

Scripture and Marriage Equality: Resources

2006 Colloquy resource materials



How I Changed My Mind

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If I were to give a one sentence answer to the question it would be: “I changed my mind when I changed my heart.” But since I’m expected to speak longer than this, let me spell out what I mean by that and how it happened.

It’s February 1983, a little over 20 years ago. I am meeting in an airport in Albuquerque with two other United Methodist bishops and an executive of the Division of Ordained Ministry out of Nashville. We are doing preliminary work on legislation for the 1984 General Conference our subject matter was ordained ministry. We worked on many aspects of the subject. But a particular concern being raised was: “How do we screen out homosexual persons from becoming ordained ministers?” I proposed a seven-word addition to the list of things to which candidates for ministry must commit: “Fidelity in marriage and celibacy in singleness.”

The phrase had the advantage of not singling out homosexual persons, but being generic applying to all candidates regardless of sexual orientation. It was accepted by all. That little phrase made its way and was acted upon by the Division of Ordained Ministry, the BHEM, a General Conference legislative committee, the General Conference, and was then printed in The Book of Discipline where it remains to this day. This is by way of confession.

Now why did we do that? You would think that on as important a matter as that we might look to Wesley’s guidelines of discernment: that is, scripture, tradition, experience and reason. But I’m here to tell you that we did not look at the scriptures; we never mentioned tradition; we did not refer to experience, and reason. It was almost absent from our discussion. Instead of those four classic words guiding our conversation, we were unconsciously guided by two other words: institutional protection. In other words, this issue was raising controversy and problems within our connection the placid sea of United Methodism was being roiled so we would cut it off at the pass.

Which leads us to a deeper question... what was there in the minds of all of us to be fearful and act as we did? Because I cannot enter the minds of other people and determine why they acted as they did, I can only examine myself and so this gets more personal. I cannot remember being aware that there was any such thing as homosexuality until I was in junior high school. Even then, this came in derogatory comments made by one boy about another boy. I never heard a sermon that mentioned it or was in a class where it was discussed. In the service in WWII, living in a barracks, any references took the form of derogatory jokes or stories.

Coming back from the war I entered law school, and discovered that in the laws of the state of Washington the title heading of the law against homosexual practice was: “The Crime Against Nature.” The taboo was so powerful they didn’t want the forbidden words even in the law’s title.

But I was well into my adult life before I came face to face with an acknowledged homosexual person. I was about 28 years old I was serving a small church prior to going to seminary, and also served as part-time chaplain at the Washington State Reformatory nearby. Two 19 year-old inmates who had just been sentenced there came to “see the chaplain.” They were there for some kind of burglary offense. They proceeded to tell me they were gay and went into a long and rather convoluted defense of that, going back to David and Jonathan in the Old Testament.

Needless to say, they didn't impress me very much, and probably confirmed vague doubts and fears I already had about such persons.

In the next 20 years I was serving as a pastor and a DS, and though I had persons in congregations who sort of "seemed" to be homosexual, I was not directly confronted with homosexuality in counseling or other pastoral situations.

After I was elected bishop (this was in 1972, the first year the word "homosexuality" appeared in The Book of Discipline), I had responsibility in a few personnel situations. The first was in the Portland Area in the 70's when a gay clergyman came out of the closet, and I had to deal with it. After I was appointed to Los Angeles in 1980, Pacific Homes rather consumed my first two years. But I dealt with another gay clergy and his appointment we sort of sparred around for awhile, then came to a kind of truce in which I agreed to appoint him to a non-church-related special appointment. Implicit in this was the understanding that if he were to seek a pastoral appointment, I would not have agreed.

In addition to these two clergy situations, I ministered at the bedside of two men dying of AIDS. One was a layman from this Conference--the other a clergy member of another annual conference who was living in the Los Angeles area. But when I was officially retired from active episcopacy on September 1, 1992, my basic institutional mindset was unchanged.

What is it that makes this mindset so powerful that it can last most of a lifetime? Two things: First, at the gut level of the perhaps 90% of the population who are of heterosexual orientation, just the idea of homosexuality produces an almost instinctive negative reaction, coming from who-knows-what subliminal sources. Add to this the pervasive cultural taboo against homosexuality all around us and the way this taboo is built into our institutions. The result in individuals is often an inchoate, unarticulated, yet quite powerful sense that there is something wrong about homosexuality and those of that orientation.

The second reason this mindset stays on is that to think of changing it is to invite conflict and even turmoil. Neither individuals nor institutions like conflict or turmoil. To put it another way, both individual inertia and institutional inertia are powerful forces to retain the status quo. I am personally convinced that it is this which motivates the votes of a majority of the General Conference.

So is it a hopeless case?

Is there nothing which can change the minds of individuals and institutions?

Thank God there is. After I retired, we were enjoying life on Whidbey Island. We were in the Coupeville UMC, a marvelous congregation which right now is celebrating 150 years of service. Among the pillars of that church for several generations was a farm family. The matriarch of this clan was a great lady, Dorothy. Dorothy had borne a number of sons, some of whom ran the farms in Coupeville, but one son, Jim, was a gay man.

Jim lived in Seattle, but would visit his mother regularly and always come to church with her. Dorothy loved her son Jim, and was profoundly hurt that her church, of which she had been a lifelong member, in effect, rejected him. And I will never forget a moment at a coffee hour shortly after I had returned from the 1996 General Conference, when Dorothy asked me, "Did the General Conference take any action to change its position on homosexuality?" I can recall how uncomfortable I felt as I looked into this beautiful United Methodist woman's hopeful face and

had to reply: “No, Dorothy, they didn’t.” The look of infinite sadness on her face was almost more than I could bear.

In 1998 we moved to Wesley Homes and renewed friendships with old friends who were clergy and spouses of the Pacific Northwest Conference. And while I had been aware that some of them had children who were gay or lesbian, our closer association now evoked from them stories of the pain, the anguish, and the struggle of these families. Most of their gay and lesbian children were now estranged from the UMC, having said to their parents more in sorrow than in anger, “I guess we’re not good enough to be in the UMC.”

Perhaps the culminating experience leading me to change my mind took place in March of 1999 when I presided over the trial of Rev. Gregory Dell, pastor of the Broadway UMC in Chicago.

Greg Dell was a 25-year veteran of pastoral ministry in the Northern Illinois Conference, having served faithfully and well in a number of appointments. A few years before the trial, he had been appointed pastor at Broadway United Methodist Church, a church in which an estimated 30-40% of the congregation was of homosexual orientation, reflecting a community of similar orientation. In the summer of 1998, two of his active laymen who were partners came to Dell and asked if he would conduct a service of “holy union” for them. After some thorough discussion and counseling, Dell agreed and the service took place in September of 1998 at the Broadway Church.

As result, Dell was charged with “disobedience to the order and discipline of the UMC.” At the trial, Dell freely acknowledged that he had conducted the service, but felt he was simply carrying out his vows of ordination to minister to the people he was sent to serve. He felt he was being obedient, not disobedient. The two-day trial was full of testimony, including that of the two men in the holy union service, of the pastoral faithfulness of Gregory Dell. But the 13 elders of the Trial Court, not surprisingly, found him guilty and suspended him from the exercise of ministerial functions for one year.

The trial had a profound impact on me. It showed how we could send a faithful pastor (Greg Dell didn’t choose to go to Broadway, he was sent there) to a community with orders to minister to the people and when he did just that, we would punish him and suspend him from the ministry he loved. It revealed the destructive nature of the anti-homosexual bias reflected in the actions of the General Conference.

So, it was with memories of the trial still fresh, and with keen awareness of the deep pain of friends whose gay and lesbian children felt rejected by their church, that I was asked in January of 2000 to preach in the pastor’s absence on February 20th. I agreed, but literally had no idea of what I might preach about. So I turned to the lectionary for that day, and read over the passages. Suddenly, it jumped out at me: Isaiah 43:19: “Behold, I am about to do a new thing!” And it occurred to me: surely if God can do a new thing, so can I! So I sat down and wrote a sermon on that text which I preached on February 20th. In the sermon, subtitled “The UMC and Homosexuality,” I stated flatly that I was wrong, and called on the Church to prayerfully seek a new inclusiveness. I was 76 years old.

What conclusions can I draw from this journey through which I have come? We UM’s like to use Wesley’s “quadrilateral.” That is, testing truth by scripture, tradition, experience and reason. This is a very helpful thing. But what I have come to believe is that experience trumps all the rest in questions like this.

For I don't come to the scriptures with a "tabula rasa" (a blank slate). I come with some kind of experience either positive or negative, which colors my reading of scripture and is likely to pre-determine the outcome. My experience causes me to look for an interpretation of the scriptures which satisfies and confirms how I feel as a result of my experience. And the same is true of tradition and reason I can find traditional and rational grounds to back up whatever conclusion I have arrived at based on my experience. To put it another way, no one who has a gut feeling that homosexuality is wrong is likely to be convinced otherwise by scripture, tradition, reason or any combination thereof.

A classic example is this. John Wesley was a brilliant young clergyman; he knew the scripture, he was familiar with the church fathers in terms of tradition, and he could write ten point logical sermons with the best of them. But he was miserable he tried going off to the colony of Georgia as a missionary to the Indians but, he suffered a string of outright failures: the Indians weren't interested; he fell in love with Sophie Hopkey, but was rebuffed by her, and in a classic example of inexcusable behavior, he refused to serve her the sacraments. Sophie's intended got out a warrant for John's arrest, and John fled to the coast in ignominy and disgrace. On a ship back to England, this beaten-down and demoralized clergyman wrote in his journal, "I went to America to convert the Indians; but O! Who shall convert me?"

It was out of the background of all these powerful and traumatic experiences in his own life, that a few months after returning to England he went to a little meeting in Aldersgate Street, and there, as he wrote that night in his Journal for May 24th, "About a quarter before nine, [while listening to the leader reading from Martin Luther's preface to the Book of Romans]. I felt my heart strangely warmed. I felt I did trust in Christ, in Christ alone for salvation [and that he had] saved me from the law of sin and death."

What changed John Wesley from a thoroughly defeated clergyman into a man who would in some measure change the world?

I'm convinced that it was not further reading of scripture, nor of the church fathers, nor through the power of reason. Rather, it was his own life experience, particularly the disastrous two years in America, that came together that night to transform and empower his life.

So what are we to do if we are to change the mind of the UMC to make it more inclusive to all of God's children? We change its heart. We help all of our people to experience the hurt, the pain, the trauma, the rejection which our present policy inflicts on good and faithful Christians. Oh, we don't neglect dealing with scripture and tradition and reason, because all of these can be enlisted in the struggle for inclusiveness. But we understand on an issue such as this that changing the heart is a prerequisite to changing the mind. At least, that's how it was for me.

Jack M. Tuell