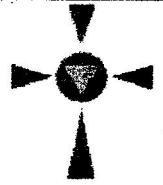


# Affirm!

## TABLE MANNERS



Affirmation: United Methodists for Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgendered Concerns  
GC 2000 Daily Newsletter

May 10, 2000

### Worship Interruption

During this morning's worship service there will be a brief interruption inside the convention center to call attention to the Soulforce protest outside. People will chant, "Wide is the welcome, extend the table!" We invite all persons, as their conscience permits, to stand in solidarity with this witness.

Affirmation fully supports this morning's powerful witness.

### Let My People In

*Jeanne Knepper spoke these words in Cleveland on 15 January 2000 before the Pre-General Conference briefing for press and heads of annual conference delegations to General Conference. On Wednesday, 12 January, the day many participants arrived, there was a fire in the Sheraton Hotel, site of the briefing. In addition, a Cleveland water main broke only two blocks from the Sheraton that same afternoon.*

I want to begin by thanking UM Communications for the opportunity to be here. Affirmation cherishes any chance to speak with GC delegates. Although the "question" of homosexuality, the "issue" of homosexuality, the "problem" of homosexuality have been before the UMC at every GC since 1972, the people "we, the members of Affirmation" have not. And we want you to know that this is really about people who are UM. So I thank you for this privilege.

Although I wasn't so sure I was grateful when I arrived on Wednesday. There had been a fire. The streets were flooded. The room was smoky; the phones didn't work; the toilet didn't flush (and me off a long flight!) and we couldn't drink the water. I don't know about you, but I started thinking about Moses up in front of Pharaoh, hearing the words, "Let my people go..." and watching out for frogs. Wondering, should we be afraid for our firstborn?

And knowing that yes, we should, if our first born are LGBT and live in cultures shaped by hatred or intolerance of homosexuality.

Indeed, we should be very afraid for them. The Southern Poverty Law Center tells us that hate crimes against Gay men and Lesbians increased 260 percent between 1988 and 1996; that Lesbians and Gay men are physically attacked in bias-motivated assaults six times more often than Jews or Hispanics and twice as frequently as Blacks; and that anti-homosexual hate crimes exhibit "extraordinary viciousness and brutality."

We've all heard of the brutal murder of Matthew Shepherd (see page 4,) but most of us are not aware that in the year after his death, in the period from October 1998 to October 1999, at least 19 Gay men, Lesbians and Transgendered people were stabbed, beaten, shot, slashed, and burned. All died because someone believed they didn't deserve to live.

Well, you might say, that's awful – but what does it have to do with us?

Perhaps we need to know that forty percent of the people who harass Gay men or Lesbians make specific references to religion, God, or the Bible during their assaults.

Perhaps we need to know that the United States Department of health and Welfare has identified religion as a risk factor in Gay youth suicide, explaining that "family religious beliefs can be a primary reason for parents forcing youth to leave home if a homosexual orientation is seen as incompatible with Christian teachings [their language.] These beliefs also create irresolvable internal conflict for Gay youth. They may feel

wicked and condemned to hell and attempt suicide in despair..."

Perhaps we need to know that Matthew Williams, who murdered Gary Matson and Winfield Mowder in their bed last spring told his mother when she visited him in jail, "I think God put me here as a witness... I have followed a higher law. I see a lot of parallels between this and a lot of other incidents in the Old Testament. They threw our Lord and Savior in jail." Williams represents himself as a religious martyr, and jailed for his faithfulness to God in killing two Gay men.

And this has a lot to do with us.

We are people of the Word. We believe that words, and how we use them help to shape our world. How else do we explain the size of our UMC Book of Resolutions? The UMC participates in the creation of this violent culture through its words, through its continued promotion of a lie, that the practice of homosexuality is incompatible with Christian teaching.

This was a lie when it was adopted in 1972, for even then we knew that faithful Christians did not all agree on our Christian teachings about homosexuality. It is an even greater lie now.

In April 2000, scientists released the report on the genome project, an international collaboration to map all human genes. Already, five years ago, a leader in the National Institute of Health, who was Catholic, gathered with religious leaders and told them, "We will need to get down on our knees, for we have borne false witness against our brothers and sisters."

Homosexuality is not a choice and it is not a sin. It's the way some people are, people created by God, people beloved by God. And God is saying, "Let my people in!"

Now, I know that some will try to persuade you that you have to "hold the line" or there will be schism. But we all know the church can't split unless you vote to separate it. And you're not going to do that. This church is too important to you, to me, to all of us.

Some will try to stampede you into fierce language and punitive postures. But I think you're better than that. I know, I believe, that we are all of us, everyone in this room, people of God, doing our best to be faithful, glad for the space that gives us room for unity without uniformity.

Some say that we are a threat to the church. I say we are your colleagues, your pew-mates, your pastors, your bishops, your children and your parents. We are Christians, we are United Methodists, and we are yours, called by God to be in this place, in this time, in this church.

Our children are teaching us a phrase. When they have hard decisions to make, when pressures assail them, they ask themselves, "What would Jesus do?" It's a good standard, a very good question for these times.

When faithful and loving couples come to their faith communities asking for blessing and support, "What would Jesus do?"

When teens are driven from their homes by our language of judgment, "What would Jesus do?"

When talented and grace-filled Christians answer God's call and present themselves for ordination and service to our church, "What would Jesus do?"

I think maybe God has a sense of humor. I've thought that a long time with respect to the Roman Catholic Church, experiencing a severe shortage of priests. Sometimes I think God is saying to that denomination: "Hey, I'm calling plenty of people into the priesthood - and they're women! Let my people in!"

And I think God is speaking to us as well. Are our numbers down? Let my people in!

Have we lost our sense of celebration? Let my people in!

Do we long for vital community? Let my people in!

Do we ache to speak an effective word of reconciliation to a fractured and violent world?

Do we? Do you?

In 1996, GC delegates heard the musical group *Montana Logging and Ballet Company* sing the song they wrote to honor Bishop Tutu and his struggles in South Africa, "Take the Barriers Down." Now Bishop Tutu himself is saying to us this discrimination against Lesbians and Gay men is wrong. Take the barriers down.

I believe that God is calling to us. Listen, listen to God's voice in the night. Listen to that persistent voice, echoing through the ages: "Let my people in!"

## LOVE IS IN THE AIR - TWO EXAMPLES OF THE SPIRIT MOVING

Members of Affirmation and a cadre of our affiliated friends were seen in very first person conversations in the last twenty-four hours with members of the Transforming Group. Dialogue was initiated. Two white flags. Spontaneously, two groups came together in peace with open hearts and a first chat.

The Bishops were serenaded, spontaneously, by one of our own yesterday during their session in the conference hall. Totally without previous planning, a serendipitous voice sang out from the other side of the curtain. Our Sister was honored by this opportunity afforded by the Holy Spirit to sing to her bishops.

### The Reconciling Experience

*Sid Hall is the senior pastor at Trinity UMC Austin TX.*

In a congregation-wide meeting lasting over two hours, Trinity United Methodist Church voted to become a Reconciling Congregation. We were the second in Texas and, so far, the only one in Southwest Texas. After everyone had left that night and all the doors were locked, I sat down on the outside steps and cried. I had just witnessed the most powerful, painful, and beautiful church gathering in

my life. Although I don't want to diminish the three years of study, prayer, struggle, and education we had prior to the vote, I realize just how naive I was in thinking that the hard work of the gospel had been done. Our next few years would prove to be the real test, but also the deepest fulfillment.

I thought voting to be a Reconciling Congregation was foremost about the commitment to be an inclusive congregation. However, inclusiveness was just the first step in our spiritual journey together. The deeper commitment lies in how we answer a theological question: Is it possible to truly celebrate the diversity of God's creation by living together in a diverse community? What I have eventually come to realize is that the commitment of a bunch of mostly straight people to include within its fellowship as full participants, Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual, and Transgender Christians is only the first (but important) very inadequate step. The next step is to really lean on each other. I don't think I figured out till after we became a Reconciling Congregation and lived with it awhile that being Reconciling is not just a matter of welcoming people in a sexual minority, but that straight people needed out Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual, and Transgender people to be complete themselves. Paul said that if any part of the body thinks it doesn't need another part, it is diminishing itself too. The Body of Christ needs all of us, and not just in the way that society or the organized church constitutes, but also in the great and wonderful diversity in which we are created. This is the powerful and wonderful truth I now understand that I didn't know before.

In the last eight years I have had the blessing of seeing a whole generation of children and youth grow up in the church with loving and out Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual, and Transgender Christian mentors. I now have the confidence that for those children who turn out to be Gay themselves, church will be a safe and loving place for them to grow into adulthood. For those children who turn out to be straight—which will be most of them, of course—they will grow up to be unequivocal allies of Lesbians and gays and will help foster the prophetic compassion of Jesus into a new generation of church leaders and Christians.

Being the pastor of Reconciling Congregation continues to be one of greatest gifts of my years in

ministry. It is not always easy, particularly when the church at large tries to clamp down our ministries, but it is always fulfilling. Being a Reconciling Congregation is not always successful in changing the hearts and minds of people stuck in a heterosexist paradigm, but it is, I believe, the way of the heart and the way of Jesus Christ. What a blessing for this straight pastor still clueless about the oppression and pain of many of God's people. Yet growing in God's deliberative love through the graciousness of God's Gay and Lesbian Christians, willing to hang in there with me and hang in there with a denomination that still chooses not to see their gayness as part of God's gift. Thanks be to God.

### **Silenced Witnesses**

*The Silenced Witnesses Project is an exposition personalizing those who have been killed by acts of violence towards the Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgendered community or those who committed suicide. This exhibit will be shown throughout General Conference at different locations and times. From now until the end of General Conference we'll list each day several names from the Silenced Witnesses display.*

#### **Matthew Shepherd**

Gay man.

Shepherd was pistol whipped and left to die bound to a fence in Laramie Wyoming, October, 1998.

Churches, including The United Methodist Church, perpetuate a social climate that permits and covertly encourages such violence. The language of Leviticus has been specifically used in laws that mandated death for homosexuals. In such a climate it is no accident or surprise that forty percent of the people who harass Gay men or Lesbians make specific references to religion, God or the Bible during their assaults.

#### **Rita Hester**

Hester was stabbed multiple time in Boston Massachusetts, on Nov. 28, 1998.

The U.S. Department of Justice has concluded that "homosexuals are probably the most frequent victims

[of hate violence]." Moreover hate crimes directed against Gay men and Lesbians are reported to be particularly violent.

#### **Lauryn Paige**

Transgendered woman.

Paige was stabbed multiple times in the head and torso on January 9, 1999.

Gays and Lesbians are six times more likely to be the victims of violent hate crime than Jews or Hispanics, and twice as likely as Blacks.—Intelligence Report, 1997. From Southern Poverty Law Center, "the Disease is Hate," 1998

#### **Harold Jack Eisenhuth**

Eldora, Colorado

Eisenhuth was beaten to death with a hammer on January 9, 1999.

Forty five percent of Lesbians and 29 percent of Gay men have suffered physical attacks because of their sexual orientation.

Kenneth Morgan, Baltimore psychologist, 1989 academic study.

From Southern Poverty Law Center, "The Disease is Hate."

#### **Steve Dwayne Garcia**

Houston, TX

Garcia was shot to death on February 7, 1999.

"Hate is learned. It can be unlearned. Educators can play a vital role in preventing the development of the prejudice and stereotyping that leads to hate and leads to crime." - Janet Reno, US Attorney General, October 9, 1999

**Let's keep the Spirit moving. Let's keep our hearts open.**