

RESPONDING TO AWE
Alex Patchin McNeill
June 7, 2015
More Light Sunday
Shepherdstown Presbyterian Church

Over 40 years ago, a young Presbyterian clergy man who was about my age at the time stood on the floor of the General Assembly and held up a sign that read "Is Anyone Else Out There Gay?" Rev. David Sindt's hand lettered sign sparked the first gathering of the Presbyterian Gay Caucus one of the original groups that formed what we now know as More Light Presbyterians. The first hopes of this group were simple, to confront the silence on the issue of homosexuality by getting together persons who identified as gay or those who supported gay people participating in the life of the church to break through the isolation and create a sense of community which transcended mistreatment by congregations and presbyteries where gay and lesbian people were seeking to serve the church. At first the dream was simple, but revolutionary, to gather together and form community but then the dream grew.

On the day that the marriage amendment and authoritative interpretation allowing ministers to marry same sex couples passed the General Assembly last year, I had the chance to meet Rev. Hal Porter who served Mount Auburn Presbyterian a church that became More Light in the early 1990s. He told me a story that in 1985 the More Light Churches Network held a conference with all the churches that had already voted to become More Light, there were several dozen at that time. At the conference Rev. Porter spoke as part of a panel on the hopes for the budding LGBT faith movement, he remembered that at one point on the panel someone offered that perhaps the group could work towards the affirmation of same-sex marriage by the denomination. He told me that those gathered went completely silent with only a few people emitting some nervous laughter because at the time, the idea seemed so far away from their reality that same sex marriage would not only be recognized but affirmed by the CHURCH that it almost seemed impossible. On the night that not one but TWO polity changes were passed by General Assembly by an overwhelming margin, Rev. Porter looked me in the eye and said that he truly believed during that panel that this day in the denomination would never come.

Paul wrote in his letter to the Romans, "if we see what we hope for, that isn't hope. who hopes for what they already see?" The hopes and dreams that founded the movement for Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgender welcome in the PCUSA were so far beyond what was visible at the time that in some cases they wouldn't be realized for 30 years or more. Watching the advancement of the rights, recognition and affirmation afforded to LGBT persons in the past 3 years has almost felt like watching progress at the speed of light. States that recognized same-sex marriage increased exponentially, and this month might bring another favorable ruling from the Supreme Court effectively granting same sex marriage recognition nation wide. In addition to that, laws around fairness in housing, employment, adoption, and healthcare have furthered protections for LGBT people from discrimination.

Yet I would consider the progress made in the past forty years of the LGBT movement and broader social justice movement to be what Paul calls in his letter the "first fruits of the spirit" the beginning signs of what is yet to come, but not the fullness of what God is calling for us to experience which is in the translation of the common english Bible for "our bodies to be set free."

Friends, I believe that we are in a moment where the whole of creation is audibly groaning for further revelation about who God's children are, and adoption into who God is. While we celebrate both the tangible and symbolic progress made towards LGBT welcome in our churches and in our communities, we know that the reality of physical and emotional abuse experienced by LGBT people is on going. Thought it is thrilling to see Caitlin Jenner, a transgender woman grace the cover of Vanity Fair magazine, just this year 11 transgender people have been killed in the United States by the police, family members or strangers. While shows like Modern Family and Orange is the New Black positively portray LGBT characters, the reality is still that 40% of LGBT people have experienced homelessness because for so many, they were kicked out of their families upon coming out or were unable to find a job due to their identity. Even as the Supreme Court is set to rule favorably on same-sex marriage recognition, bills aimed at encoding discrimination under the guise of religious freedom cropped up in 27 states including Indiana, Michigan, North Carolina, Texas and even in West Virginia. While many attempts failed, North Carolina just passed a law allowing magistrates of the court the ability to refuse to issue a marriage license to a same-sex couple based upon his or her religious beliefs. Yes, creation is groaning towards a new reality, and I believe we are in a moment in the course of this movement for LGBT justice and social justice where we need new hopes and new dreams that go beyond what we can already see.

The movement to welcome LGBT persons into the life of the church was founded upon the radical notion that gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender persons were created in the image of God to counter the prevailing assumption that we were an abomination in the eyes of God. The hope then was that LGBT people would be welcomed into the life of the church just like any other brother or sister in Christ. What a revolutionary statement, that we are all God's children! The continuing act of revelation of God's children at the beginning of this movement was towards further recognition of who was included in the umbrella of God's welcome. The organization that began after Rev. David Sindt's sign at the 1974 General Assembly started as Presbyterian Gay Caucus, which later became Presbyterians for Gay and Lesbian Concerns as more and more identities began to be named and yearned toward recognition.

As I've traveled to More Light churches over the past two years since I stepped into the role of executive director, doing so as an openly transgender man called to serve the Presbyterian Church, I've come to see some of the challenges with focusing on welcome as the locus for change in the denomination. I remember a conversation with a member of a More Light church that was one of the early churches to declare that there was 'yet More Light to break forth on the scriptures around homosexuality' and as such they were not going to exclude anyone from membership or leadership in the church. He recounted the history of the congregation's welcome and said, "well first we welcomed gay people, then lesbians, and then we learned about bisexual people and now transgender people?!" He threw up his hands in semi-exasperation and said "what's next?!" With a sigh almost too deep for words, I suddenly saw how the founding hope of this movement had run its course. Allowing one identity at a time into who was included in the kingdom of God could lead to this frustrated exasperation of who is next, what DON'T we know yet? I believe that the hope beyond our horizon requires us to refocus on who God is as a way to understand the fullness of what God is calling us to.

So who or what do we say God is? Naming and describing God has perhaps been the project of religion since the beginning. The creation story in Genesis describes God as Elohim, as a plurality of aspects "we," God comes to Moses and is described as YHWH "I am who I am" other places God is named in the scriptures refer to God as Jehovah

Jireh which means “the Lord will Provide” or Jehovah Shalom “the Lord is Peace.” Jesus calls God “Abba” meaning Father. In the Psalms God is described as a potter, as a knitter forming us in our mother’s womb, as a creator of life and destroyer of enemies. We as a people called to follow God have attempted for 5,000 years to describe who God is. In Barbara Brown Taylor’s sermon “Three Hands Clapping” she quotes a colleague who says when “when human beings try to describe God we are like oysters trying to describe a ballerina, we simply do not have the equipment to understand something so utterly beyond us, but that has never stopped us from trying.” The directory for Worship in our Presbyterian Book of Order puts it this way, “When people respond to God and communicate to each other their experiences of God, they must use symbolic means, for God transcends creation and cannot be reduced to anything within it. No merely human symbols can be adequate to comprehend the fullness of God, and none is identical to the reality of God. (W-1.2002)”

I was raised in a church that did its best to try and not limit who God was but still called God “He and Him” without much variation. While we are God’s creation, and as the prophet Isaiah says “Called by name by God” and therefore by our virtue of being alive know something of who God is, the temptation we have to avoid is making God in the image of us, to assume that because we have legs, arms and a beating heart that God does as well. I was watching the show called “The Cosmos” with Neal Degraass Tyson when it hit me. In the very first episode of the show, which if you haven’t seen it was a science documentary on the nature of the universe, Neal Degraass Tyson demonstrates just how vast our universe truly is. He starts us on Earth and then zooms into our solar system, and then out into our galaxy, and then beyond our galaxy to other galaxies and then talks about how even with all this vastness the universe is STILL expanding even further still. Suddenly I caught a glimpse of hope beyond our understanding, a hope that points towards just how vast, our universe yes, but how vast God, the creator of the universe is. My tiny oyster brain saw for a moment a twirling ballerina and my jaw dropped. It had never really hit me like this that God is much, much bigger than we can ever imagine. We are created in the image of a God of abundance, of limitless possibilities and expansion. Faced with this brief glimpse at semi-comprehension I saw what such an understanding of God might mean for the work towards LGBT inclusion in the church and world.

While one possible response seeing a glimpse of an abundant God might cause some people to batten down the hatches in fear of the vastness. The other, which I believe we are called towards is to confront a God of abundance with awe and wonder, not just at who God is, but also who we are as God’s creation. We are so much more than we can ever hope to name, that we only have symbols to describe who we are. In the beginning of the welcoming church movement we only knew how to welcome one identity in at a time when we were just beginning to say out loud for the first time the words gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender. The trouble is, welcome started to be expressed as a series of “ORs” bisexual OR transgender, straight OR gay and not the fullness of “AND.” We are so much more than any one identity could possibly describe. We are abundant because our creator is abundant. We are waiting with hope for “our bodies to be set free.” This doesn’t just apply to LGBT people, this freedom is for all bodies. What we hope for then is not just a world where all are welcome, but for a world where all respond in awe and wonder to the fullness of God’s abundance, and in turn welcome the abundance of who we are created to be. This is the hope that calls us forward towards more light. Amen.