

Telling the Stories of Hurt in the Christian Community

Friday, 29 January 2010

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By Emily Cooper - Believe Out Loud Discipleship

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My husband, Wiley, has told the story of Richard, his talented accountant at United Way of America, from the pulpit a number of times.

Richard wanted to keep his sexual preference quiet, but AIDS happened to him and he had to quit his job and go to his home and his partner in rural Virginia to die.

His partner of a number of years was not the partner from whom he contracted AIDS. No matter. Richard's partner cleaned his sores, wiped his bottom, endured his medicine-induced anger and held him when he died, just the way any committed spouse who loves his or her mate would do.

Richard left an insurance policy to the children of a co-worker for their education. The next week, the Roman Catholic co-worker came to Wiley: "My priest says Richard is in hell. Is Richard in hell?"
"No, do you love your son?" Wiley asked. "Yes, of course, I love my son and my daughter dearly. They are my life."
"Do you think God loves Richard any less?"

Audrey Krumbach, field organizer with Reconciling Ministries Network, was in South Carolina recently to encourage "those who can speak out to tell their stories," part of a five-year campaign of Reconciling Ministries Network's program to gain full inclusion for people of all sexual orientations — including gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender — within 50 United Methodist Annual Conferences. The campaign is called "Believe Out Loud Discipleship."

The RMN's work is based on 2nd Corinthians 5:18: "And all things are of God, who hath reconciled us to himself by Jesus Christ, and hath given to us the ministry of reconciliation.

Those who oppose its work largely base their beliefs on Leviticus 18:22, "Thou shalt not lie with mankind, as with womankind: it is abomination," but in the same book (11:10) is, "But all in the seas or in the rivers that do not have fins and scales, all that move in the water or any living thing which is in the water, they are an abomination to you," bloggers point out.

"People don't change until they know each other's stories," Krumbach quoted at the meeting held at Reformation Lutheran Church in Columbia.

The RMN is not an official part of the UM Church, but is a movement of United Methodist individuals, congregations, campus ministries and other groups working for the full participation of all people in the United Methodist Church.

Asked about another unofficial movement within the church which focuses much of its energies on the "sin" of homosexuality, the Confessing Movement, Krumbach said a top-level meeting a number of years ago left the RMN feeling betrayed, but, at the grassroots level she's learned, "We share so much more than we disagree on."

Attending the meeting in Columbia were about two dozen people — GLBTs and heterosexuals, parents, clergy and friends — a person who had to face the reality of her secret commitment to her partner (now decades-long) when she was asked to lead a singles workshop, a teacher who was severely chastised for accommodating a transgender youth, an older couple who are convinced that if their church knew of their commitment, they would have to leave their church.

“There are gay men and lesbians, their mothers and fathers, sons and daughters, in every UM church,” a seminary professor said in a Reconciling Ministries DVD in which various UM lay people, clergy and seminary professors are recorded. “If my baptism meant anything, then I belong here (in the church),” a middle-aged Virginian said. “This is the civil-rights movement of our time.” The church needs “to really live out what the Methodist church says it stands for.”

“This isn’t an ‘issue’; it’s ‘people,’” another said.

Krumbach, a master of divinity graduate from Garrett-Evangelical Theological Seminary in Chicago, candidate for ordination and daughter of a UM pastor in Georgia, said, the Reconciling movement is not part of the gay agenda.

It receives personal financial gifts from a number of bishops and coalesces with a number of church boards.

In 1980, RMN says, “one bishop stood alone in Indianapolis for full inclusion.

In 1996, 15 UM bishops in Denver stood in support for full inclusion. In 2004, 30 bishops in Pittsburg stood up to show support for full inclusion. In 2005, 43 bishops sent notes of welcome and hospitality to straight, lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender United Methodists worshipping at Lake Junaluska. Later that year, a unanimous Council of Bishops cited inclusiveness and encouraged hospitality for gay and lesbian United Methodists.

While the younger generation thinks the Christian response so obvious it doesn’t merit discussion, preceding generations are threatened by people who are different and fear change, Krumbach said.

The Christian Community’s survey shows 68 percent of UM clergy feel those of the GLBT should be welcomed, but only 7 percent would speak out. Even so, “there is enough inclusive power in our churches to make a difference,” Krumbach said.

There are few church and church communities in the South that have become “Reconciling” — a church and a Sunday school class in Atlanta, a few in North Carolina, and so on. In South Carolina, it appears only one church, Washington Street UMC, Columbia, is processing the aftermath of its Grace Sunday school class’s decision to become a Reconciling class. Suber-Marshall Memorial UMC, Columbia, discussed their pastor’s call to consider joining and decided it was welcoming but would not join the RMN.

After two years of study, the statement agreed upon by the Grace Class there is:

“All persons are individuals of sacred worth. We affirm Jesus’ example of love without reservation, and we covenant to deal compassionately and justly with one another. Therefore, this inclusive and nurturing community of faith, the Grace Sunday School Class, openly welcomes all persons of any age, gender, race, ethnic origin, economic reality, family status, sexual orientation, diverse ability or social standing as full participants in the life of this reconciling community. We recognize that there are differences among us, but believe that we can love alike even though we may not think alike. We invite all people to join us in our faith journey toward greater love, understanding an mutual respect.”

A group of interdenominational clergy and laity have committed to developing a surrounding religious support/welcoming/advocacy alliance in the Columbia area for promoting fuller inclusion of gay persons into religious life.

Those joining hands in initial planning include Lutherans, Presbyterians, United Church of Christ members and United Methodists. A meeting will be Tuesday, Feb. 16, at Reformation Lutheran Church, beginning with a 6 p.m. Shrove Tuesday pancake meal.

There’s another story from Washington Street UMC:

Jan. 3, senior pastor, Paul Harmon preached from Ephesians, 3:6, about how the Gentiles were fellow-heirs of God’s promise. He told the story of a soldier who stood on one side of a gathering of two armies, Confederate and Union, readying to kill each other. A thunderstorm drenched them all. A rainbow, the soldier’s diary reflected, arched from one encampment to the other, “as if God was trying to say, ‘you’re all connected; why are you fighting?’” The barriers we erect really don’t matter,” Harmon said.

“Our job is to go out there and say, ‘God wants you, whoever you are, wherever you are.’ God put

us here to gather in all those who might respond to the call of the Gospel. God is about the business of redemption and how can they be redeemed unless they meet the Redeemer? And how can they meet the Redeemer unless it is through his people — the church, so our job is to invite.”

“The invitation of Christ is for all people,” Krumbach said at the January meeting.