will not be contributing significantly to that purpose
- Limitations on executive compensation to ensure that those who have been culpable do not receive undue reward
- Aid for low-income families who will bear the heaviest burden under the downturn in the economy

The Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) has long been concerned with the establishment of a just economic order that benefits all, not only the wealthy few. In 1934, in the midst of the Great Depression, the Presbyterian Church in the U.S.A. recommended a set of guidelines outlining a vision for true justice in economic relationships. Among these principles, it included setting aside the motives of “money-making and self-interest,” reexamining competition as “a major controlling principle in our economic life,” and valuing “human worth” above material riches as the primary asset of a community. In addition, **the 1934 General Assembly urged “that our natural resources and economic institutions be considered as existing for the public good and such plans for ownership and control be developed as will lead to the best use in the interests of all.”**

In whatever legislation Congress passes, the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) urges you to ensure that it moves our economy closer to these principles of valuing

human worth and the common good. As you consider the appropriate response to the financial crisis, you have an historic opportunity to affect change in our economy. To establish this program without the proper safeguards would be disastrous, but with appropriate mechanisms to ensure transparency and accountability, we may begin to recover and repent for the greed and inequity of the last several years.

The prophet Isaiah said “someday there will be a king who rules with integrity, and national leaders who govern with justice. Each of them will be like a shelter from the wind and a place to hide from storms. They will be like streams flowing in a desert, like the shadow of a giant rock in a barren land. Their eyes and ears will be open to the needs of the people.” (32:1-3, *TEV*) I urge you to be such national leaders in the face of this financial storm.

I give thanks for your service to our country. Please contact Leslie Woods in the Presbyterian Washington Office with comment or questions – leslie.woods@pcusa.org; (202) 543-1126.

Sincerely,

Sara Pottschmidt Lisherness
Director, Compassion, Peace and Justice
Ministry
Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.)
100 Maryland Avenue NE, Suite 410
Washington, DC 20002
(202) 543-1126

Editor’s note: Emphasis in bold is in the original

A Meditation on Walls

Saint Paul Mennonite Fellowship, March 8, 2009
Composed and led by Lisa Pierce and Karen Abshier

This Lent, we will reflect together on Jesus nature as “The Other.” What is so fascinating to me about Jesus’ otherness is that he both claimed it and transcended it. He cast himself outside the walls of power and providence, yet transcended the dividing walls, sitting at tables with prostitutes and tax collectors alike. In the end, he transcended even the walls of his own tomb.

Israel is building a “Separation Wall,” reportedly to protect Israelis from Palestinians, although some argue that it serves primarily as an annexation of disputed territory into Israel.

The construction of the nearly 450-mile-long wall will cost approximately four billion dollars.

It consists of a series of 25-foot-tall concrete slabs, trenches, barbed wire buffer zones, electrified fencing, watch towers, thermal imaging video cameras, sniper towers, and roads for patrol vehicles.

For he is our peace; in his flesh he has made both groups into one and has broken down the dividing wall, that is, the hostility between us.
(Ephesians 2:14)

Friendship Park, between Imperial Beach in California and Tijuana in Mexico, was dedicated by Patricia Nixon, then first lady, in the early 1970s, and has long been a popular meeting and picnic spot.

Although a chain-link fence divides the space along the border, the barrier allows people on either side, often those separated by immigration status, to have contact, share food, talk and kiss.

But the U.S. Border Patrol has ordered that the area be permanently closed to the public and a secondary, solid border fence be erected north of the existing fence stretching out to the Pacific Ocean.

Isn't it interesting how the walls that we build to protect ourselves so often become our prisons?

The Roman Empire built walls, including Hadrian's Wall, to protect Roman Britain from the Pictish tribes of ancient Scotland, making the northern British border the most heavily fortified in the Roman Empire.

The Ming Wall in China, part of the Great Wall, stretches over 4,160 miles and was once guarded by more than one million men.

Some estimate that two to three million Chinese died as part of the project of building the Great Wall.

You shall call your walls Salvation. (Isaiah 60:18)

The Western Wall, also known as the Wailing Wall or the Kotel, is located in the Old City of Jerusalem. Just over half the wall was constructed around 19 BCE by Herod the Great. The remaining layers were added from the 7th century onward.

Jews regard the wall as the sole remnant of the Holy Temple and practice prayer at the wall, sometimes placing slips of paper containing written prayers into the crevices of the wall.

Muslims also claim the wall as a holy site, saying it is referred to in stories about Muhammad and is part of the al-Aqsa Mosque.

The wall is one of the most disputed sites in Israel/Palestine.

It was now about noon, and darkness came over the whole land until three in the afternoon, while the sun's light failed; and the curtain of the temple was torn in two. (Luke 23:44-45)

Good fences make good neighbors. (Robert Frost)

The Berlin Wall was erected in the night of August 13, 1961. It was a weekend and most Berliners slept while the East German government began to close the border. In the early morning of that Sunday, most of the initial work was complete: the border to West Berlin was closed. The East German troops had begun to tear up streets and to install barbed wire entanglement and fences through Berlin.

Mr. Gorbachev, open this gate! Mr. Gorbachev, tear down this wall!
(President Ronald Reagan)



The people raised a great shout and the wall fell flat. (Joshua 6:20)

Sometimes walls are as invisible and impenetrable as silence

The Vietnam Veterans Memorial, originally designed as a student project by Maya Lin at Yale University's School of Architecture in 1981, has become a symbol that has served to unify and reconcile a nation sorely divided by a foreign entanglement.

Lin envisioned a black granite wall, in the shape of a V, on which the names of the American military dead and missing would be inscribed.

The architect hoped that "these names, seemingly infinite in number, [would] convey the sense of overwhelming numbers, while unifying these individuals into a whole."

Early on the first day of the week, while it was still dark, Mary Magdalene came to the tomb and saw that the stone had been removed. (John 20, verse 1)

Without walls, there is no shelter.

Truth is, we all need boundaries. We all need some sort of wall or fence.

The trouble comes when there are no boundaries and others come and go, taking what they need without regard for you.

But the trouble also comes when the boundaries are too rigid, when we won't let anyone in and we won't let anyone or anything go.

The best walls have doors and windows.

The best fences have gates.

"I am the gate. Whoever enters by me will be saved, and will come in and go out and find pasture." (John 10, verse 9)



Doing What We Can Where We Are

By Bill Dummer

In this article, I want to use myself and my family as examples of what an “ordinary person” can do to engage in advocacy for justice where they live. About five years ago, after being flooded with requests to advocate for many worthy causes, I decided that I needed to prioritize. I recalled the great impression made on me in the mid '60s in a special elective seminary course titled “The Ethics of Poverty,” taught by none other than Maggie Kuhn of Gray Panthers’ fame. I realized that throughout my ministry, issues of poverty had always drawn my attention and energy. So I decided it was addressing poverty where I live (as well as in the world) that would be the cause in which I would become engaged.

The city of Milwaukee, Wisconsin, has the seventh highest rate of poverty of the major cities of the U. S. So where should I begin? When I made this decision, my daughter was the Organizer in the Advocacy Department of the Hunger Task Force of Milwaukee. The Hunger Task Force was organized about 30 years ago in an effort to address childhood poverty in Milwaukee, especially the hunger of the city’s poor children. The optimists who started the agency thought the problem could be solved in a short time, so calling it a “task

force” seemed appropriate. I got involved when my daughter was organizing an advocacy group of the agency, which took the name Voices Against Hunger.

Our first effort was to put pressure on the county Department of Social Service to improve the way it worked with people applying for food stamps. If people phoned, they were often on “hold” for an hour. If they came in person, they often waited for two or more hours before meeting with a social worker. Then, there was usually a delay of some days before they received their food stamp Quest Card. Our monthly meetings with the administrators made some progress by keeping their feet to the fire on this.


The next issue we addressed was the school breakfast program. Wisconsin was ranked in 50th place in making use of this Federal program. Unlike the School Lunch Program, children did not want to come early to school to have breakfast for a number of reasons. One of them was the stigma of being seen by the other students coming out of the lunchroom just as school was beginning for the day. The Organizer and a cadre of us VOH members began meeting with school administrators, and then with sympathetic members of the school board. The purpose was to educate them about “Provision 2” of the School Breakfast Program. In this program, if 95 percent of the children in a school qualify for free or reduced *lunches* (based on their family’s in-

come level), the government will provide free breakfast to every student in the school. The school administration agreed, at first, to only a pilot program in a handful of schools. After that first year, research showed that the program was quite effective in improving the performance of children who previously had come to school with a less than adequate breakfast (usually a small bag of chips and a can of soda). The following year, the school board voted to make the Provision 2 program district-wide, in all the schools that qualified. Voices Against Hunger members assisted in getting the parents to fill out the required financial information form. The children have breakfast in their classrooms during the first 15 minutes of the day, while doing a worksheet of some kind. After one year, research showed that students' complaints of stomachaches were practically eliminated, and they also paid more attention in class after eating a small but nutritious breakfast.

About the time of this success, my daughter went to work for the Interfaith Conference of Greater Milwaukee. They were looking for a project director for an effort to initiate a Housing Trust Fund for Milwaukee. There is virtually no low-income housing available, especially for the mentally ill and other people with disabilities. This time, my wife is a member of the Housing Trust Fund Coalition that my daughter organized. However, I am in the "reserves" that are called up whenever there is an

"action" to bring pressure to bear on the mayor and the city council to fund a Housing Trust Fund in the city's budget. The city council approved having a Housing Trust Fund in the city budget. However, the mayor committed only \$400,000 rather than the promised \$1 million. Throughout 2008, I attended a number of "actions" in lobbying for the larger amount. Despite getting only "half a loaf," the first HTF building was completed by January of 2009.

A few years ago, efforts were begun to start an Industrial Areas Foundation for greater Milwaukee. Southeast Wisconsin Common Ground held its "Founding Convention" in April of 2008, with over 2000 people crowding a room at the Convention Center, representing over 40 plus organizations – mostly churches. It has several issue groups operating. I have become involved in the Youth Jobs Group, whose efforts resulted in Common Ground's first success. We advocated for the city council to double the number of summer youth jobs in 2009. I think the city council realized that Common Ground meant business when several hundred of us filled the gallery of the council's chambers for the mayor's budget message. This was followed by delegations of us crowding the gallery of the committee room when the budget for youth summer jobs was doubled. Now, we are going to work to assist in finding companies and organizations that will hire these 3,000 youth come summer.



I hope this testimonial illustrates how anyone with the time, energy and passion can do something about issues of justice right where they live. There are many opportunities similar to the ones I have mentioned, in cities and towns around the country, in which people of faith can “do what they can where they are” to reduce the income disparity in the country.

The author:

Bill Dummer is a retired Presbyterian minister living in Milwaukee, and is a member of the Witherspoon Society board.

To receive regular e-mail notices of additions to the Witherspoon website, just send a note to dougking2@aol.com

Please put “web updates” in the subject line.

A note of apology ...

Your Witherspoon board regrets that we were unable to publish the print version of *Network News* for the Summer and Fall issues of 2008. The expenses of the 2008 General Assembly, among other factors, made the printing and mailing costs more than we could cover. The Summer 2008 issue is on-line in easy-to-print PDF format, at <http://www.witherspoonsociety.org/NN%20sum%2008.PDF>.

The Fall issue we were simply unable to publish.

... and of promise

But now we're back! And thanks to generous extra contributions from many of you, we plan to resume our quarterly publications beginning with this Winter 2009 issue.

You just might notice our new, smaller format beginning with this issue. The ever-changing (dare we say evolving?) regulations of the U. S. Postal Service are making it more expensive to mail *Network News* as a Second Class periodical. But sending it as a Standard Rate bulk mailing will reduce postage costs, especially if we use a smaller format that the Postal Service processing machines like better. We hope you like this new deal – and that you'll let us know of any opinions or suggestions for future issues.

Change is Coming, Change is Here.

Reflections on this moment in our Church.

by Michael J. Adee

All around us the evidence continues to surface. Change is coming, change is here. In the last year the largest number of congregations from all across the country stepped forward to affiliate, minister and witness as welcoming and affirming More Light Churches. The most recent one makes history as the first More Light Church in the state of Louisiana: First Presbyterian Church, New Orleans.

The margins of support for the 218th General Assembly's Ordination Amendment 08-B show an increase in nearly every case so far, even in those presbyteries that did not approve it. Without question, 2009 is not 2001 or 1997, when previous ordination amendments were considered. Moreover, it is absolutely not 1978 when homophobia and false teaching about same-sex loving people was placed into our Church's policies. This is a new day.

The old worn-out dogmas and misinterpretations of Scripture used for decades to support anti-gay prejudice and discrimination in both Church and society against LGBT persons and their families are rightly

being discarded as people take more seriously their hearts, faith and study of Scripture. More of us are living the truth of our lives, our faith and our ministries. Few people can say that they do not know a lesbian, gay, bisexual or transgender person because more of us are coming out. Our parents, friends and other allies are coming out, too and passionately working to end the prejudice and false witness being borne against persons they love.

A primary gift of the 218th General Assembly's Ordination Amendment 08-B is that it removes barriers to love. Jesus was clear when asked what was the most important law or commandment: "... you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all of your soul, and with all of your mind, and with all your strength." The second is this, "You shall love your neighbor as yourself." Mark 12: 28 - 31.

Our current church law fails to recognize LGBT persons as children of God created in the image of God and unconditionally loved by God. Our current ordination law sanctions love and family for straight people only which is tantamount to blasphemy considering it is God who creates all persons. Insisting upon compulsory heterosexuality or the imposition of celibacy for full participation and service in our Church is a scandal to the Gospel of Jesus Christ and a barrier to the realization of God's realm. How can we expect

people to love themselves, others and even God if we are not willing to remove such prejudice from our hearts and church laws?

The sacred Call to Love from 1 John 4: 7- 8 echoes in my heart as I reflect upon this time and moment in the life of our Church, nation and world.

“Beloved, let us love one another, because love is from God; everyone who loves is born of God and knows God. Whoever does not love does not know God, for God is love.”

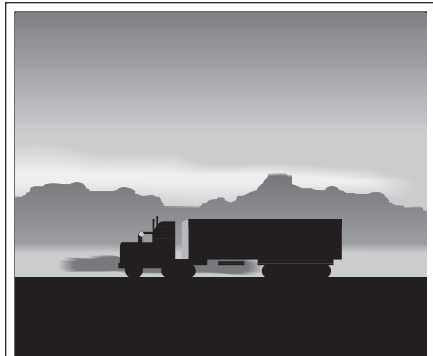
The truth is that change is coming, change is here. Fewer Presbyterians are willing to let our Church be known by homophobia, discrimination, and whom we exclude. Every day, more Presbyterians are recognizing that it is God who makes all of us, not just some of us; and that it is God who is calling us to be the Body of Christ, one human family.

The ancient Call to Love comes to us today in the form of Amendment 08-B. There is a way through and out of the thirty-plus year debate in the Presbyterian Church and other religious traditions. The bottom line of this debate is not “are gay people qualified to serve.” Rather the real question is this: Is God the God who makes lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender persons and calls them to be part of the Church and to ministry, or not? And, the answer is, of course, Yes! God is God. God is love. And, beloved, let us love one another, because love is from God.

Love is coming, Love is here.

The author:

Michael J. Adee is Executive Director & Field Organizer of More Light Presbyterians.



Are you moving?

Please tell us where you've gone (or where you're going, if you're one of those plan-ahead people), so we can keep in touch with you.

Just send your new address (and maybe your old one, just to be sure) to your Witherspoon Communications Coordinator, Doug King
2198 Vining Drive, Unit B
Woodbury, MN 55125

"Roberta's Rules of Order"

Helping Progressive Presbyterians be more progressive in group meetings and decision-making

This book notice has been provided by Alice Collier Cochran, the author of the book, in response to a brief review by Witherspooner Sue Spenser, who praises the book as a helpful guide to the Presbyterian business of meetings. Both reviews are on our website at http://www.witherspoonsociety.org/2008/on_books.htm

Do you feel like you're running your session or church committee meetings like Congress? No wonder! The rules called Robert's Rules of Order were written over 130 years ago, derived from English Parliament, as were the rules still used by the House and Senate.

Major Henry Robert (US Army Engineer) developed a version of these rules to help control unruly people (all men, in those days) in a church! They were intended for large, decision-making groups called Deliberative Assemblies. Today they are still useful for large congregational meetings – but not smaller Sessions, committees or task forces.

Robert's Rules of Order (Newly Revised, 10th edition) states in Chapter One, page one, that these rules need not be used in groups of about a dozen members or fewer that don't want the same degree of formality. The important thing is to adapt a customized set of meeting rules that uphold democratic principles but are short and easy to implement. However, most groups don't have the time to write their own rules. Enter "Roberta's Rules."

The book *Roberta's Rules of Order* was written by Alice Collier Cochran, a member of Sausalito Presbyterian Church (California) and published by Jossey-Bass/Wiley in 2004. It includes methods from reliable sources that have been proved to be effective in a modern and pluralistic society.

Resource A (in the back) contains a template of rules you can adopt for smaller decision-making groups. She has also just completed a QuickStart Guide to help customize these meeting rules using larger templates. Both the book and companion workbook are available online at Amazon.com.

If you've been bored or frustrated with your church's group meetings and methods of decision-making, take a look at the practical tools and techniques in Roberta's Rules of Order. For instance, compare the various decision-making options, including reaching concordance instead of consensus or simple majority rule. You can learn more at www.RobertasRules.com.

After you've given it a try, send your comments or questions to Alice at Alice@RobertasRules.com

Financial "downturn" hits the PC(USA)

It's not only investment banks, car manufacturers, universities, and other non-profits large and small that have been hit by the "downturn" in the U.S. economy. ... The General Assembly Council faces a projected \$5 million shortfall for 2009 and \$5.7 million for 2010. ...

This is a very challenging time for staff of the GAC, and for members of the Council as they struggle with many difficult decisions. We in the wider church will want to hold all of them in our prayers, even as we strive to maintain attitudes and policies that show respect and fairness in our treatment of one another, and particularly of staff members.

Witherspoon remembers the same-day firing of personnel in the Advocacy Committee for Women's Concerns, the National Network of Presbyterian College Women, and Racial Ethnic Young Women Together, and before that the firing of the last three men in the media services unit. We hope that this pattern is not repeated in the coming weeks. But it could happen again, unless the GAC finds ways to act with respect for the human worth and the calling of the personnel being impacted by any changes.

This is the opening of a brief article by Gene TeSelle, which we posted on our website on Feb. 19, 2009. We invite you to see the rest of it, at http://www.witherspoonsociety.org/2009/PCUSA_news_2009.htm

Witherspoon is on Facebook!

The Witherspoon Society and Voices of Sophia have joined the "Web 2.0" world with our Witherspoon Society page on Facebook.

It's been a treat to see so many friends join us from around the country and even around the world. One of the people joining us as a member of our Facebook community is the Rev. Roberto Jordan of Argentina, one of the people instrumental in drafting the Accra Confession and the featured speaker at our 2007 fall conference on global discipleship.

By joining us on the Witherspoon Society Facebook page (<http://www.facebook.com/group.php?gid=50517709365>), you can keep connected with other friends passionate about social justice issues and keep up-to-date with notes about the latest news from a variety of PC(USA) social justice groups.

If you don't know much about Facebook, it's a simple way of getting connected with old friends, people with similar interests and it's free. If you are a first-timer, simply go to www.facebook.com and register. By joining as a member of our Facebook page, you too can post news from your church or presbytery that might be of interest to the rest of us or begin a discussion on a topic close to your heart. It's fast, fun, and free – something we all enjoy! See you there...

Mitch Trigger,
Secretary/Communicator of the
Witherspoon Society

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**The next issue of
*Network News***

will bring you news and analysis
of the Presbyterian Church
(USA) and our shared calling to
serve peace and justice in the
world.

**We welcome your contribu-
tions and reflections!**

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Deadline for the Spring issue is
April 15, 2009.

Winter 2009

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Register soon for Ghost Ranch Peace & Justice Week!

July 27 - August 2.

Save money by registering before May 15!

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